

“If I’d Only Known!”

A few years ago, I was given some furniture by my sister. The only problem was that she lived in North Carolina and I lived in Tennessee. The solution was to rent a large U-Haul truck and make the long round trip. While traveling across the mountains, I came to a stop on Interstate 81 north of Johnson City, Tennessee. After sitting in stalled traffic for several minutes, I noticed cars around me pulling into the median and driving back the way they had come to take advantage of the many back roads. Impatiently, I did the same thing. However, I failed to take into account that I was not driving my small compact car but a fourteen-foot long truck.



As I was entering the median, I felt a bone-jarring jolt and came to a very sudden and complete stop. Panic quickly set in. I threw it in reverse but went nowhere. I threw it back into drive and went nowhere. I got out and looked and saw I was wedged over the top of a small ditch, both sets of rear tires spinning in the air. I wasn't going anywhere and to make matters worse, now traffic was flowing freely in my original direction. All I could do was sit and wait for a tow truck (summoned by a police officer who felt too sorry for me to give me a ticket) to come free me. If only I had known or could have guessed that would happen, I never would have attempted that insane maneuver.

How many times in our lives do we make that claim: “If only I’d known . . .” We use that statement often but it doesn't really mean much because there is no way we *could* have known. (OK, I'll admit I should have known that what happened in the U-Haul truck *could have happened* but let's not quibble.). The point is that we do not *expect* to know what is about to happen in the future. We make our best estimate and deal with things as they come at us.

A much thornier question is this: “Does God ever make such statements?” Does God sometimes “throw up His hands” in frustration and sigh, “If I’d only known things would turn out the way they did, I would've acted differently.” For many, that thought is laughable. For many others, that thought is not only possible, but preferable, bringing a sense of comfort. Those who believe such a way are sympathetic to a doctrine called “Open Theism.”

What is Open Theism?

We all want “new and improved.” That's how we want our clothes detergent, our vacuum cleaners and our televisions. For many, that's how we want our theology. In today's world, we want easy answers and we want them now. Evangelical Christians do not necessarily want to think matters through. Instead, we want the answers to life's toughest questions served up neat and tidy with all the rough edges smoothed over or even removed.

Open theists do their best to present such a message to potential adherents. Open theist Clark Pinnock distinguishes between two “models of God” that people “commonly carry around in their minds”:

We may think of God primarily as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of being, as an all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks. Or we may understand God as a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans.¹

This sounds great, does it not? But a thinking believer will soon realize that Pinnock is giving an unfair treatment since most Christians take parts of both models. God is a monarch but not “aloof.” He is all-determining and at the same time a caring Father. What Pinnock presents as two distinct models are really aspects of a single model of God, minus a few of his extreme characterizations such as aloofness and removal from the world process.

Open theism came to the forefront of the evangelical world at the attempt of a few scholars to answer some tough questions. The questions and the way we find the answers are of vital importance. The questions are many and they are crucial. However, they are not new. Christians have struggled with them for centuries.

The search for answers to these questions led some scholars to doubt the veracity of the classic understanding of God’s omniscient foreknowledge. Gregory Boyd shares that he “came to the conclusion that something was amiss in the classical understanding of divine foreknowledge. [He] came to believe that the future was, indeed, partly determined and foreknown by God, but also partly *open* and known by God as such.”² Boyd and scholars like him were looking for something “new and improved.”

Some questions are grounded in our views of biblical exegesis and some are grounded in historical facts. Others are grounded in theological queries and philosophical ponderings while even more result from a practical standpoint. These questions that follow will form the basic outline of the remainder of this paper.

Biblical Questions

Biblically, Open Theists deal often with problematic texts and the questions they raise to any serious Bible student. Open theists try to answer questions dealing with God’s foreknowledge and His ability to know the future and the implications of the possession or lack of possession of that knowledge. These questions include such brain-twisters as:

¹ Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God*, by Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 103.

² Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 11. Boyd is senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church (Baptist General Conference) in St. Paul, Minnesota and former professor of theology at Bethel College and perhaps can be called the leading proponent of this theology.

- If the future is exhaustively settled in God's mind, why does the Bible repeatedly describe God changing His mind?
- Why does the Bible say that God often changes His plans or "repents" of previous decisions and prophecies?
- Why does God sometimes use words such as "perhaps" and "maybe" and "possibility?"

Open theists refer often to several different passages and insist that the only way to glean accurate understanding is to take the passages "in their plain meaning." For instance, one passage that is referred to often is I Samuel 15:10-11, which reads, "Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, 'I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands.'"³ In its plain reading, God was obviously upset at his "wrong" decision to make Saul king. However, just a few verses later, Samuel reveals that "the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind" (I Samuel 15:29). Obviously, the straightforward meaning cannot be taken here. There must be further study to reconcile the two. I will attempt such study later in this paper.

Philosophical and Theological Questions

Other questions are more thought-provoking in nature. For instance, open theism tries to solve the problem of evil. People have often wondered why a good God would allow evil things to happen. We often hear, "Why didn't God stop that runaway bus?" or "Why did God allow my wife to get cancer?" If he allows it, is He truly good? If it happens because He can't stop it, is He truly powerful?

Remaining in the mode of philosophical thinking, Greg Boyd deals with the reality of our free existence. As a major player in this controversy, Greg Boyd, asks, "if every choice you've ever made was certain an eternity before you made it, were you really free when you made each choice?"⁴ Was it possible that you could have chosen differently if it was eternally certain in God's mind? If not, can we truly say that we are truly free?

He asserts that "to assume [God] knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person's free activity is already there to know – even before he does it! But it's not. . . . We create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don't exist. . . . So God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions."⁵ Open theists argue that just as God's omnipotence is not diminished because he cannot make a square circle or a two-sided triangle, His omniscience is not diminished because future free decisions cannot be known since they simply do not exist. They are unknowable!

Open Theism tries to erase the problem of God's alleged exhaustive divine foreknowledge of all future events with man's absolute libertarian free will. Does God know the outcome of every free decision made by man acting within his own free will?

³ Unless otherwise marked, Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

⁴ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Of course, this raises other issues. Boyd asks, "If God foreknew that Adolph Hitler would send six million Jews to their death, why did He go ahead and create a man like that?"⁶ To do so, Boyd argues that God is ultimately responsible for the behavior of evil people and events that he "unleashes" on the world. Therefore, Boyd, in a letter to his agnostic father, came to the conclusion that "the only response I could offer then, and the only response I continue to offer now, is that this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler."⁷

Ultimately, you have to deal with a major question: if God is eternally certain that various people will end up in hell, why does He create them? These are good questions. They are the same basic questions people have asked for centuries. In fact, traditional Arminianism holds to both libertarianism and exhaustive divine foreknowledge, which seem logically at odds. In this respect, open theism is more logical than Arminianism. However, it pays a high price for its logical superiority. Boyd and his cohorts in open theism take the wrong route and end up with incorrect conclusions.⁸

There are two starting points. Reformed theologians normally start their defense with divine sovereignty. Freewill theists (Arminians, open theists) normally begin with human freedom and moral responsibility. John Feinberg says that "one's starting point is crucial because it shows what one deems most important and one tends to wind up where one started."⁹ The Bible does not explicitly tell us what type of freedom we have (libertarian or compatibilist or otherwise). It merely tells us that we are free. Since libertarian and compatibilistic freedom are both possible types of freedom, both must be examined and open theists cannot carry the day simply by "defining their opponents out of existence as 'unreal,' 'ungenuine,' or 'not meaningful.'"¹⁰ We need an actual definition in order to engage in argument.

Another philosophical question raised by open theists has to do with God's relationship with time. How does an eternal God interact and interrelate with time-bound human activity? Is God in time, above time, beyond time? These are very good questions but are also incredibly complex in their answers.

Unfortunately, I will not be able to address these specific questions in this paper. It is recommended that one read John Feinberg's chapter on this subject in his outstanding treatment of the doctrine of God.¹¹ Let us leave this topic with these words of Scripture:

⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 10.

⁷ Greg Boyd and Edward Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions About Christianity* (Wheaton: Victor, 1994), 29-31.

⁸ Other authors that will be referred to often in this paper include John Sanders, author of *The God Who Risks* and a professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana, and Clark Pinnock, professor of theology at the Canadian Baptist McMaster Divinity School in Ontario author and editor of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* and *The Most Moved Mover*. Pinnock, who in the 1960s was a conservative professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a critic of the then-moderate SBC leadership, underwent a theological transformation in the 1980s which led to highly unorthodox understandings of such doctrines as biblical inspiration, God's foreknowledge, and the nature of salvation and hell.

⁹ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2001), 677.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 679.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 375-436.

- Isaiah 57:15 (KJV) tells us the God of the Bible is “the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy.”
- Psalm 90:2 states that “Before the mountains were born, Or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.”
- Psalm 93:2 (NIV) informs us that God’s “throne was established long ago; [He is] from all eternity.”

Historical Questions

The Old Testament is the battleground in the theological struggle between the advocates of the openness view of God and the traditional (classical) view of God.¹² The open view is a seismic shift not only in theology, but in exegesis and even history. Openness proponents claim that traditional theism has questionable origins. Boyd says that “while some [including himself] argue that the development of the classical view of God was decisively influenced by pagan philosophy, classical theologians have always maintained that it is deeply rooted in Scripture.”¹³ Much like today’s anti-Western Civilization multi-cultural attempt at revisionist history, this argument falls woefully short of proving the point. As we will examine later, we shall see that it is indeed open theism that is more influenced by Greek philosophy than classic theism. A simple appeal to an impartial third-party – the early rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash – will reveal the historical errors of openness claims. We will also look at various heretical sects from the past and reveal how open theism mirrors portions of those same teachings already repudiated in history.

Practical Questions

Practically, Open Theists claim that if God knows in advance all our thoughts, feelings and future actions, then our real relationship with Him is called into question. After all, how can our lives, prayers and decisions make any difference at all to God if He already knows that outcome of every event in our life?

