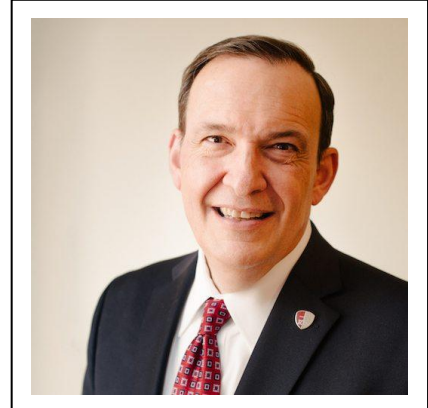


# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Openness of God Controversy

J. LIGON DUNCAN III, PHD

If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Romans 11:33. Please give your close attention to verses 33 to 36, but especially verses 33 through 35, and then I'd like you to take out your pew copies of *Hymns for a Modern Reformation* and turn to the very first one, "Give Praise to God," which was the first new Reformation hymn to be written by Dr. James Boice.



It occurred to me, as we were singing last night, that the first two stanzas of this hymn are all you need to refute "open theism" or at least all you need to know that "open theism" is unbiblical. If you understand what we sang then, you have all you need in order to know that open theism is wrong.

Listen to Dr. Boice's lyrical rendering of Romans 11:33 and following. "Give praise to God who reigns above for perfect knowledge, wisdom, love. His judgments are divine, devout. His paths beyond all tracing out. No one can counsel God all wise or truths unveil to His sharp eyes. He marks our paths behind, before. He is our steadfast counselor. Come lift your voice to heaven's high throne and glory give to God alone."

Open theism basically says, "No, Dr. Boice, you're wrong. That's not what God is like. We do counsel God. He doesn't know all things, and He doesn't know all of the future." And I'm not overstating. That is precisely what open theism says.

Now, let's hear what God says about this matter, through the words of Paul, in Romans 11:33-36.

"33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen" (NASB).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

*Let us pray. Our Lord and our God, as we consider this subject, we would ask that you would give us the power of attention to follow the argument, to understand it, and, simultaneously, to grasp where this new teaching is out of accord with your word. We pray, O Lord, that this would not be merely an intellectual exercise, that we would not engage in it with a view to speaking uncharitably to people, but at the same time, we pray that you would impress upon us, even as we consider these things, how grave it is to question the glory of the knowledge of the Almighty. All these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

2

Friends, I'm going to try and do five things today. That's a very Calvinistic thing to do, and at a PCRT, I think that's especially appropriate. Now, I say I'm going to *try* and do five things because I haven't done it yet. I've given this seminar twice at the two previous PCRTs in Colorado Springs and in Indianapolis, and I've only gotten through the first four points. Now, that doesn't mean I'm a four point Calvinist—I want to make that very clear! Let me tell you what I'm going to try and do so that you can, perhaps, follow the aimless meanderings of my mind.

First, we are going to try and answer the question, “What is open theism? Second, we're going to tackle the question, “What is the claimed biblical basis for open theism? Third, we will tackle the question, “What is the claimed positive significance of open theism? What does it get you? In other words, if one hypothetically assumes that open theism right, what is the benefit of believing so? We'll try and offer some rejoinder to this as well. Fourth, we will ask the question, “What are the problems with open theism, in its various forms? And fifth, we want to tackle the positive matter of “What is the biblical basis for the historic Christian view of God?”

Now, we will, necessarily, have to survey to cover even this much ground. Many of the blanks will be filled in when this manuscript is given to the Alliance and is produced as one of the ACE/Crossway booklet series. So if you're frustrated at the pace and brevity of coverage, so am I. I'll try to clear and to go as slowly as I can, because the terms and the concepts can be confusing. So, be forewarned, this will be thick with terms and concepts.

## What is open theism?

What is open theism? Open theism is the name of a movement within evangelical Christian theology that seeks to radically change the way we think about God. It has been advanced by such figures as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Greg Boyd, Richard Rice, William Hasker, David Basinger and Terence Fretheim. Fretheim's commentary on Exodus, written many years ago, is an example of a book that's committed to a “god of possibilities,” that is, to an open view of God. John Sanders' book, *The God Who Risks*, which was published not too long ago; Greg Boyd's book, *God of the Possible*; Clark Pinnock's book, *Wideness in God's Mercy* and *The Openness of God*—all of these books have

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

been produced fairly recently. The earliest of them in the early 1980's, the bulk of them in the last three years, and all of them espouse an open view of God.

Now there are a number of names and nuances associated with this revisionist outlook on the traditional Christian doctrine of God. Sometimes you will see this view called *open theism*. Sometimes you will see it called *free will theism*—that's one of Clark Pinnock's favorite names for it. This can be a little confusing, because it sounds like it might just be historic Arminian teaching—free will theism—but actually it's something a little more super-charged. Sometimes it's simply called the *openness of God view*, and sometimes it's called *open view theism*. Actually, there are even more names, but I'm just wanting you to notice that when you see any of those appellations, they're talking about basically the same thing.

Now there are a number of significant philosophical and theological differences within the movement of open theism; that is, different members of the general movement of the openness of God theology have some different ideas about how this all works out. And so, to avoid a potential for considerable confusion—because this subject is going to be mind-blowing enough as it is—I am going to concentrate on two books only and the positions that they reflect.

The first book is *The Openness of God*, by Clark Pinnock and a team, a group of other writers. Pinnock edited the volume, wrote part of the volume, but a whole set of folks wrote chapters in it. And the second book, *The God of the Possible*, by Greg Boyd.