Practicality is a big selling point for Openness teachers. In the preface to *The Openness of God*, we are told that “we need a theology that is biblically faithful and intellectually consistent, and that reinforces, rather than makes problematic, our relational experience with God. The view of God presented in this book may seem new to those outside scholarly circles, where it is well known. But if we remember that it presents in a systematic way what most Christians already practice in their devotional lives, then it will not seem strange at all.”¹⁴

John Sanders, one of the principal authors and theologians in the Open Theism movement, has had declared that his book, “The God Who Risks,” is “an important act of courage that invites readers to *new, courageous thinking*.”¹⁵ The premise behind this desire is that the theology we currently hold must be “improvable” in principle. However, as Charles Hodge once said, “If it is true it is not new, and if it is new it is not true.” When people start thinking that we just now discovering in our day what the Bible

¹² Russell Fuller, “The Rabbis and the Claims of Openness Advocates,” in *Beyond The Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2003), 23.

¹³ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 24.

¹⁴ Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, preface.

¹⁵ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), (back cover). Emphasis mine.

has said all along, it is not far from saying that it does not matter what the Bible has been saying all along.

Why is Open Theism Growing In Acceptance?

The aim of open theism, which is to “rescue our understanding of God’s relationship with His creatures” is noble and commendable. Sadly, the end result is heresy. The thinking has been allowed to flourish through the permission of such organizations as *Christianity Today*, Baker Books, InterVarsity Press and other popular authors. It is influencing scores of students on college campuses across the nation and has caused a stir not seen in decades within the ranks of the *Evangelical Theological Society*. This gathering of evangelical minds voted several months ago to challenge the membership of openness thinkers Clark Pinnock and John Sanders. Members voted 171 to 137 against Pinnock and 166 to 143 against Sanders. Boyd resigned from the society after stepping down from his position of professor at Bethel College in May 2002. In the 2001 annual meeting, ETS members voted 253 to 66 (with 41 abstentions) in favor of a resolution that denied open theism.¹⁶

One must ask, though, why open theism seems to be growing in some circles. William Davis, associate professor of philosophy at Covenant College, lists several reasons for the surprising level of acceptance. First, he says the times are favorable doctrinally and culturally.¹⁷ As a systematic theologian, Davis says that the last century has seen a constant slow drift from evangelical beliefs. Mainline liberal theologians spend less and less time dealing with the actual words of Scripture. However, all camps are guilty. He says reformed thinkers stress God’s transcendence so much that it is hard to imagine having a close relationship with Him. Arminians apologists simply avoid the puzzling aspect of their theology that says God knows the future yet we still act completely freely. Evangelicals as a whole do not have a great affection for doctrine. All this has worked together to prepare a ready seed bed for open theism to prosper.

Culturally, we bring our individualistic understanding of life and social issues into the fray. “Denominationalism” is waning and people want an intimate personal “real” relationship. We are independent creatures and a new thinking that departs for “cold dead old” traditionalism is very appealing from the start. A final cultural indicator of open theism’s acceptance is our predisposed resistance to authority. We do not want to “be under God’s thumb.” We want to be “free” to “work alongside him” in “determining our destinies and futures.” This understanding of libertarian freedom is thought to be an undeniable fact of our existence. We certainly seem to be free and no authority can be superior to the way things *seem*.

We have “Americanized” Christianity and inserted a “rights mentality.” As in civic government, authority is simply the consent of the governed. But spiritual authority does not rest on consent. American Christians come to expect that their consent is always necessary to command their obedience. A God

¹⁶ Doug Koop, “Closing the Door on Open Theists?” in *Christianity Today*, January 21, 2003 (online version found at www.christiantoday.com/ct/2003/001/14.24.html).

¹⁷ William Davis, “Why Open Theism is Flourishing,” in *Beyond the Bounds*, 114.

who rules autonomously and completely from His throne in heaven is deemed tyrannical. The increased rise in prominence of various parachurch organizations has fed this independent spirit. Organizations such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Bible Study Fellowship, Promise Keepers, Young Life, Campus Crusade for Christ and others meet real needs in the lives of believers.

However, the problem lies in the extent to which they allow Christian to treat the organization as their spiritual home. A parachurch organization is no substitute for church. This idea that “we are our own shepherds” leads to a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the “priesthood of the believer.” This doctrine is commonly thought to mean that each believer is free to interpret Scripture as he or she sees fit. That is not the case. The Church as a whole is the sole authoritative interpreter of the Bible. Open theists exploit this thinking. They claim classic theism is in actuality the “God of the Greeks.” Instead, they have presented to us the “God of the Americans.”

Open theism would be easier to refute if it had *nothing* of value to recommend. Open theists at least genuinely attempt to deal with the Scriptures and shallow thinkers will be duped into accepting their attempts at exegesis. Malnourished believers who have been living off a diet of sermons relating only tangentially to the text will readily embrace this biblical treatment. Also, the treatment of such vital pastoral concerns such as prayer and devotion and relationship give answers to long sought questions. The openness writers should also be applauded for writing in a completely accessible manner for a non-academic audience seeking answers. Sadly, the answers come only at the high cost of God’s majesty.

However, as with any “new” way of thinking, there must be a perceived weakness in the “old” way of thinking and perceived benefits in accepting the change. The basis for the weakness and strength of each position provides insight into the subject matter at hand. Such is the case with open theism.

Perceived Weaknesses of Classic Theism

The church has managed to hold a position of consensus on God’s knowledge of the future until fairly recently. The advent of open theism has cast a faint shadow on that position and it has slowly moved from the ivory towers of academia to the shelves of normally shallow Christian bookstores. One of the biggest inroads into the consciousness of the “man in the pew” came in the editorial pages of *Christianity Today*.¹⁸ In the article, David Neff urged both classic theists and open theists to study the Bible before engaging in debate. That is all well and good. 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. Neff wrote that “There is no more boring concept of God than that traditionally presented by *philosophical* theism.”¹⁹ In the same article, Neff claims that open theism takes the “biblical high ground.” Really? What are the supposed weaknesses of classic theism?

¹⁸ “God vs. God,” *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, 34-35

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine to show author equating classic theism with philosophy while equating open theism with biblical scholarship).

Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge

Proponents of open theism are basically committed and more consistent Arminians. They affirm Arminian teachings such as the universal love of God for all humanity and His true desire that every individual in the world be saved, God's creation with genuine (*libertarian*) free will given to all and the necessity of the freedom of the will for genuine worship and human moral accountability. However, they depart from classic Arminianism on this point: they object to the notion that the divine omniscience includes comprehensive knowledge of the future.²⁰ Open theists demand that omniscience be redefined as God's perfect knowledge of the past and present only. All of the future is unknown (and logically unknowable) to God since it has not yet occurred. They ask, "How can God know the future when much of that future is determined by the free choices and actions of free humans acting independently and autonomously?"

However, numerous passages seem to state, in the openness hermeneutic of "straightforward understanding" that God does know all things, including the future. Just in studying the atonement of Christ, we find God working the future out according to His will before the world began. Consider the following:

- Micah 5:2 – "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. **His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.**"
- Titus 1:1-3 (NIV) – "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness-- a faith and knowledge resting on the **hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time**, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior." The Greek is clear here: *pro chronon aionion* – "before eternal times."
- 2 Timothy 1:8-10 (NIV) – ". . . the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life-- not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. **This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time**, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."
- 1 Peter 1:20 – "**For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world**, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you." The NIV has "chosen before the creation of the world" and the KJV has "foreordained before the foundation of the world."
- Ephesians 1:4 – ". . . just as **He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before Him."

Open theist John Sanders says that these passages simply mean that God planned for Christ to become incarnate as part of His "general" plans and God foresaw that some would be angry enough with Jesus to kill Him. That interpretation is not only contrary to the texts but contradictory to Sanders' own position that God does not possess future knowledge.

²⁰ Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 32.

In response to these passages and open theists' interpretations, Douglas Wilson notes:

If words have meaning, then somebody somehow was chosen in Christ to holiness and blamelessness before the world was made. But if anyone was chosen for salvation, or known as receiving salvation, before the world was made, then that means that such persons were genuine objects of God's knowledge (as the Arminian holds) or genuine objects of God's redemptive love (as the Reformed hold). In either case, God's knowledge of the future is clearly seen. God knew that sin was going to occur and He created the world anyway – having already planned the salvation of sinners.²¹

It is important to understand the phrase "if words have meaning." This is because of the irony that people (read: open theists) can hold reason in very high esteem to rationalize our understanding of God, as well as time and eternity, and yet "when it comes to reason's legitimate job – determining what the words are actually saying – then such reason falls to the ground."²²

Lack of Genuine Freedom among the Creatures

Open theists claim that if the will we possess is not libertarian free will, then we are not truly free at all. This libertarian free will is defined such that a moral agent is free *only* as long as he or she could choose differently from which he or she actually did choose. That is, given all the conditions that are true of the situation in which he makes the choice, the agent is free so long as he could have chosen differently within that identical situation in which he makes the choice. It is, therefore, literally impossible for the choice to be known (by God or that person).²³ The logic is simple: How can humans be really free if God knows perfectly what they will actually do? Are we really free if God already knows what we will do, therefore insuring that we will indeed make that choice or perform that action?

Basically, the challenge from open theists to their theological kin, the Arminian, is this: *comprehensive divine foreknowledge and libertarian freedom are mutually exclusive*. That is why I wrote those open theists are basically more consistent Arminians. If you value libertarian free will (as classic Arminianism does), then you must be willing to give up your commitment to comprehensive and exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

Lack of Genuine Providential Control among the Godhead

Many Arminians suggest that God's simple foreknowledge (the classic Arminian position) puts God in the best position to regulate the future. Open theists disagree. If God simply knows the future, there is no opportunity for God to influence or respond to any free choices or actions that take place in the future. God knows and accepts what free creatures will do but he is not in a position to use such knowledge in a providentially beneficial way.²⁴

²¹ Douglas Wilson, *Knowledge, Foreknowledge and the Gospel* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1997), 27.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 37.

What Options Exist?

Open theists are deeply and fundamentally dissatisfied with *all* versions of the Arminian tradition of God's simple foreknowledge. This commitment to God's foreknowledge undermines much of what Arminianism cherishes most – libertarian free will. Ironically, it is at this single point that open theologians and reformed theologians agree. So, what option does a Christian have in regard to God's knowledge of the future? There are basically three options.

1. Versions of Calvinism offer the most comprehensive concept of divine providence with their commitment that Scripture teaches God's ultimate control over all that occurs. Calvinists also deny libertarian free will and instead embrace compatibilist free will, meaning that man's free will is compatible with God's exhaustive foreknowledge. Our wills are free but we can and must only choose those things we want and are able to choose.
2. Arminians concerned to keep God's foreknowledge are at a quandary. They cannot keep both God's exhaustive foreknowledge and libertarian free will.
3. This leaves open theism as the third and only model in which free will is allowed logically.

Perceived Benefits of Open Theism

Open theism is growing quickly in acceptance among scholars and college students and seminarians. Why? What benefits are there in discarding classic theism?

A "Real" Relationship between God and His People

This matter of genuineness in relationships is the heart of the matter in open theism. Classic theism makes a mockery of this notion, says the open theist. They say we may live under the illusion of acting freely but in fact are merely acting according to God's script.²⁵ Open theists even claim that classic Arminian thinking, though devoid of any scent of divine determinism, renders real God/human interaction and real human freedom illusory.

Risk in the Creation Project

If the future is unknown, then it must be assumed that God takes great risks in His creation and administration of this world. By "risks," open theists claim that God could not and can not possibly know if and how His grand plans will play out or even succeed. This desire for a risk-taking God stems solely from a desire to believe and maintain human libertarian free will. To keep our free will, God cannot know what we will think, choose or do in the near or far future. God can only speculate what the next moment will bring.

Instead of demeaning God, Greg Boyd suggests that taking responsible risks is a virtue. He asks, "Don't we ordinarily regard a compulsion to meticulously control everything as evidencing weakness, not strength? Of course we do."²⁶ He further exclaims that "everyone who is psychologically healthy knows it is good to risk loving another person, for example. You may, of course, get hurt, for people are free

²⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 210-211.

²⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 57-58.

agents. But the risk-free alternative of not loving or of not trying to control another person is evidence of insecurity and weakness, if not sickness.”²⁷

Do we see passages in Scripture where God took risks? Of course, in this way of thinking, God took a gigantic risk in deciding to limit Himself and grant humans this wondrous gift of libertarian free will. Although God wanted them to use this freedom to love Him, He knew that it was theoretically possible that none would! We can look to the life of Abraham. Suppose Abraham refused to offer Isaac as sacrifice as God required. What would God do then? That was the great test for Abraham. What if he failed? Would God have to find another to act as the channel of blessing on earth? After all, God had already promised that His blessing would come *through Abraham* (Genesis 12:1-3). Yes, God risked greatly, even foolishly in promising something before He was certain it would happen as planned.

Making Sense of the Repentance of God

The God of open theism must face the possibility that He would have to change His plans from time to time. God is the “best learner.”²⁸ (*Does He play well with others and not run with scissors?!?*). As God reacts to the swirling changes all around Him, He must realize that He has made the *wrong* decision and must step back, reevaluate and basically “punt.” Greg Boyd presents this strongly in two statements found in I Samuel 15:11 and 15:35, where we read that God regretted making Saul the king. Boyd wonders how God could truly experience regret if He knew all along, as adherents to foreknowledge assert, that Saul would turn out badly. Boyd says, “Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than what we expected or hoped for when the decision was made.”²⁹

John Sanders uses the incident described in Exodus 32 to bolster this same position. Israel grows impatient waiting on Moses to return from the mountain. At Aaron’s direction, they build a golden calf and worship around it. God is deeply angered and tells Moses He is going to destroy them. Beginning in Exodus 32:11, Moses entreats the Lord and the Bible declares that “the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” This is a clear example, according to Sanders of God repenting or changing His mind. He said He would do one thing but He did another.

Making Sense of the Reassessments of God

In addition to repenting, God also changes His assessment of His own actions and beliefs regarding some past situation. One example is when Sanders tells us that the first sin was, in God’s estimate, unexpected and implausible. When man sins, God must reevaluate His previous belief regarding His creatures. Another example offered by Sanders is that God, upon learning what He did through the flood, promised never again to send another flood.³⁰ Here, God “second-guesses” Himself. Sanders says that “God must have felt very badly about what He had done.”³¹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 124.

²⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 56.

³⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 50.

³¹ Ibid.

Providing a Proper Response to Suffering

Open theists stand ready with words of comfort when human tragedy, injustice, suffering and pain occur. They tell us that God is as grieved as you are about the difficulties and heartache you are experiencing, and He, too, wishes that things had worked out differently. However, because God cannot know, much less control the future, we must not blame God for the evil things that happen in our lives. Instead, we can be assured of the love He feels toward us and be secure in the knowledge that He “feels our pain.” Furthermore, God stands ready to provide us with strength to make it through these pointless and purposeless acts of evil. After all, God is love above all else!

Both Greg Boyd and John Sanders refer to personal tragedies they have experienced that led them to this way of thinking. For Boyd, it was seeing a “perfect marriage” disintegrate. For Sanders, it was the death of his brother in a car wreck.

Why Must Open Theism Be Refuted?

Open Theists believe that this “new” belief should be widely accepted and embraced by those within conservative evangelicalism. Boyd says that “the debate about the nature of the future is an important issue. . . . But compared to our common faith in the person of Jesus Christ and the importance of our loving unity in Him, this issue and most other theological issues are peripheral.”³² Bruce Ware, the Senior Associate Dean of the School of Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, disagrees. Ware wrote “God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism” to “demonstrate that this debate with open theism is central, not peripheral. It has everything to do with the God whom we trust, follow, honor and obey. It has everything to do with whether He is worthy of our uncontested reliance, our unqualified devotion, and our unreserved worship.”³³

In the list of endorsements inside the front cover of Ware’s book, an impressive array of evangelical scholars weigh in on this fact. D. A. Carson says that open theism “so redefines the God of the Bible and of theology that we wind up with a quite different God.” Wayne Grudem contends that open theism “ultimately portrays a different God than the God of the Bible.” Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville believes that “the very identity and reality of the God of the Bible is at stake.” John Piper says that open theism “dishonors God, distorts Scripture, damages faith and would, if left unchecked, destroy churches and lives.”

Boyd counters by arguing that open theism is not about the nature of God but rather “about the nature of the future.”³⁴ Boyd insists that he affirms God’s omniscience as much as anyone else. However, Boyd and other open theists have simply redefined omniscience. Also, on the same page where Boyd denies that open theism is not “about God’s nature at all,” he goes on to say that “Scripture describes the openness of God to the future as one of His attributes.”³⁵ One must ask how the openness of God cannot be “about God’s nature at all” and yet at the same time is about an “attribute of greatness”?

Implications for Inerrancy

Open theism has numerous far-reaching implications, which we will address later in this paper. First, if open theism is true, it forces us to deal with the issue of inerrancy. Biblical Christianity has affirmed through the ages that Scripture is nothing less than God’s Word. Scripture itself teaches this. To secularists, this is circular reasoning. It is important, however. We do not approach the Bible and make it into something it does not claim to be. We do not confer upon it an authority it does not already claim for itself. As with any doctrine, we appeal to Scripture for proof. Unless Scripture is fully and completely authoritative and reliable, we cannot affirm any doctrine. If the Bible is errant in any one place, it raises the possibility that *any* statement of Scripture can be in error. Furthermore, if any statement can be in

³² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 19-20.

³³ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 9-10.

³⁴ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

error, an independent source must be raised to judge the veracity of any doctrine from the Bible. We would have to resort to human reason, religious experience and other criterion for justification of any theological grounds. Of course, there are many who are quite thrilled to do just that.

The basic problem open theism forces upon biblical inerrancy is this: If God does not know the future free actions of His creatures, how could He inspire a sacred text using autonomous authors?³⁶ How can God be sure they communicated what He wanted communicated? How can we place any confidence in biblical prophecy if God is just as ignorant of the future as we are? Is God merely a “good guesser”?

To protect the text, God must “override” the free will of man. Therefore, libertarian free will either denies inspiration or claims that God manipulated man in some sort of mechanical method of dictation. Open theists claim to believe in the inspired and inerrant Word of God. They appeal to it often.

It is this very issue that is causing the furor in the Evangelical Theological Society. Former Society president Roger Nicole³⁷, made a motion at a recent society meeting that the open views of Clark Pinnock and John Sanders lead to a “flagrant contradiction of [the society’s] confession of the inerrancy of Scripture.”³⁸ Furthermore, open theism calls into question the divine author of Scripture, as well. The Bible is filled with prophecies and to the open theist, God is ill-fitted for the work of a prophet. Also, the God of open theism often gives bad advice so He is therefore unable to give us a Bible with infallible guidance for our lives.

Implications for Sin

Libertarians deny the doctrine of original sin. Original sin states that we are guilty of the sin of Adam, which has been imputed to us and inherited by us. However, libertarians tend to believe that we are guilty only of those sins that we have committed freely.³⁹

Implications for the Gospel

Second, we are forced to deal anew with the gospel itself? Open theists can be imagined to plead, “Surely we can all be Christians together and disagree over how much God knows.” The answer is “No!” The Bible repeatedly tells us that our salvation is connected to a proper understanding of *who Jesus is*. John refers often to a proper *confession* of Christ. John writes that “whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (I John 5:1). To be “born of God,” we must affirm that Jesus is the Christ. But what does the title “Christ” mean? Just using the word as a title does not mean you are saved. Mormons do just that and they are not the children of God. Later, John writes that “whoever transgresses and does

³⁶ Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2001), 205.