Now, suffice it to say that open theism is Arminianism with a vengeance. Now by saying that, I do not intend to disagree with John Piper, who rightly notes that classical Arminianism has never affirmed some of the things now being affirmed by open theists, but rather I say that open theism is Arminianism with a vengeance to emphasize that a radical—and it must be said—wholly, unbiblical human autonomy set over against divine foreknowledge is asserted by open theists with more force, philosophical sophistication and consistency than any previous development in the history of Arminianism. So it's Arminianism with a vengeance, especially with regard to Greg Boyd's view.

All of the authors of this revisionist movement are equally horrified by Calvinism and its view of God's sovereignty, although, as we've already indicated, they would disagree with an orthodox Lutheran view, as well as with the historical Arminian view and a classical Wesleyan view. All of those views would be undercut and modified by the open view of God. But, especially, advocates of open theism are horrified by Calvinism and its view of God's sovereignty.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Do you remember when R.C. Sproul, just the other night, spoke of an author who had attributed Jim Boice's work as the cause of "a resurgence of militant Augustinianism?" Well, that was one of the openness theologians (and he didn't mean it as a compliment!). And so you can see what they think of Augustinian theology or Calvinistic theology or Reformational theology. They don't like it and especially its teaching about God's sovereignty, God's foreknowledge, and absolute predestination, above all.

Now, what has led to the heightening of general evangelical attention to this theological phenomenon is the encouragement being offered to it by InterVarsity Press of America, Baker Book House, and *Christianity Today*. InterVarsity has published Clark Pinnock's openness books; John Sanders and Greg Boyd have been published by Baker; and *Christianity Today* has been pushing open theism through book reviews and editorials. Now there have been, recently, some rejoinders to these writings, and I'm going to mention those, but this new spate of pro-open theism publications from within the evangelical community has been one of the things that has put this subject on the map. People have been teaching these things for some time. Now, however, it's on the radar screen because of these major evangelical publishers producing books and promoting the debate as legitimate.

Now, open theism, as presented in the book by Clark Pinnock called *The Openness of God*, is basically as follows—this is just a paragraph description of an entire book, but I have taken each phrase of the paragraph basically verbatim out of different components of the book, so I think it's an accurate reflection. This is how it goes: Open theism, according to Clark Pinnock, is the belief that God's sovereignty is necessarily self-limited by virtue of his creation of free agents. God's power stops where human will begins, by God's own deliberate self-limitation. God cannot foreknow the future actions of free agents, because then those future actions would not be free. Therefore, God's foreknowledge also is self-limited. Hence, the future is not certain, and God's greatness is not found in his divine control of the future or in his exhaustive foreknowledge of the future, but rather in his flexible, adroit, wise, quick responses to things as they unfold. In other words, God is really quick on his feet. Something pops up, and he is on it like white on rice, but he's responding, he's reacting, he's the greatest defensive point guard in the history of the cosmic NBA. Prophecy, then, is an educated guess, and it is conditional upon the decisions and actions of God's free agents. That's why it's wrong sometimes, according to Pinnock. God is always ready to adjust his plans to fit new and surprising circumstances. Prayer is an activity whereby we can actually change the mind of God. God is susceptible to emotional upheaval in response to the action of free agents. His love is his supreme attribute, and all other attributes must be understood and interpreted in terms of our understanding of his love. God does not predestine individuals to salvation or damnation, rather, he predestines blessings on those who choose him, and he

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

predestines some individuals to special service in the church. God is too merciful to condemn anyone to eternal torment, and so the unsaved will eventually be annihilated, ceasing to exist. Thus far, open theism, according to Clark Pinnock and company.

Now, it is apparent here that there is a sweeping agenda for a fundamental change in the classical Christian view of God. But we move at once to a second (and perhaps even more influential and compelling) presentation of the open view of God, that of Dr. Greg Boyd. Dr. Boyd's vision for open theism, which you'll find in his book—*God of the Possible*—is less exhaustive, perhaps, but it is also more persuasively put and more philosophically astute. Boyd, unlike Pinnock, presents his view in constant reference to Scripture. He writes in an engaging, understandable, inviting and even disarming style, and he is clearly brilliant. His simplicity of expression and his comprehensive and mercurial grasp of the subject as a whole evidence this. Indeed, having interacted with his material and with those who have verbally interacted with him, I am tempted to declare Boyd the most intelligent and philosophically sophisticated Arminian theologian in history. Here is how he describes his position, taken directly from Boyd.

“Open view theists believe that the future exists partly as actualities (future events which God sovereignly determines to bring about) and partly as possibilities (aspects of the future which God sovereignly allows his creatures to bring about). They [that is, open theists] base their conviction on biblical, philosophical, and experiential evidence. Even recent scientific developments which demonstrate that many aspects of reality are not fixed are causing people to rethink the nature of the future.”

So, whereas Pinnock says the future cannot be known by God without restricting the free will of creatures, therefore God does not know, exhaustively, the future, Boyd says something slightly different. He says, well, part of the future can be foreknown because God has settled part of the future, but part of the future cannot be known because God has not settled that part of the future. So, for Pinnock, all of the future is conditional, to some extent. For Boyd, some of the future is settled, while other parts of the future are open.

Are you following me so far? In other words, Boyd believes that God predetermines some things, but not all things, and therefore, there are some things in the future which are as yet unsettled. They are dependent upon the free actions of free agents and—and this is the most important thing—they cannot be known because they do not yet exist. Boyd argues that anything that is not settled in the future does not exist and therefore cannot be known, even by God. The idea is that God knows all things that exist, but parts of the future don't yet exist, and therefore even God can't know those parts of the future because they don't exist. Boyd argues that God can only foreknow that which he has predetermined, and since he has not predetermined all things, he cannot foreknow the

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

future exhaustively. He objects, then, to the concept of *exhaustive* divine foreknowledge—the view that God knows all future events and contingencies perfectly and completely. A view, by the way, which has been held by Calvinists, Wesleyans, Lutherans, and also by almost all Arminians, until the advent of open theism.