³⁷ Roger Nicole earned a Th.D. from Gordon Divinity School, and a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He assisted in the preparation of the *New International Version of the Bible*. He is Professor of Theology Emeritus at both Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (where he taught for over 40 years) and Reformed Theology Seminary in Orlando.

³⁸ Roger Nicole, “Open Theism is Incompatible with Inerrancy” in *Founders Journal* (Vol. 52: Spring 2003), 14.

³⁹ Frame, *No Other God*, 207.

not abide in the *doctrine of Christ* does not have God. He who abides in the *doctrine of Christ* has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9 – KJV).

We are also told to believe in the “name” of Jesus. In the New Testament era, a name was intrinsically tied to a person’s identity. That is why the angel told Mary to name her son Jesus, “for it is He who will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). We must affirm the deity of Christ and in so doing, we must affirm the full deity of God. As we shall see, God declares in Isaiah 40-48 that the ability to know the future is a test of deity. A denial of this is a denial of deity. In stripping God of His deific attribute, we are not talking of the same God of Scripture. *The Socinians* (see “Is Open Theism New?” below) *denied the deity of Christ; Open theists deny the deity of God.*

Open theists would also deny that God’s salvation plan was actually set in eternity past but merely is God’s “contingency plan” as the world and its evil unfolds before Him. For instance, God could not have known that Adam and Eve would sin as they did in the Garden. In fact, Clark Pinnock writes that when God created autonomous creatures, He “accepted a degree of risk with the possibility, not certainty, of sin and evil occurring.”⁴⁰ John Sanders states that sin was not only not foreknown by God, its occurrence in the garden was “implausible” to God.⁴¹ However, the Bible declares that “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4) and that God “has saved us . . . according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus *from all eternity*” (2 Timothy 1:9).

Sanders also believes that the cross was in fact not foreordained by God, but was “God’s wise response” to the way Israel chose not to follow his son. Sanders portrays both Father and Son deciding only at the last minute that Jesus had to die. He says that “although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. The path of the cross comes about only through God’s interaction with humans in history.” Not until the agonizing prayer in Gethsemane do “Father and Son . . . both come to understand that there is no other way.” Even after this new discovery comes to God, the question still hangs over Jesus, “Will this gambit work?”⁴²

Furthermore, it is impossible to imagine being secure in our salvation. If we can freely choose to become a believer, then surely we must be freely able to choose to not believe any longer. God cannot control the future so He surely cannot promise us that we will persevere. If God does make such a promise, He surely is powerless to keep it.

Implications for the God’s Trustworthiness

Third, we must deal with God’s overall trustworthiness and reliability as a guide for our lives. If open theism is correct, then the openness God, in comparison to orthodoxy’s view of God, is quite deficient in His understanding.⁴³ If God does not know the future, then how can we relate to Him differently than we do our local television weatherman? Open theists might say that God knows “more” than we do so is

⁴⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 42.

⁴¹ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 45-46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁴³ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 19.

the best available guide for life. However, the weatherman knows far more than we do about all things meteorological but we all know how reliable he is. Of course, the gap between untrained people and a learned weatherman is microscopic compared to the gap between mortal man and an infinite God.

However, the question remains: Why trust the word of God when He doesn't know the distant future, much less minutes and hours from now? Not only is God "learning" from what happens moment to moment, He is also realizing that certain of His beliefs about the future have been *wrong*. Since He is so often mistaken, we must conclude that He is often filled with *regret*. God is often *surprised*. What are we to make of this so-called God? The old hymn said "I don't know what the future holds but I know Who holds the future in His hands." Open theism renders that phrase in the hymn moot.

As Bruce Ware points out, His "deficient wisdom" surely means that God cannot be certain about just what will happen in the end. Will God actually succeed in fulfilling his "goals," as John Sanders calls what most call "plans." The only true answer open theists give is that they are hopeful that God will somehow "pull it off."

Implications for God's "God-ness"

While open theists claim that their view enhances the reality and genuineness of relationship with God, the truth is that the gains they propose are not real. Just read what we are told about the "open God."⁴⁴

- God can only guess what much of the future will bring;
- God is relatively reliable only when predicting things close at hand;
- God cannot be trusted to give accurate guidance on matters that are far into the future;
- God constantly sees many of His beliefs about the future proved wrong by what in fact transpires;
- God reevaluates the rightness or wrongness of His own past conduct based on what He learns moment by moment;
- God even regrets at times that His own decisions or His counsel to those who have trusted Him have actually resulted in harm instead of the good He intended –

Given all that, what sense of confidence can you truly possess in turning your life over to this "god?" While claiming to offer "meaningfulness" to Christians, open theism "strips the believer of the one thing needed most for a meaningful and vibrant life of faith: absolute confidence in God's character, wisdom, word, promise and the sure fulfillment of His will."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

Implications for Worship

What does open theism do to our worship? We worship by remembering how great and mighty He is. If open theism is true, however, we cannot thank Him for confusing the enemies of Gideon, but rather we must praise Gideon. We cannot praise Him for drying up the Red Sea; after all, He was just as surprised as Moses was.

Today is no different. For what can we truly praise God today? Are we thankful for delivering us from evil? How can we be when He was either powerless to stop evil or desires my freedom so much that He chooses not to intervene? Do we thank God for the person who introduced us to Christ? We cannot for God had no part in that – all the praise lies with the free individual who decided himself to talk to us. Can we even thank Him for saving us? Absolutely not. After all, that was completely *my* decision. All He could do was “influence” me just as my pastor was doing and the crucifixion was simply the outworking of a multitude of free events. I suppose we could thank and praise God for His “resourcefulness” in making the best out of a bad situation.

Is Open Theism “New?”

As stated earlier, one of the perceived benefits of accepting open theism is the “newness” of it. Finally, the authors proudly say, we have a biblical way of dealing with the ailments of this world. After 2000 years of Christianity’s best and brightest giving it a shot, we are finally able to “figure it all out” thanks to the combined brilliance of Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd and John Sanders.

It is commonly understood that Clark Pinnock introduced open theism to modern evangelicalism in 1986 in an essay entitled “God Limits His Knowledge” for the book “Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty.” In this essay, Pinnock wrote that “God anticipates the future in a way *analogous to our own experience*.”⁴⁶ Open Theism quietly crawled onto the scene and has grown since. In 1990, Robert Brow wrote an article for Christianity Today called “Evangelical Megashift.”⁴⁷ Brow, a prominent Canadian theologian, described a radical change on the evangelical horizon – a megashift towards a “new-model thinking.”

Pinnock later wrote “The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God” in 1994. The issue hit mainstream consciousness with the release of Greg Boyd’s “God of the Possible” and John Sanders’ “The God Who Risks.”

The movement has all the appearance of living up to its promise of “new and improved” but is it really new or simply rehashed heresy from centuries and decades gone by?

The Historic Roots of Open Theism

The advocates of open theism often represent the movement as something very contemporary. In fact, the “newness” is one reason given why people should be attracted to it. This is faulty thinking. Traditionalism, which reveres ideas because of their antiquity, and modernism, which embraces ideas because of their newness, are equally fallacious.⁴⁸ The only factor for accepting teachings is the teaching’s solidarity with Scripture.

However, openness is not new. What is new is that open theism has been branded as “evangelical.”⁴⁹ Its basic premise, libertarian free will, is also not a new idea. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341- 270 B.C.) believed the world was made up of tiny atoms that normally move down vertical lines. Sometimes, they collide and combine and occasionally swerve. This randomness explains the nature of human freedom.⁵⁰ Plato (427-347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) also held to a kind of randomness in

⁴⁶ Clark Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 157.

⁴⁷ Robert Brow, “Evangelical Megashift,” *Christianity Today* (19 Feb 1990), 12-14 as found in Wilson, *Bound Only Once*, 95.

⁴⁸ Frame, *No Other God*, 26 (footnote 6).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

nature.⁵¹ Consistent with this thinking, the “god” of philosophy is a distant cry from the God of Scripture. Much later, Jacobus Arminius, in his battle with Calvinism, presented his ideas on the freedom of man.

Despite the numerous cries to the contrary by open theistic scholars, the disavowal to distant wayward theological and philosophical cousins is simply not true. Also, their claims that historic Christian orthodoxy is antiquated and arose from Greek philosophy more than the Scriptures are also untrue. Pinnock, Sanders and Boyd all see their view as an alternative position between traditionalism (filtered through a Greek philosophical grid) and Process Theology of the 20th century. Open theism has been affected by Greek thought at least as much as classic theism.

Ben Merkle, professor of theology at New St. Andrews College, writes that “the openness of God doctrine is merely a rehash of some of the more obnoxious parts of theology of sixteenth-century Socinus. Or, more recently, the Openness of God view is a baptized version of what has been parading about the University of Chicago for the last fifty years under the heading of Process Theology.”⁵²

What is Socinianism and Process Theology? A cursory examination will reveal to the average reader that they are indeed distant relatives to this “new” view.

Socinianism

In the 1500s, John Calvin had great hope for advancing Protestant doctrine in Poland. The Polish king, Sigismund Augustus, had Calvin’s *Institutes* read to him twice a week. Calvin even dedicated his commentary on the Book of Hebrews to the king. However, even within Calvin’s lifetime, Poles became quite taken with anti-Trinitarian theology and became a strong Unitarian community. They took their name from their most influential teacher, Faustus Socinus.

Socinus followed his uncle Laelius Socinus in teaching various heretical whims. He did not receive a good classic education and revealed his heresy early in life. At twenty years of age, he was denounced and sought refuge in Lyons. It was in Lyons that he developed his thoughts on the denial of the deity of Christ. He returned to Italy after three years and stayed in Florence for 12 years, conforming outwardly to the Roman Catholic Church. After this, he moved to Poland where his teachings began to truly take hold.

Along with his anti-Trinitarian views, Socinus held to a Pelagian view of the atonement, that is, the crucifixion served as an example for us but forgiveness is found through our own ability to do good works. Socinianism attempted to place “love” as God’s central attribute and attempted to rid the divine attributes of all that seemed harsh or severe.⁵³ With love as God’s governing attribute, God is perfectly able to forgive sin without demanding a payment of any kind. Socinians argued that the fact that He would demand a payment is contradictory to the very notion of forgiveness. Sins could either be remitted or paid for, but not both. A payment rules out grace.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ben Merkle. “Liberals in Drag.” In *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism*, edited by Douglas Wilson, (Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 2001), 67.

⁵³ John MacArthur, “Open Theism’s Attack on the Atonement,” in *Bound Only Once*, 99.

Socinus also denied predestination and God's foreknowledge, original sin, justification by faith and more. Although he held to many other heretical views, his view on foreknowledge is forever linked with his name. Socinus saw his theology as corrective to the aberrant views of both Calvinistic foreordination and Arminian foreknowledge.

Robert Strimple makes the distinction for us. He writes that:

Calvinism teaches that the sovereign God has *foreordained* whatsoever comes to pass and therefore He *foreknows* whatsoever comes to pass. Arminianism denies that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass but wishes nonetheless to affirm God's foreknowledge of whatsoever comes to pass. Against the Arminians, the Socinians insisted logically that the Calvinists were quite correct in insisting that the only real basis for believing that God knows what you are going to do next is to believe that He has foreordained what you are going to do next. Like the Arminians, however, the Socinians insisted that it was a contradiction of human freedom to believe in the sovereign foreordination of God. So they went "all the way" (logically) and denied not only that God has foreordained the free decisions of free agents but also that God foreknows what those decisions will be.⁵⁴

This is precisely the teaching of open theism. However, the errors of Socinus were great and far more extensive than the errors of open theism. That is one reason why open theists work so hard to distance themselves from this heresy in their literature.⁵⁵ However, the heterodox agreement on the divine nature of God clearly makes some sort of agreement. It is not fair to make the sweeping statement that open theists are present-day Socinians. They most certainly are not. However, it might be fair to say that open theists are not Socinians *yet*.⁵⁶

Process Theology

Socinus' teachings dominated Poland until the 1700s. One particular sect that grew out of this thinking was Process Theology, the brainchild of mathematician and philosopher Alfred Whitehead. His theology grew out of his study of the nature of time. To Whitehead, time did not flow but "comes into being in little droplets." One of Whitehead's students, Charles Hartshorne, applied this thinking to theology. Hartshorne took Whitehead's metaphysic and Socinus' description of deity and made a religion that any liberal theologian could live with.

Hartshorne clearly saw Process thought as a revival of Socinianism. He wrote "Have we any reason for rejecting that old Socinian proposition . . . ? Is God all-knowing? Yes, in the Socinian sense. Never has there been a greater discovery . . . that the Socinian discovery of the proper meaning of omniscience. . . . Events that have not yet happened are not there to be known and the claim to know them could only be

⁵⁴ Robert Strimple, "What Does God Know?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 140-141.

⁵⁵ Douglas J. Wilson, "Neo-Socinianism and Biblical Theism," in *Whatever Happened to the Reformation*, edited by Gary W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2001), 63.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

false.”⁵⁷ The Socinians sacrificed the foreknowledge of God for the sake of being able to have a free will that has absolutely no competition. They share this with Process and Openness theologians.

Pinnock tells us as much in this enlightening quote:

He [Charles Hartshorne] has taught me that thinking of God as literally *all*-powerful divests the finite universe of a degree of power. He has pressed the point that God, though unchanging in His character, is certainly able to change in response to a changing creation. In my theology, at least, God has used process thinkers to compel me to change certain ideas which I had and bring them up to scriptural standards.⁵⁸

Socinianism, Process Theology and Open Theism

Openness theologians have managed to discard much of Process Theology’s more repugnant strains but its main selling point remains the basis for this “new” way of thinking. Boyd emphatically declares that openness and the other heresies have “little in common.”⁵⁹ Of course, this means that the three do indeed have some “a little” in common. For one, both Openness and Process thinkers begin with the accusation that classic theism is some sort of “Greek lovechild.”

Process and Openness also then begin to speak of the necessity of a changing (growing, processing) God. Boyd correctly points out that the Process god “can’t” predetermine or foreknow “anything.” Open theists differentiate themselves from this horrible thought by saying that the Open God can and does predetermine and foreknow “whatever He wants.”⁶⁰ Openness proponents then issue the triumphant proclamation that “it takes a greater God to steer a world populated with free agents than it does to steer a world of pre-programmed automatons.”⁶¹ This, of course, shows a remarkable ignorance of reformed thought on the will of man.

Hartshorne hated classical Christian doctrine and asked derisively “How is it God is the supreme, however benevolent, tyrant? Can we worship a God so devoid of generosity as to deny us a share, however humble, in determining the details of the world, as minor participants in the creative process that is reality?”⁶² This quote describes the central connection between Process Theology and Open Theism. We want to “be involved in the creative process.” And to open theists, this process (and only this process) is equated with REALITY. In other words, to be REAL, we must take part as EQUALS with God. This not only elevates man to position of co-Creator of the future but demotes God an infinite level of notches. Sanders says that God “will do all He can to help us but since God is dependent on us for

⁵⁷ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (SUNP: Albany, 1984), 26-27; 38-39 (as found in Wilson, *Bound Only Once*, 70.)

⁵⁸ Ronald Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1987), 208 as found in *Bound Only Once*, 81.

⁵⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 31.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 12 (as found in Wilson, *Bound Only Once*, 72). ***This is the heart of the matter – a totally selfish, prideful man-centered demand by fallen man on a sovereign holy God to give us what we think we deserve by right.***

some things, there is no guarantee that we will properly appropriate the divine wisdom.”⁶³ *Indeed, it can be said that open theists have placed God in the hands of angry sinners.*

Pinnock skips the physics and math of Hartshorne and Whitehead but repeats basically the same message. To Pinnock, only open theism gives us a *real* and *meaningful* existence. He says that “The Bible presents an open view of God as living and active, involved in history, relating to us and changing in relation to us. . . .God cares about us and lets what we do impact Him. Our lives make a difference to God – they are truly significant.”⁶⁴

If you read books by Openness proponents, you soon notice their obligation to frequently explain that what they are teaching is *not* Process theology. The constant denial of the charge is incriminating. Taking liberties with the Bard, we might say that “methinks they doth protest too much.” Open theists try in vain to distance themselves from Process Theology. Openness proponents basically say that while it is true that the God they describe acts a lot like the God of Process theology, the difference is that their God doesn’t *have* to act like that, He *chooses* to act that way. The God of Process theology is *necessarily* dependent on creation. It is ontological, built into His very nature and essence. The God of open theology merely *chooses* to be dependent on creation. They are correct in saying this is a distinction but it is far from sufficient to distance themselves totally from each other.

Of course, Openness priorities present a problem. Would you not rather worship a god who “really is that way” instead of a god who merely “acts that way on occasion,” as the openness God does? For example, if we assume that moral behavior is a virtue, then which kind of god would be a better god: a god who has moral behavior built into his character or a god who attempts to be moral most of the time but sometimes falls short of perfect morality? If, as Openness advocates say, the mutability (changeableness) of God is a virtue, then a god whose mutability is built into his ontology would seem to be a better god.

They make the distinction that they believe God usually limits His interaction with us to the point of simply “urging” us. However, they believe that God can still “intervene” and is capable of actual “coercion.” We are free because God gives us that freedom but if things get “hairy,” He can interrupt our freedom to straighten things out. Douglas Wilson equated this view to that of a small child “steering” a car in his father’s lap. The child is actually steering the vehicle but at any moment, the father can retake control of the car.

One can easily see the similarities between heretical Process theology and Open theism. Merkle states that to say that “Openness is the happy medium between Calvinism and Process theology is similar to describing Oakland as lying halfway between San Francisco and Miami. Openness is Process theology’s kid sister.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 276-277.

⁶⁴ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 104.

⁶⁵ Merkle, “Liberals in Drag,” in *Bound Only Once*, 81.

The Historic Battle Against Open Theism

The Second London Confession of Baptists in 1677 (reissued in 1689), in Chapter II, "Of God and the Holy Trinity," paragraph 2, says:

In [God's] sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the Creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain.

Remarkably, three hundred years ago, Baptists directly repudiated an essential tenet of contemporary open theism, namely, that God's knowledge is significantly "dependent upon the Creature." Why would those Baptist write such a thing? The simple answer is in response to the Socinian heresy raging throughout Europe. Socinus has been dead just 73 years and his teachings were spreading. One popular theological dictionary tells us that "Socinian thought became predominant in many circles, both General Baptist and English Presbyterians being widely contaminated."⁶⁶

Therefore, the Baptists in 1689, when confronted with the spreading of this false teaching about the foreknowledge of God, were moved to take an explicit stand against it in their affirmation of faith. The issue remained important enough for the next 60 years, so that when the Baptists in America chose their first affirmation of faith, they chose this same 1689 London Confession. They made some small additions relevant to their situation, but left the wording on foreknowledge exactly as it was in the 1689 Confession.

In 1707 the first Baptist association in America was organized at Philadelphia. As theological disputes arose among the Baptists of the New World, they appealed to "the Confession of Faith, set by the elders and brethren met in London in 1689, and owned by us," as their standard of doctrine. When the association gathered at Philadelphia on September 25, 1742, they ordered a new printing of this by-then classic statement of faith, which is now known on this side of the Atlantic as the "Philadelphia Confession of Faith."