We should recognize here that both the Boyd and the Pinnock brands of open theism are keenly aware of a major philosophical problem with Arminianism. Arminians, historically, have offered a theodicy—a justification of God, a defense of God—for the problem of evil called or known as “the free will defense.” In other words, when you pose the dilemma to the Arminians, “Is God sovereign and good?” and the Arminian says, “Yes, he’s sovereign and good.” And then you say, “Well, how can a good God ordain evil things?” The Arminian says, “Oh, no, you don’t understand. He doesn’t ordain evil things. God’s sovereign and he’s good, but he leaves the choices of his creatures to themselves. He knows what they may choose, but he doesn’t ordain it, and therefore he’s not responsible for the evil they choose to do of their own free will.” That’s the classic Arminian free will theodicy: God is not the chargeable cause of evil, because evil is the result of the unhindered and unordained choices of personal free agents.

Now, both Boyd and Pinnock are aware of a major problem with this defense. The Arminians pose this free will defense, while at the same time holding to the historical Christian view of the exhaustive divine foreknowledge of God. This, Arminians thought, thoroughly vindicated the position of the Christian God and upheld divine sovereignty while avoiding what they consider to be the pitfall of Calvinism—predestination—and at the same time protecting human free will. It got them their cake, and they could eat it too. However, astute skeptical philosophers (as well as Calvinists) shredded this Arminian theodicy by noting that, if the future is exhaustively foreknown, then it is necessarily settled. If God knows that Judas is going to betray Christ, it is necessarily settled, and thus, determined. Hence, if God knows the future, it must be settled, and therefore there is no free will in the Arminian sense of that term, and God is still culpable for a future that he knew, but didn’t fix. In other words, the Arminian defense doesn’t defend adequately the integrity of God.

Now Pinnock and Boyd realize this inescapable blunder of traditional Arminianism, and they seek to remedy it. They both realize the power and inexorability of the foreknowledge–settled future nexus. In other words, if God has exhaustive, accurate, unconditional, divine foreknowledge, then there is a settled future, and they understand its ramifications for their brand of free agency. And so they attempt to slip the Gordian knot of this problem by different means than the historic Arminians.

Pinnock tends to emphasize that God’s foreknowledge is self-limited. Boyd knows the inherent problems with that approach. Why? Because it necessarily entails the ignorance

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

of God. There are some things that are going to happen that he does not know. And so Boyd nuances this approach with an idea that he developed (strikingly similar to the thinking of the famous sixteenth-century Jesuit philosopher de Molina. Boyd says, not that God is ignorant of the future, but that parts of the future are unknown because non-existent, and thus, unknowable. God, he says, knows all things that exist now and in the future, but not all of the future exists yet, and so it can't be known, even by God. Therefore, God isn't ignorant of the unsettled parts of the future, because those parts do not yet exist.

7

To put this in yet still another way, for the sake of clarity, Pinnock attempts to “get God off the hook” of responsibility for evil (as well as “protect” human libertarian freedom) by denying unconditional, exhaustive foreknowledge, while Boyd tries to “get God off the hook” by denying the very existence of the future. Pinnock rescues freedom for humanity and justifies God by scuttling foreknowledge. Boyd rescues freedom for humanity and justifies God by scuttling the future. It's not just the end of the world as we know it, it's the end of the future as we knew it that Boyd proposes. Nevertheless, he continually asserts that this is a minor debate, much ado about nothing.

Let me give you an example of this. As he begins his section on the practical implications of open theism, he makes this statement: “‘So what?’ the reader may be asking. ‘What difference does it really make whether you believe that the future is exhaustively settled or only partially settled? This seems to be a minor point in the total scheme of things.’”

Allow me pause here and utter a question begotten of stunned incredulity. Who could possibly listen to the proposals of open theism and think them to be a minor point in the scheme of things?! I can't imagine somebody reacting that way to Boyd's book or asking that question ‘What difference does it make, because it is such a minor point. After all, we're only differing on whether God knows the future or not?’ Unbelievable.

And here's how Boyd answers. “My first reaction is to agree. In light of all that Christians share in Christ, the disagreement between the open view of God and the future and the classical view is minor.” Now this kind of protest is ubiquitous in open theist writings, and it is utter nonsense.

## **What is the claimed biblical basis for open theism?**

When move on then to the second point. What is the claimed biblical basis for open theism? I'm going to focus almost exclusively on Boyd here. I want to make one comment about Pinnock, and then we'll talk about Boyd.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Pinnock's book, *The Openness of God*, really has very little biblical argument. Roger Nicole, in his review, says this: "It may be noted that only the first chapter corresponds to the subtitle, 'A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God.' After that, only Pinnock has some biblical references—13—in his text, and I discovered none in the footnotes, except for one reference of John Sanders to Philo's view of Exodus 3:14, which he rejects. The biblical underpinning of these four chapters and the 309 footnotes that document them is paltry." So we have here a proposal to change 2000 years of Christian opinion on the Christian doctrine of God based upon 13 verses.

8

The lack of exegetical argument in Pinnock is one reason I'm more interested in interacting with Boyd. Boyd's view, though a little different than Pinnock's, does far more interaction with the biblical material. Boyd is very easy to read. He's frustrating—you'll have to put him down every paragraph or so because you'll get mad—but he's very easy to understand, and he's constantly quoting Scripture and posing himself as the one who really is the most biblical in this discussion. And so we're going to concentrate on him. He basically has eight arguments, eight biblical arguments, he would say, eight strands of biblical argumentation for the open view of God.