These two confessional documents are the theological fathers of the Baptist Faith and Message of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 2000, this document was revised and a very strong statement was edited into this faith document:

Be it further RESOLVED, that we confess and proclaim that the omniscience of God extends to all creation and throughout all time, to all things actual and potential, even to the thoughts and actions of His conscious creatures, past, present and future . . .⁶⁷

Thankfully, the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention see this issue as central enough to warrant a forthright declaration that defines the core values of Baptists.

⁶⁶ O. Ramond Johnston, "Socinianism," in: Everett Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 490

⁶⁷ Passed June 14, 2000, SBC Convention meetings, Orlando, Florida. You may visit www.sbc.net to read the entire document.

Answering Open Theism's Biblical Questions

A major strength many claim for open theists is their stance on the trustworthiness of God's Word and their abundant use of the Scriptures to formulate and buttress their position. One of the initial appeals of the openness position is its challenge to all to take the Scriptures "simply for what it says."⁶⁸ Virtually all of openness' arguments from Scripture stem from this hermeneutic. Greg Boyd says that "the open view is rooted in the conviction that the passages that constitute the motif of future openness should be taken *just as literally* as the passages that constitute the motif of future determinism."⁶⁹

As a general rule, it is wise to treat the Bible in this fashion. We should be very reluctant to deny a straightforward understanding of any text unless we have a very good reason to do so. For instance, a major distinction between Baptists and other denominations is over the understanding of Jesus' words, "This is My body." Martin Luther felt strongly that Jesus' statement was the intended meaning and understood the passage literally and straightforward. Ulrich Zwingli believed there were good biblical reasons for seeing Christ's words as metaphorical and representational, as in other statements of Christ when He said, "I am the door" and "I am the living water." I agree with Zwingli on this particular issue and affirm along with Bruce Ware that we should deny the literal and straightforward meaning of Scripture *only if* the reasons for doing so are compelling.

Classic theists would say we have good reasons to do so with much of open theism's exegesis of selected passages. In the next few pages, we will look at several passages to which open theists repeatedly refer. However, before looking at these passages, it would be good to give a simple overview explaining why the seemingly sensible hermeneutic of interpreting passages in a straightforward manner does not always bring out the author's intended meaning.

The Danger of Abusing Straightforward Interpretation

The examples examined in the pages to come will reveal the danger of simple interpretation without proper study and exegesis. The passages are ones that open theists use often to buttress their views that God does not know the future and, thus, has to "learn." We will see the shortcomings of their interpretations of these passages. A look at another passage in Genesis will expose further problems with this straightforward approach and gives warnings for doing so with the remainder of open theists' pet texts.

The Straightforward Interpretation of Genesis 3:8-13

Let's look at Genesis 3:8-13, which has several problematic areas for open theists trying to prove their methodology is adequate.

⁶⁸ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 65.

⁶⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 54 (emphasis mine).

- ⁸ And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.
- ⁹ Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"
- ¹⁰ And he said, "I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."
- ¹¹ And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"
- ¹² And the man said, "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate."
- ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

In this passage, we see that Adam and Eve "heard the sound" of God in the Garden. The sound they heard was of God "walking." Upon hearing this sound, the first couple "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God." On a straightforward reading of this passage, we learn that God has physical characteristics such that He can make a sound when He walks and, more significantly, that God can be hidden from, which indicates He is spatially located and delimited.

This raises the question of whether or not you can read such a text in a straightforward manner. If the open theist agrees with the fact that we should not read this literally, then where is a straightforward reading legitimate and where is it not? How do we determine which passage to read literally and which to read analogically? Above all, this fails to commend the openness interpretation of various texts by simply *asserting* that only open theists respect the straightforward reading of the passage. Instead, it reveals that they arbitrarily insert a straightforward meaning in the passages *they choose*⁷⁰.

However, we must consider even more directly relevant features of this one passage. In verse nine, the man and woman are hiding and we read that God asks, "Where are you?" Again, we must ask – What would a straightforward reading here yield? It appears that God does not *presently* know where they are and that God is *spatially located* (not omnipresent) so that He is unaware where Adam actually is. In other words, a consistent open theist must come to the conclusion that denies God's exhaustive *present* knowledge and a denial of His omnipresence.

The problem gets worse in verse eleven. God asks Adam, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The open theist must deny yet another of God's attributes: His exhaustive knowledge of the *past*. God simply does not know what is going and why it has happened. Adam must inform an ignorant God of all that has transpired since their last "walk" in the garden. Later, in verse thirteen, God asks Eve the same type of questions. This indicates He is ignorant of her past actions, as well.

⁷⁰ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 74.

However, open theists staunchly defend God's omniscience of the past and present. But, it appears they do so only by being inconsistent in their interpretation of the Bible. If their hermeneutic applies to Genesis 22:12 and other passages (as we shall see), then why doesn't it apply here? In fact, there are numerous problematic passages similar to this one. Consider the following:

- In Genesis 18:20-21, we read: And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. **I will go down now**, and **see if they have done** entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." If God is omnipresent, how can He "go" anywhere? Furthermore, God appears ignorant once again of the cities sinful actions in the *past*. He must "go" and "discover" their evil actions.
- In Genesis 9:14-15, we read: "And it shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud, and **I will remember My covenant**, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh." Here, a straightforward reading informs us that God has the potential to forget. More importantly, it appears He can forget extremely important things like covenants He makes with His creatures.
- In Exodus 7:5, we read: "And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when **I stretch out My hand** on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst." Does God have physical hands?
- To continue this theme, do we really want to say that God has a face because the psalmist says that He hides His face? (Psalm 13:1). Or that God has eyelids? (Psalm 11:4). Did God really part the Red Sea with a blast from His nostrils? (Exodus 15:8). Is His tongue truly a devouring fire? (Isaiah 30:27). Is His power literally in His arm? (Isaiah 53:1). Does God have intestines (Isaiah 63:15 (KJV)) or other body parts, such as wings (Psalm 91:4) and eyes? (Psalm 17:8).

Open theists would call such argumentation "silly!" Their response would be that there are a number of Bible passages which inform us that God has comprehensive knowledge of the past and present and those passage bear heavily on the passages mentioned above. They say that we must interpret God's questioning of Adam and Eve as rhetorical questions. But, if that is so, again we ask, why not, as we shall see next, in Genesis 22:12?

So, the question then becomes, "*does Scripture elsewhere teach , which sufficient clarity and fullness, that God has exhaustive knowledge of the past, present AND FUTURE so as to see other purposes served in these texts than that of teaching that God has just learned something?*"⁷¹

The Straightforward Interpretation of Genesis 22:12

This passage is referred to repeatedly by Boyd, Sanders, Pinnock and others. The passage is dealing with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God's command. As Abraham prepares to do the deed, God says, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; *for now I know that you fear God*, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

⁷¹ Ibid., 76.

Without question, the straightforward understanding of this passage is that ONLY THEN did God learn what He previously did not know. Boyd writes that “the verse clearly says that it was *because* Abraham did what he did that the Lord *now* knows he was a faithful covenant partner.”⁷² When Abraham raised the knife to drive it into Isaac’s chest, open theists claim that *then and only then* was God able to say “now I know” that Abraham truly feared Him. God learned something and this demonstrates that God does NOT have exhaustive divine foreknowledge of the future.

However, in looking a little deeper, Bruce Ware points out at least three problems with this straightforward reading.⁷³ *First*, if God must test Abraham to “find out what is in his heart” (recall that the text says that God now knows what is *in Abraham’s heart*), this calls into question God’s *present knowledge* of Abraham’s inner spiritual, psychological, mental and emotional state. Remember that 1 Chronicles 28:9 tells us that “the LORD searches all hearts and understands every intent of the thoughts.” 1 Samuel 16:7 informs us that “God sees not as man sees, for man look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” Scripture seems to say that God absolutely knows our hearts and minds and intents. In fact, God knows Abraham better than Abraham knows himself. The openness interpretation of this passage cannot avoid denying that God does NOT know man’s heart. If this is the case, then God does not know the *present*.

Second, Ware asks if God really needs this test to know specifically whether Abraham “fears God”. We have already seen that the openness reading of this text denies God’s knowledge of the present, it also denies the *specific content of that knowledge*. Boyd tells us that “God knows the thoughts and intentions of all individuals perfectly and can play them out in His mind like an infinitely wise chess master anticipating every possible combination of moves his opponent could ever make.”⁷⁴

Open theists see this illogic to a degree. Boyd uses God’s perfect knowledge of people’s inner lives to explain Peter’s denial of Christ. He writes that we can understand “the Lord’s foreknowledge of a person’s behavior simply by supposing that the person’s character, combined with the Lord’s perfect knowledge of all future variables, makes the person’s behavior certain. As we know, character becomes more predictable over time.”⁷⁵ Amazingly, Boyd uses this line of reasoning to explain how Jesus knew Peter would deny Him. However, regardless of the fact that open theists must admit the uncertainty that Peter would deny Jesus *at all*, they nevertheless say that this knowledge of Peter’s character allowed Jesus to predict that Peter would deny Him *EXACTLY* three times (not one, not two, not four but THREE)! How is this possible with Peter’s libertarian free will?

We will examine this issue more in the next few pages but suffice it to say that if you compare the two episodes of Peter and Abraham, Abraham’s heart of faith seems far more “predictable” than Peter’s three denials. However, it is only at the point that Abraham raises that knife that God NOW knows that Abraham does in fact fear Him.

⁷² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 64.

⁷³ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 67ff.

⁷⁴ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 152.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

Consider also the passage in Romans 4:19-22, where Paul uses Abraham as the supreme illustration of the nature of true faith. In this passage, Abraham exhibited remarkable faith when both he and Sarah were old and childless. Year after year, as they grew older, Abraham believed God's promise of a son. Paul uses phrases such as "in hope against hope" and "without becoming weak in faith" and "giving glory to God" to show Abraham's true character: utter trust and fear of God. Remember, this faith was evident LONG BEFORE the sacrifice incident where God *finally* discovers Abraham's true feelings toward Him.