He would say, **first** of all, that *there are many Bible passages in which God says that he regrets how things turned out*, and this proves that God didn't know how things were going to turn out, or he wouldn't have regretted them. Genesis 6—"I am sorry that I made man," when he looks upon the wickedness of the earth. "You see," Boyd says, "that proves that God didn't know what was going to happen, because he was sorry that he made man."

**Second**, he says, *there are passages in which God asks questions about the future*—what's going to happen? This, Boyd argues, shows that God is not aware of how certain aspects of the future are going to turn out.

**Third**, he says, *there are passages in which God confronts the unexpected*. Things happen that God has to then quickly confront. There are events which catch him off guard or surprise him. This too, says Boyd, shows that God doesn't know all of what is going to happen in the future.

**Fourth**, *there are passages in which God is represented as getting frustrated*. Boyd suggests the question: Why would he be frustrated if things were working out as he planned and expected?

**Fifth**, *God tests people to know their character*. There are passages in the Bible, he would say, where it's indicated that God tests people in order to know their character. Now, if he already knew their character, and if he already knew how things were going to fall out,



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

why would he need to test them? Clearly, he has to do this because he doesn't know. He's trying to gather some information, trying to do a little intelligence gathering here.

**Sixth**, *God speaks in the Bible of what may or may not be*. If you repent, then God will forgive. If you rebel, then God will judge. The argument is that this "if-then" kind of scenario found frequently in the Bible points to God basing his future actions on our future actions, and thus suggesting that the future is unsettled. Boyd believes that this kind of evidence shows that there are different possibilities, outcomes and alternatives for the future.

**Seventh**, and this is very important, he goes to Jeremiah 18. This is a key passage for Boyd (as it is for Pinnock). You've already heard a wonderful exposition of it in Phil Ryken's address on Romans 9. Boyd says of Jeremiah 18, "Look, the Calvinists have totally misunderstood Paul's use of the potter and clay illustration. When Paul says that God is the potter and we're the clay, he doesn't mean that God is determining and we're putty in the hands of a sovereign God. He means that God is very *flexible*. He's a flexible potter. And if we choose one thing, he'll make us one way, and if we choose another way, he'll make us another way." We are the world's first talking lump of clay. Here's how he argues it. Pick up in Jeremiah 18:6. "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" Now, not a sovereign, static, predestining potter, a flexible potter. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. 7 "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; 8 if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. 9 "Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; 10 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. (NASB)

And so he says, "Look, that passage clearly says that God's blessing or cursing is contingent upon our choice and therefore, our future receiving of God's blessing and cursing is not a product of his sovereign mercy alone, but the response of his sovereign mercy to our prior choice, whether it's a choice to obey or a choice to disobey. If we choose to obey, his sovereign mercy responds to us with blessing. If we choose to disobey, his sovereign mercy responds to our choosing with a curse." So he's a flexible potter, he's not a sovereign God that ordains.

Now what do you do with that, by the way. What do you do with it? Well, of course, Jeremiah 18 doesn't teach that at all. What is the problem that Jeremiah is facing with Israel? What is the message, by in large, that God has given to Jeremiah to address to the people of Judah? It is that they have fallen away from the Lord, they have turned his back on him, they have spurned his promises and his overtures of mercy, and he is going to bring punishment upon them. But what do the people keep saying? "He can't do

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

that. He's already made us promises." And Jeremiah is being given a word from the Lord to say—"Now let me explain something to you—you don't have me over a box here. You can't say I've made promises and then turn your back on me and think that you can do so with impunity, because contained in every promise is the warning that if you spurn my grace, my judgment will fall on you. And contained in every warning is the promise that if you repent of your sins, I will certainly show blessing upon you. This passage is not about God changing his mind in the future, it's about understanding the categories of warning and promise in prophecy. Promises may not be presumed upon without a response of faith and obedience. Warnings always carry with them tacit overtures of grace and forgiveness.

We're told in the New Testament that Jonah was a prophet of grace. Well, do you remember his message? "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed." Hey, great sermon. Want to hear 'em like that Sunday after Sunday? But that's a message of grace! How do you know that? Jeremiah 18 tells you that contained in every warning of the prophets of scripture is the implicit promise of blessing for those who see their sin, who turn from their sin and cast themselves upon the mercy of the Lord. God is not telling you about a possible future which he's going to flexibly adapt to you. He is telling you a settled position—"I will always bless as you repent. I will always curse when you spurn me. And don't think that you can appeal to my promises and spurn me and receive blessings." That's what Jeremiah's talking about. He's not talking about a flexible potter whose will is determined by this inanimate lump of clay. I mean, I can think of a lot better analogies that could have been used if you wanted to express that, like a husband trying to influence his wife. A husband's "sovereign decree" is often not the determining factor in that relationship. Have you ever notice that? Jeremiah could have given a better example if that's what he wanted to convey.

**Eighth**, and finally, Boyd argues that there are passages that indicate that God sometimes reverses his intentions. And, thankfully, again, you've already heard a wonderful exposition of Exodus, chapter 33, in this regard. And I'd like to take you right there, because this is one of the key examples in Boyd's book of how God changes his mind and how we are often involved in changing that mind. On page 83 of his book, he gives these examples of what he calls "Divine Mind Changes"—those are his words, not mine. He says this. "This theme is far more pervasive in scripture than most believers realize. Consider briefly the following small sampling. Exodus 32:14. 'Because of Moses' intercessory prayer, the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.' David later recounts this episode when he notes that the Lord said he would destroy them had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to turn away his wrath from destroying them. That's in Psalm 106:23. Did God really plan on destroying Israel and did he really change his mind? And the implicit answer is, yes,

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

God was going to destroy Israel. You've got to take the text seriously. It says that he was going to destroy them, and Moses' intercession saved them. Exodus 32:14. One more example, and then we'll interact with this. Exodus 33, verses one through three, and verse 14. In the light of Moses' pleading, the Lord reversed his plan not to go with the Israelites into Egypt. Was God simply toying with Moses when he told them he was planning on not going? And the implicit answer is, no, he wasn't merely toying, he really wasn't planning on going. And Moses, thank goodness, talked him into it."

Now, there are two examples that he gives of how God's mind is changed by his people in the scriptures. How do you respond to that? Let me say two things. Let's pick up with Exodus 32. You might want to turn Exodus 32 before you and just remember the context. This is right in the context of the golden calf. The people of God have already violated the first and second commandments before Moses can even get down from the mountain, and in the context of this, God threatens to destroy his people, and Moses intercedes. He intercedes and he says, "Don't destroy this people. Don't destroy this people that you brought out of the land of Egypt into the wilderness, because if you destroy this people, the nations are going to mock and say, "What did he do but just bring this people out in the wilderness to destroy them. So Moses fervently intercedes with God. Now is what Moses—is he trying to teach us there the following two things, or three things. One, that his influence conditions the compassion of God. Is Moses trying to teach us that his influence conditioned the compassion of God? God's compassion had just come to the end of the rope—he'd had it, "that's it, I'm going to fry them"—and Moses in the greatness and generosity of his heart talked God out of it. Is that what he's trying to teach? Is he trying to teach us here that God changes his mind, that he reverses his intentions?

Is he trying to teach us here the principle that God's people have influence by their prayers on evoking the future actions of God. Well, let's look at the passage for a second. Moses has already given you a textual clue to indicate that his heart of compassion is not as big as God's heart of compassion. Where did he give that to you? In Exodus 3 and 4. Do you remember his call? God comes to Moses, he meets him at the burning bush, he calls him to be the prophet to his people, he sends him into Egypt, and what does Moses say? "This is incredible. This is incredible, God. This is an awesome mission. Send anybody you want to, but just not me." Moses' response to God's call is, "This is amazing activity here, God, but I don't care enough about your people to lead them out of Egypt." Moses has tipped you off that his heart of compassion is not nearly as large as the heart of God for his people. Moses didn't even want to be their liberator. Moses doesn't expect you to turn a few chapters later and think that suddenly he has gotten to be more large-hearted than God, more patient than God. In fact, he shows his impatience throughout the account. So what's happening here? God is

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

training Moses to have a heart for his people like he already does, because Moses is the mediator. Moses is the mediator, and he's got to have a heart for his people if he's going to intercede for them, if he's going to mediate for them. And so in Exodus 32, he's training Moses to be a mediator. The whole passage is about Moses being a mediator. It's not about God changing his mind. It's not about God having Moses exercise some influence on him.

Secondly, if you say that Moses changed God's mind, you must say that God's grace was conditioned by Moses, that God's grace was prompted by Moses, that God's grace was evoked by Moses. And, my friends, that's blasphemy. The cross lets us know that God's grace is not evoked by anything in us. It is self-generated, and the cross is the expression of that prior grace. It's a mockery to the love of God to say that somehow he looks down upon us, and we coax him into loving his people and having compassion. That's a horrendous caricature of the majestic, loving God of scripture. So this isn't just a little exegetical mistake that Boyd is making here, he's contorting the face of God. This passage is about mediation, it's not about God changing his mind.

Finally, what about the issue of Moses interceding and the relation to the decree of God? Well, you see the problem all along—and we'll say this in just a moment—the problem all along with open theism is it thinks that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are incompatible. Now we Calvinists, we Reformational Christians, happen to think that that's incorrect. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are not in contradiction. We may not be able to explain fully how those things work together, but they are not contradictory. And so the fact of the matter is, God often uses the prayers of his people as the instrument for the accomplishment of his will. But in that case, prayer functions—as C.H. Spurgeon once said—like a carrier pigeon. You know, the carrier pigeon is sent from home base with its message out to the place where the message is to be taken, and then it comes back home to the place from which it was sent. And, Spurgeon says, prayer is just like that. Prayer begins in the heart of God and lights in the heart of his people, who send it back to him where it returns from whence it came. And so God uses the prayers lifted up for the accomplishment of his will, but it is his heart where the origins of those prayers lie and they are sent out to ours. Do our prayers effect the plans of God? Not by themselves, but they may be the instrument which God has ordained from the foundation of the world to accomplish his will. Think of Daniel 9. Daniel picks up Jeremiah, he finds out that the children of Israel are to be in Egypt for 70 years in exile. Now if I had found that, and I was in exile, I would have said, "Yippee! It's almost over!" Daniel doesn't do that. He begins to confess his sins. He says, "Lord, we've been in exile all these years. The time, according to Jeremiah, is almost up, but we're still hard-hearted. We still don't love you." What does he start to do? He starts to plead for God to answer his promises. And if I read my Bible right, at the end of

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Daniel 9, we are told that in response to Daniel's prayer, Jesus came. Let me say that again. In response to Daniel's prayer, God sent the Messiah into the world. Daniel's prayer was the instrument chosen by the sovereign God to bring his son into the world. Go back and read it sometime. God's sovereignty, man's responsibility—no contradiction.