Also, portions of Hebrews 11 are devoted to the faith of Abraham. The writer of Hebrews charts Abraham's life and shows time and again how faith carried him along. That faith is seen in Hebrews 11:19 which says that Abraham "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him [Isaac] back as a type." The question is simple: When did Abraham consider that God is able to raise people from the dead? It has to be before he was to attempt sacrifice. Why would Abraham put his hope in it after he already knew Isaac did not have to die? Undoubtedly, the writer of Hebrews knew what Abraham was thinking when he told his helper in Genesis 22:5, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and *return to you*." If Abraham had this confidence prior to ascending to the altar, then does this not prove that Abraham already feared God? Would not God know that already?

Therefore, since Abraham already fears God and since God already knows that, it cannot be that God "learns" such only when Abraham raises the knife! Abraham was willing to obey God because he had absolute faith that even if God allowed it to continue on to completion, God would simply raise Isaac from the dead, according to Hebrews 11:19 above. Therefore, we MUST take this passage anthropomorphically and analogically, not literally at face value.

Third, Ware points out that given the openness commitment to libertarian free will, God's test of Abraham would not have accomplished what open theists claim it has accomplished. Sanders writes that "God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count for collaboration toward the fulfillment of the divine project. Will he be faithful? Or must God find someone else through whom to achieve His purpose?"⁷⁶ Boyd comments that "the verse clearly says that it was *because* Abraham did what he did that the Lord *now* knew he was a faithful covenant partner."⁷⁷

However, since Abraham had libertarian free will (according to open theists) and since God can be taken back and surprised by improbable and implausible human choices and actions, what assurance could God truly have that Abraham would *remain faithful* in the future? The "now I know" of God could very easily slip into "I was wrong about you." At best, God only knew Abraham was "more likely" to obey, not conclusively prove that he always would. Just because Abraham passed this test, does it necessarily imply he would pass the next one, or the one after that? Of course it does not – not with Abraham armed with his all-powerful libertarian free will.

⁷⁶ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 52-53.

⁷⁷ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 64 (emphasis in original).

Open theists are in a particularly troubling spot here. On one hand, if this test on the mountain confirms further a pattern of obedience and faith already established, how could God only know NOW that Abraham feared God? On the other hand, if Abraham's radical obedience was in contrast to previous unbelief, why would God then conclude that Abraham would *remain* faithful in the future?

It is clear that the openness position on this one passage fails. The straightforward meaning open theists desire simply cannot be the intended meaning of this text. So, what is the meaning? Open theists are right to point out that *something* happens *in relation* to God in this incident.

Divine immutability is best understood involving God's unchanging nature and promise.⁷⁸ However, God is not unchangeable in every respect. God is changeable in relationship with His creation, particularly with man and angels. God does not change His essential nature, purposes, will, level of knowledge or wisdom; but God does interact with His people in the experiences of their lives as their lives unfold in time.⁷⁹

Therefore, when God observes Abraham raise the knife, God sees and experiences in this moment what He has known would happen from all eternity. Basically, God is saying, "In the moment of this action, I (God) am witnessing Abraham demonstrate dramatically that he fears Me."

The Straightforward Interpretation of Genesis 18:9-21

This passage (mentioned briefly above) is not dealt with by Sanders or Boyd. However, given the direct relevance of this passage to the central claims of open theism and its close proximity to favored passages in Genesis, one is left to wonder why the discussion was omitted by both openness proponents.⁸⁰ In Genesis 18, three men visit Abraham and Sarah. One of these men is the "LORD," as described within the text. This would make this passage a "theophany," which means that God is appearing in human form. This same individual asks in verse nine, "Where is Sarah your wife?" Apparently, He does not know! Perhaps, some might reason He asked for the benefit of the other two. Other problems arise, however.

In verses 20-21, as the three "men" prepare to leave for Sodom, the "Lord" speaks to Abraham and said "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. **I will go down now, and see if they have done** entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, **I will know.**" A moment's reflection reveals several problems. First, by His own admission, God does not *presently know* the extent of the sin of Sodom. Second, He does not know the *past sin* of Sodom fully, since He says He must see if they *have done* according to its outcry. Third, God is not omnipresent, since He must travel there and only when He arrives is He able to discover the status of the city's sin.

Hermeneutical consistency would demand that just as God "learned" something new about Abraham in Genesis 22 that He is getting ready to learn something new about Sodom. Furthermore, open theists must admit that God is lacking in past and present knowledge (IF they are going to be consistent)! It is conceivable that *some* open theists might be willing to leave orthodoxy all together (if they haven't

⁷⁸ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 73.

⁷⁹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 73.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

already) and deny these and other of God's attributes. That would be more admirable than the arbitrary and capricious *ad hoc* methodology presently used.

The Straightforward Interpretation of Jeremiah 18

Boyd says that the most blatant example of God's openness rests in Jeremiah 18.⁸¹ Let's examine this text:

- 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying,
- 6 "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "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.

In considering this passage, Boyd suggests that "if this text isn't enough to convince us that God's mind is not eternally settled, then our philosophical presuppositions are controlling our exegesis to a degree that no text could *ever* teach us this."⁸² What can we say about this passage?

First, the verses immediately prior describe God as a potter and Israel as clay (verse 1-4, 6). The point is not that what the Potter does *depends* on the clay. The clay was dealt with "as it pleased the potter" (verse 4).

Second, in the verses that follow (18:11-12), God states that He knows (in advance) exactly what Israel will do. We read that God is already fashioning a plan to punish unrepentant Israel. This is ironic that in the passage open theists use to describe God as unknowing, He knows *exactly* what is going to happen next.

Third, we must ask what these passages mean that are bracketed by God's sovereign control (vv. 1-4) and exhaustive divine foreknowledge (vv. 11-2)? The answer: When people repent of their sins, God has pledged that He will forgive. When people turn against Him, God has warned that He may bring upon them His swift judgment. Isaiah is asserting God's constancy to act in ways that are appropriate to the situation and in total keeping with His perfect attributes of justice and mercy. In this sense, it appears God "changes." That is a far cry from the open theist claim that God "learns something new" and devises a new plan of events.

⁸¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 75.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 78 (italics in original)

There are other passages that open theists use to prove their point of God's ignorance of the future. Keeping in mind the points just made about straightforward interpretation, we are now prepared to deal with open theism's interpretations.

The Straightforward Interpretation of "Entering God's Mind" Texts

There are a few places in Jeremiah which seem to reveal that certain items have "never entered God's mind." Specifically, God is "surprised" at the sinful rebellion of Israel. This, of course, is used heavily to illustrate the "risk" God took in dealing as He did with His creation. Let's look at those passages:

- Jeremiah 7:31 – "And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and **it did not come into My mind.**"
- Jeremiah 19:4-5 – "Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods . . . and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, **nor did it ever enter My mind.**"
- Jeremiah 32:35 – "And they built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them **nor had it entered My mind** that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin."

Here, it appears that God is totally ignorant of some specific kind of behavior until it actually occurs via the libertarian freewill action of His autonomous creatures. When they finally choose to act, the knowledge of this behavior "enters" the mind of God for the first time in eternity. Boyd comments on these passages and says, "However we understand the phrase 'not did it enter My mind,' it would at the very least seem to preclude the possibility that the Israelites' idolatrous behavior was eternally certain in God's mind. If the classical view is correct, we have to be willing to accept that God could in one breath say that the Israelites' behavior 'did not enter my mind,' though their behavior 'was eternally in my mind'. If this is not a contradiction, what is?"⁸³

Two responses are in order. First, open theists readily affirm God's awareness of all knowable things past and present. Surely they must admit that it is impossible for it to be the case that "it never entered God's mind" that Israel would behave as she did. At the very least, according to open theists, God has known from all eternity that it *could* happen just as it did.

Second, and more important, the passages in Jeremiah refer to the abhorrent practices of local idolatrous pagan communities around Israel. The specific behavior alluded to is the horrible act of Israel burning their children on the altars of pagan gods. It cannot be denied that this is the behavior God is referring to through His prophet Jeremiah. However, we must note that God warned Israel against this exact sin hundreds of years earlier. Deuteronomy 12:31 warns Israel not to follow after the gods of other nations because "they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods." Later, in 18:10, God warns Israel that "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his

⁸³ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 61-62.

daughter pass through the fire.” In light of the reference to “Molech” in Jeremiah 32:35, Moses records in Leviticus 18:21 “You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech.”

Now, can we rightly say that these statements in Isaiah accurately reflect an ignorance of God regarding the pagan practice of child sacrifice by fire? Had God truly *never considered* this act? Clearly not, since He several times warns them against this very same act hundreds of years prior! These practices simply could not have entered God’s mind for the first time in Jeremiah.

Instead, we must understand that these phrases illustrate the godly hatred God has for this particular sin and the supreme displeasure God has in His children in participating in this sin. God is saying that this behavior is so vile, so wicked, so detestable that He does not want even to consider such a thing as happening – although, as we have seen, He in fact does know about such behavior.⁸⁴

The Straightforward Interpretation of “Divine Remembrance” Texts

We often read of God “being reminded” of certain things from the past. For example, in Genesis 9:13-17, God places a rainbow in the sky in order “to remember the everlasting covenant” He made with Noah. In Isaiah 62:6, God says that He has appointed watchmen (probably angels) on the walls of the new Jerusalem and their job, day and night, is “to remind the LORD” of His pledge. What is remarkable about these specific passages is that God has “tied a metaphorical string around His finger” (does He have a finger?) and used a mnemonic device to aid His failing memory! At least, that is what a straightforward interpretation would lead us to believe. This would mean, however, that God has a less than exhaustive knowledge of the past. Even worse, God seems to lack knowledge of *His past*.