Secondly, look at Exodus 33. Did God plan on not going up to Canaan, up to the future land of Israel with the children of Israel? No? Of course not. He had already, in Genesis 49, we're already told that he had planned the land to be the land of the tribes and for him to dwell in their midst forever. Moses already tipped you off. He doesn't expect you to forget what you learned in Genesis 49 when you come to Exodus 33. So, what's going on here? When Moses pleads for God to go up in the midst of his people. Well, as R.C. so beautifully pointed out, he's teaching us the fundamental principle of the centrality of God. You see, God announces to Moses, "Look, here's the deal. If I go up in your midst, you're going to sin again, and I'm going to break out against you and I'm going to wipe you all out." You see, it's a dangerous thing to live close to God. I mean, think of what a headache it was for the children of Israel to have God in their midst. Their refuse had to be taken outside the camp. Why? Because a holy God was in their midst. They had to live in a particular formation mandated by God. Why? Because a holy God was in their midst, and he's a God of order. They had to obey certain ceremonial practices. Why? Because a holy God was in their midst, and you had to treat him with regard and respect. So it was a little bit of a pain to have a holy God living in your midst. And here the holy God says, "Okay, this is it. I'm going to take you up to Canaan. I'll lead you there. I'll lead you in, I'll get you there, I'll give you the land, I'll give you all the blessing, but I'm not going to go up in your midst." Now, most modern evangelicals, if they were offered that opportunity, would say, "Hey, this is great. All the gifts, all the blessings, none of the headaches. It's just great. I'll take that." But Moses understood that the gifts without the giver don't matter. God is the whole point. It doesn't make any difference to go into the land of Canaan without God, and so he intercedes, and he's not trying to talk God into being loving, talk God into being compassionate, it is stressing for the people of God, in Exodus 33, how central is the presence of God with them. It is our great inheritance and blessing. So, this is just a couple of examples of how scripture will be twisted by the open view.

Now, undergirding all of Boyd's biblical proofs are the following five presuppositions:

**First**, *divine sovereignty in predestination and exhaustive foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom and responsibility.* So you start off by denying that it is possible to have first causes and second causes, and still have both of them to be real. It's impossible to have

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

both God's sovereignty (as conceived by Calvinists) and man's responsibility and both of them to be real. That's his first presupposition.

**Second**, and the *tacit a priori* here is quite important for understanding Boyd's argument, *wherever the Bible teaches a settled future, no general principle can be extrapolated from it.* Wherever the Bible teaches a settled future, no general principle can be extrapolated from it as to how God deals with us normally in his providence. So if the Bible in Genesis 50:20 says, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good," and you say, "Yeah, but, Mr. Boyd, what about this? This says that God knew the future and that he planned it." He'd say, "Yeah, it says that he knew that, but it doesn't say that he knows everything else." And you go, "Well, what about Romans 9. I mean, it talks about God knowing what Pharaoh, and God ordaining what Pharaoh was going to do." And he says, "Well, yes, but, I mean, it says it about that, but it doesn't say it about everything else." And you can go to each of the 1,437 verses in the Bible that speak of the exhaustive, divine foreknowledge of God, and he'll say that every time. "Yes, but that doesn't say — it doesn't say that and he knows everything. It says he knows about that, he knows about that, he knows about that, he knows about that, and he knows that, but no general principle can be extrapolated from that.

**Third**, Boyd operates on the principle that *whenever the Bible supposedly teaches a partially open future, a general principle must be extrapolated universally that controls our reading of the settled passages.* So whenever the Bible, through the language that we've been looking at, hints that the future may be open, then all of the settled passages have to be read in light of that.

**Fourth**, *there is far more open in the future than is settled.* There is far more opened in the future than is settled. I mean, think about it, if only the things that the Bible says are settled are settled for sure, then most of life is not settled. There are 125 thousand million variables in your life everyday, none of which are listed in the Bible. So, most of life is open. That's a frightening thought.

**Fifth**, *we have, to a certain extent, an independent say—so in the settling of the future.* That, I think, is perhaps the most frightening thought of all. David was wise enough in the midst of his sin and the taking of the census of Israel, to say to God, "I would rather fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men. And the future in our hands, and especially the future in my hands, with my black heart and my wickedness, is a frightening thought. I would rather fall into the hands of God."

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

## What is the claimed positive significance of open theism?

What's the positive significance? Now, Greg Boyd says there are seven things that open theism positively gives us. You will find them on pages 89 through 112 of his book. I'm going to rush through them, because of the time.

**First**, Boyd argues, the open view makes more intellectual sense. I leave that to you to judge.

**Second**, Boyd claims, the open view is better able to reconcile coherently elements of God's word that stand in tension with one another. So he says it does a better job of dealing with the passages in which it speaks of the future being partially open or partially settled.

**Third**, Boyd says, the openness view affects a person's view of God in significant ways. And here's one of the ways he says: In a subtle way, the doctrine that the future is eternally settled in the mind of God contributes to a harmful picture of God. How so? Because, he says, we face possibilities in life. Everyday we face variables and possibilities outside of our control that we have to respond to. Now, if we say that God doesn't face those kinds of things, well then, gee, he really can't understand how it is for us, and that's going to harm our view of God, to think that he faces a settled future and we have all this uncertainty.

Well, let me turn that argument on you for a minute. One of the things that I thank God for is, that I don't know what's coming. I want you to think about it for a minute. Jesus Christ lived every moment of his conscious experience with an exact and exhaustive foreknowledge of what was coming. Do you think that ministered comfort to his heart? The closer he drew to that cross, the greater the terror in the heart of the Incarnate Son. I thank God that I do not know what is coming. I thank God through Jesus Christ that he lived under the burden of knowing what was coming for me and holds that future for me and parcels it out to me as I can take it. I don't need a God who faces possibilities, because I have a God who faced horrendous certainties on my behalf.

**Fourth**. He goes on, then, to argue fourth that many Christians don't pray as passionately as they could because they don't see how it could make any difference. He says the problem is, despite all our pious talk about how God wants—and even needs—us to pray, many Christians have an understanding of divine sovereignty in which the urgency of prayer simply doesn't make sense. If God already knows, why pray? There's a great book, by the way, by Doug Kelly on that subject that you should read. It's simply called, *If God Already Knows, Why Pray?* But the point in again is that very argument assumes that God's sovereignty is incompatible with human responsibility and that

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

God's ultimate decree never uses the proximate ends and means of our particular activity. Paul never fell for that baloney. God elects, and Paul is the one who in Romans 10 says, "How shall they believe if they don't hear, and how will they hear without a preacher?" Had Paul just sort of hit a glitch and gone into Arminian mode for a minute there in Romans 10? No. What he said is perfectly compatible with a view that God sovereignly ordains all that comes to pass.

**Fifth**, Boyd argues that the open view helps us better to understand the problem of evil. He argues this: If you claim that God foreknew exactly what Hitler would do, and he created him anyway, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the world must somehow be better with Hitler than without him. Think about it. If God is all good, and he always does what is best, and if God knew exactly what Hitler would do when he created him, we must conclude that God believed that allowing Hitler's massacre of the Jews and many others was preferable to his not allowing it. And so, he argues, clearly God did not know what was coming with Hitler. He created him, but he didn't see it coming; therefore, he's not responsible for what Hitler did, and therefore the world is not a better place—God has not brought good out of evil.

Now, how do you respond to that? Well, the first way you respond to that is, if you think Hitler is a problem, let me give you a real problem—the cross. What's the greatest sin ever perpetrated in the history of the known universe? The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Done, as I recall, Peter, Acts 2:23, according to the predeterminate plan and foreknowledge of God, enacted by the hands of sinful men. Now, you think Hitler is a problem, I'll give you a problem—the cross. Did God use that horrendous evil for the purposes of good? He didn't just use it, he ordained it. He ordained it. Yes, our God is the God who delights to bring evil, to take evil, and bring from it good and to turn curse into blessing. That's our God. He's an awesome and a sovereign God. Furthermore, let me say this. Saying that God is off the hook because he didn't know what Hitler was going to do doesn't help you, because as B.B. Warfield recognized a century ago in his little book, *The Plan of Salvation*—if you've never read that, you need to read it—but in his little book, *The Plan of Salvation*, he says this, "It is immoral to create what you are unwilling or unable to control. That means that the sovereignty of God rests, not merely on his predestination or merely on his foreknowledge, but ultimately on the fact of his creation. So, you've got to get rid of God's creating of the world before you get him off the hook by saying, "Well, I mean, he just didn't know what was coming." You've got to deny his creation to get him off the responsibility hook that way. There's a better way to do that.

**Sixth**, Boyd says that open theism makes better pastoral sense in understanding certain troublesome situations.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

You've got to read this story to believe it, but basically the story goes that a young woman raised in a Christian home, from a very young age a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ, longed in her early years to be a missionary and longed to marry a godly man who would share a similar goal, and they would go to Taiwan and minister for the rest of the days of their life. That was the desire of her heart. And, lo and behold, at Bible College she met this young man who shared her vision for Taiwan—he was godly, he was committed—and they fell in love and they got married. And for three and a half years they courted one another, they prayed together, they went to church together, they prepared themselves for the mission field, they fell in love, and during their senior year, this man proposed to her—and not surprisingly, this young woman named Suzanne immediately said yes. And so for several months they fasted and they prayed over the matter, and they concluded that this marriage was God's will, and that gave her a sense of confirmation that this is what God would have her do. And so with a sense of joy and peace, they marched into life. But shortly after college, the newly married couple went away to missionary school, and two years into this training, Suzanne learned that her husband was an adulterer. He was cheating on her—he was involved in an adulterous affair with a fellow student at the missionary college. He repented initially, but then he went right back to the affair, and despite Christian counseling, that pattern repeated itself over and over and over over the next years. As you can imagine, their dream for the mission field was immediately shattered, and eventually, their marriage broke up. And so Suzanne came to Mr. Boyd for counsel. "How do I interpret this? I was trying to do God's will, and look at what has happened to my life." Here's the pastoral counsel—here's the wise pastoral advice—"Suzanne, take comfort. God didn't know this was going to happen. This caught him just as off guard as it caught you. But here's the good news, Suzanne, sometimes God's plan B can be just as good as his plan A." So much for the pastoral counsel of open theism. That is right out of the book, folks. Read it. I promise you, I am not making that up.

Seventh and final area, he says, the open view better interacts with the many advances of contemporary science, and basically, he appeals to quantum mechanics and chaos theory and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Whenever you hear a theologian make some sort of a deduction from Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, head for the doors, please.

Okay, those are the seven things that make the world better because of open theism.

## **What are the problems with open theism in its various forms**

There are at least six things, six problems with open theism that I would like to bring to your attention:

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

**First**, it reads the Bible atomistically and without sensitivity to Hebrew idiom. In other words, it will isolate text without appreciating the context of the story around them, and then it will read idiomatic passages in a wooden, literal sort of way without sensitivity to metaphor, especially in two areas. All of us are familiar in reading the Bible of running across what theologians call, “anthropomorphisms” —that is where God and his activities are described in the terms of even human body. You know, so in Psalm 91, God shelters us under the shadow of his wings. Now, of course, that’s clearly teaching that God has wings and feathers. No! It’s not teaching that God has wings and feathers, folks, and anybody with the slightest lick of common sense recognizes that. Okay. But what the open theists do is they come to other passages which theologians call anthropopathisms (remember, an anthropomorphism is when human bodily parts and actions are ascribed to God to illustrate who he is and what he does on our behalf and an anthropopathism is when human emotions and affective-responses are ascribed to God to illustrate who he is and what he does).

They go to those anthropopathisms and they say, “Aha! If you’re really going to be sensitive to the text, you’ve got to let the text speak for itself, and if the text says that God was frustrated, well, then, clearly he couldn’t have known what was coming, or he wouldn’t have been frustrated. And if the text says that God felt sorry that he did that, you’ve got to let the text speak for itself. Now, the problem with that is, is it doesn’t understand that often behind Hebrew anthropopathisms, that is Hebrew ascriptions of emotional—human emotional states to God, are anthropomorphisms. So, for instance, when you’re reading in the Exodus account immediately prior to the plagues that God became wrathful, it literally reads in one place, “and God’s nose grew hot.” Our Bibles translate it, “And he grew angry, or wrathful.” Okay. I don’t think you want to go there with the idea of God’s nose growing red or hot. Okay. But the Hebrew listening to this doesn’t sit there and start scratching his head and say, “Ah, we’ve got to let the text speak for itself. God must have a nose, and it gets hot sometimes.” Every Hebrew kid from Hebrew school knows that God is a spirit and has not a body like man, and he knows instinctively when Moses or any of the other prophets start using that kind of language, that he is to understand it in the sense of an analogy. This is expressing God’s attitude toward sin. He’s angry about it. He’s going to visit his wrath upon it. Okay. So, all this claim to be sensitive to the text often shows that you don’t know anything about Hebrew idiom. That’s the first problem with it.

**Secondly**, it assumes—that is, open theism—assumes the incompatibility of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It assumes the incompatibility of divine sovereignty and human responsibility and seeks to resolve the alleged tension between sovereignty and responsibility by saying it’s partly one and partly the other, which really means it’s mostly one and not much of the other. This is a brilliant apologetic ploy,

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

because that means that you can go to any of 1,437 texts in the Bible and say, “But you know, that says that God ordained that. Yeah, he did that, but it doesn’t say that he ordained everything else. I mean, he ordained some things, and he knows something, but it’s just there are other things that he didn’t and he doesn’t.”

**Thirdly**, it fails adequately to reckon with what the Bible teaches about providence and human freedom. It fails adequately to reckon with what the Bible teaches about providence and human freedom. Indeed, nowhere does the Bible address the relation between God’s sovereign providence, and even His predestination, with human freedom. Nowhere does the Bible address that question. Nowhere does the Bible address that relation. Does it offer the openness solution? And Romans chapter 9 is the consummate text. The closest passage to a passage directly addressing this issue that you will find anywhere in the Bible is in Romans 9 where the issue is raised to Paul, “But Paul, that’s not fair. If God does that, how can he still find fault?” And you remember Paul’s response, “Who are you?” A very sympathetic response from the apostle Paul, there. But Calvin didn’t write that. Paul did. And the response—“But it’s not fair.” “Who are, O man, to find fault with God?” Now that’s the—if ever there was an opportunity to articulate that the future was partly opened and partly settled and, you see, you need to understand that some things you choose and some things God chooses—there’s the opportunity. And Paul’s response is the unsympathetic, “Who are you? God’s sovereign. You got any other questions about that?”

**Fourth**, the Bible says more than open theists are willing to allow. The Bible says more than open theists are willing to allow—even on their own reading of the text. For instance, if God’s mercy must be universal and generic, rather than particular, in order for God to be maximally loving—in other words, if God’s grace, his saving grace, must be universally proffered in order for him to be considered maximally loving—then Origen was right, and everybody including Satan, must ultimately be saved. See, if you decide that God is most loving if he saves the most people, then the universalist has the most loving God. The problem is, is Paul and the apostles and Jesus won’t let you go there, because they have this bothersome doctrine called *hell*, and there are people there. So universalism will not work, textually and biblically, and when you go to those passages and say, “But we’ve got to really let the text speak for itself,” it says more than the evangelical universalist is willing to allow. Now he may say—“Well, God universally offers, but not everybody excepts.” But no, that won’t work. If God is maximally loving when he saves the maximal number of people, then he must save all to be maximally loving, including Satan.

**Fifth**, the epistemology behind open theism is “Arian epistemology” (with apologies to T. F. Torrance, who coined this phrase that I’m now highjacking and putting to better

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

use). You remember the great 4<sup>th</sup> Century heretic, Arius, who denied the incarnation and the full divinity of the Son of God. Arius' fundamental epistemic principle was, "I will not believe what I cannot understand. What I cannot understand cannot possibly be true." In other words, he makes our finite human reason the measure of what can be true, and if we read the Bible that way, we will get into trouble at numerous points, not only on the incarnation, but on the doctrine of the Trinity, on the nexus between sovereignty and responsibility. Think about it, my friends, the Bible claims to teach you about an infinite God. Now, if you're finite, and you're reading the Bible about an infinite God, wouldn't you suspect that there would be some places that you don't quite have down pat? But if you say, "I'm not going to believe it unless I have it all sorted out," wouldn't that require the God being taught by the scriptures to be finite enough for your finite mind to comprehend him? Thus, positively and finally contradicting the claim of the Bible! In other words, if I understood everything in the Bible, I would immediately reject Christianity, because it would mean this pea brain can somehow understand the supposedly infinite God revealed there. And the fact of the matter is, I'll go through all of eternity, and I'll never know all there is to know about the infinite God. And so, this kind of epistemology or investigative starting point that says, "If I can't understand it, it cannot be true," is writ large across open theism.

**And finally this**, there is a sneaking suspicion in all of the writings of open theists that we are somehow more loving than God, and that God's compassion needs to be updated to catch up with our own large heartedness. And that is the most ridiculous supposition of all.

Thank you very much.

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