The Straightforward Interpretation of “Divine Ignorance” Texts

We have already discussed Genesis 3:9 on page 17. In this passage, after Adam and Eve have eaten of the forbidden fruit, God calls out to Adam, “Where are you?” Does this question indicate that God does not know Adam’s location? Later, God asks the first couple, “Who told you that you were naked?” (3:11). Does God not know? Still later, God turns His questions on Eve and asks, “What is this you have done?” (3:13). It appears that God is pretty ignorant of all that has just transpired in the Garden.

Later, after Cain has killed Abel, God asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel? . . . What have you done?” (Genesis 4:9-10). It appears that God is pretty ignorant of what has just happened between the two brothers.

That brings up the salient point. For open theists to declare that God learns using these texts, it appears the text proves too much. These texts seem to indicate that God does not even know the past or the present.

But, God is not looking for answers. He does in fact know the answers. He is acting as a prosecutor, asking questions to allow Adam and Eve to tell Him of their guilt. His probing questions do not reveal ignorance any more than a good prosecutor’s questions of a witness on the stand in trial.⁸⁵ These are

⁸⁴ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 79.

⁸⁵ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 2002), 495.

questions a prosecutor, who knows the facts of a case, asks a defendant, to seek not information but conviction.

The Straightforward Interpretation of “Conditional Future” Texts

A number of passages present God saying through His prophets that some future events *may* occur, thus opening up the window for open theists to declare that God does not know whether or not it will occur.⁸⁶ In Exodus 4, Moses is fretting that the people will not believe that God sent him to free them from Egypt. In response, God gives Moses several miracles to perform so that if they don't believe the first one, they *may* believe the next. Verses in Exodus 13:17 and Jeremiah 26:3 and Ezekiel 12:3 use “may” and “perhaps” to indicate that people's future obedience is not fully known by God. Is this accurate?

First, an open theist should be reluctant to come to this conclusion in light of a plethora of other texts that declare God knows *exactly* what His people will do. For example, God predicts the very name of Cyrus as future king, the rise and fall of nations *not even in existence yet*, the words that come off our lips moment by moment, specific actions such as Jesus being pierced in His side, Jesus' legs not being broken, men bartering for His clothes, His burial in the borrowed grave of a rich man, Judas' betrayal for exactly thirty pieces of silver and Peter's three denials (again, note the exactness).⁸⁷

Second, there is a plausible explanation for God's use of these terms. Although God knows what will occur, perhaps He is “withholding information” from His creatures. The ambiguity might just be for our benefit – to bring about a desired response. For instance, suppose your college professor tells you, “If you study, you'll get an A.” You will probably study to do just that. However, if the professor merely says, “You will get an A on this test,” then how much studying do you think you will do. He gives you the condition so that you will study and then get that A.

Third, from our human standpoint, the conditionality is very real. God constantly says “If you obey, I will bless you; if you disobey, I will judge you.” From our standpoint as finite humans, it is true that we may or may not obey. However, that does not mean that God does not know our future actions or choices.

The Straightforward Interpretation of “Questions About the Future” Texts

Sometimes God appears to “ponder” the future and asks questions that seem to reveal His ignorance of the same. In Numbers 14:11, God asks “How long will this people spurn me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?” Hosea 8:5 has God saying, “My anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence?” Is God truly puzzled over the future?

Comparing these two passages with God's questioning of Adam and Even in Genesis 3:8-9 (Boyd omits the other questions through verse 13), Boyd denies the parallelism. Boyd argues that “some suggest that in these [Numbers 14 and Hosea 8] verses, the Lord was asking rhetorical questions, just as He had done [in Gen 3:8-9]. This is a possible interpretation but not a necessary one. Unlike God's question

⁸⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 66-71.

⁸⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 81.

about location in Genesis, *there is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical.*"⁸⁸

First, Boyd is implicitly admitting that he is using an artificial mechanism for distinguishing when and when not to take texts at their face value. In his mind, the "Where are you?" questions demands to be interpreted non-literally and rhetorically because "there is something in the text or in the whole of Scripture" that "requires" this be the case. He does not explain what that "something" is! Furthermore, Boyd's repeated complaint that classical theists fail to take the straightforward meaning of Scripture seriously is a "shallow, empty criticism."⁸⁹ After all, Boyd does the exact same thing here.

Second, by omitting the other verses in Genesis 3:10-13, Boyd makes it easier to maintain the supposed contrast between the two sets of questions about the future. But the other three questions ("Who told you that you were naked?" and "Have you eaten . . . ?" and "Where are you?" to Eve) all have to do with God's knowledge of the past and present. This begins to look like *special pleading* on the part of Greg Boyd (an attempt to hide credible evidence contrary to the view you espouse). In Boyd's case, he appears to say that only those verses that speak of God's limited knowledge of the *future* are *literally* true and *all the rest* that speak of God's limited knowledge of the *past* and *present* are either ignored and to be taken as obviously non-straightforward in meaning.

Third, we must ask how Boyd can be so dogmatic that "there is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical"? This is pure assertion and proves nothing. It only serves to beg the question: whether the whole of biblical teaching justifies taking texts such as in Numbers and Hosea in some way other than a straightforward manner.

The Straightforward Interpretation of "Divine Repentance" Texts

Just as in passages dealing with God's knowledge of the future, open theists take divine repentance passages in straightforward manner. For instance, in Exodus 32:14, we read "the LORD *changed His mind* about the harm which He said He would do to His people." Openness proponents interpret this to mean that God was faced with some new circumstance He did not foresee and this new situation resulted in God's reassessment of His plan and changing of His mind. It is granted that this is the easiest and simplest way to interpret this troublesome passage (and others like it). But is it correct?

We must consider whether or not passages like this one might be considered "anthropomorphic." This big theological word simply means that "a given ascription of God presents God as transcending the very human or finite features attributed to Him."⁹⁰ Therefore, we must ask, "Does God 'transcend' repentance?" Two passages explained below seem to say that He does, leading us to refer to this passage as anthropomorphic.

⁸⁸ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 59 (emphasis added).

⁸⁹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 83.

⁹⁰ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 86.

God's Repentance in Numbers 23:19

In Numbers 23:19, Balaam is divinely led to utter these words: "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" The purpose of this passage is to reinforce the certainty with which God pledges to accomplish the blessing (not cursing!) on Israel as stated in Balaam's first oracle.⁹¹ This implies that God's will is set and nothing will deter Him from that will. Open theists respond that God will not repent *in this single and particular incident*. It is still possible for Him to repent at other times, like a man. There are two problems with this line of reasoning.

First, if it is to be believed that God generally *can* repent but in this case He does not, then it *necessarily* follows that generally God can *lie* but in this particular case He does not. The question now before us is "Can God *ever* lie?" Several passages say He cannot.⁹² The parallelism between lying and repenting teaches more than simply that God will not repent or lie just in this specific instance. Rather, just as God can *never* lie, He can also *never* repent.

Second, notice the contrast between God and man. God is not like a man, who both lies and repents. As above, open theists must make the assertion that God does not act like a man *in this particular instance*. Do men *always* repent of what they say they will do? If they do, then the contrast can be maintained? But, if humans *sometimes* carry out what they say they will do and *sometimes* repent and do otherwise, and if God, likewise *sometimes* carries out what He says He will do and *sometimes* repents and does otherwise, then exactly *how* is God different from man? The only way the contrast works is if God, unlike men, *never* repents.

God's Repentance in 1 Samuel 15

A particularly troublesome passage is found in First Samuel 15. In this one chapter, it is twice affirmed that God "repents" and once asserted that God does not repent. Here are the passages at hand:

- I Samuel 15:11 – **"I regret that I have made Saul king**, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night.
- I Samuel 15:35 - And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And **the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king** over Israel.
- I Samuel 15:29 – "And also the **Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind**; for **He is not a man that He should change His mind.**"

The arguments developed from Numbers 23:19 apply here as well. The parallelism with lying in I Samuel 15:29 would suggest that, just as God never lies, He likewise never repents. The two must be treated similarly. Again, to say that God sometimes repents and sometimes does not is to say that God sometimes lies and sometimes does not. Furthermore, the same argument with God being compared to man stands true here. God, unlike men, will never change His mind.

⁹¹ Ibid., 87.

⁹² 2 Timothy 2:13 "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself."; Titus 1:2 "... in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, ..."; and Hebrews 6:18 "... in which it is impossible for God to lie, ...".

John Sanders believes that he has found a flaw in this thinking when reading Hosea 11:8-9. These verses, according to Sanders, should be understood to say that God does indeed change His mind for the simple reason that He is *not* like a man. The text of Hosea 11:8-9 is as follows:

⁸ How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, *my repentings are kindled together*.

⁹ I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: *for I am God, and not man*; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city.

Sanders writes about this passage that “Ware’s own criteria [of anthropomorphism] becomes problematic when put to use because Hosea 11:8-9 says God repents because he is *not human*. . . . Following Ware we have a real problem on our hands because the Bible teaches both (1) that God cannot change His mind because He is not human and (2) that God literally does change His mind because He is not human.”⁹³

Unfortunately for Sanders, this passage is not teaching that God has changed His mind. It most certainly does not teach us that *unlike* humans God *does* change His mind. Rather, it affirms that God, unlike humans, is absolutely faithful to His covenant promises.⁹⁴ The point is that God will faithfully do what He previously pledged to do.

All three of these passages reveal a God who is above the moral lapses of man. God is indeed transcending the human and finite qualities we give Him. Therefore, we have a legitimate basis for interpreting the divine repentance verses as anthropomorphic.

The question remains, however, what do these verses mean? They must mean something. First, when God is said to repent, it reflects His awareness that the human situation has changed.⁹⁵ In Exodus 32:14, God was aware and took into account Moses’ prayer. In 1 Samuel 15, God was aware of and took into account the failure of Saul. We do not need to imply that God learned this anew. God is simply acting in accordance with this changing situation. It may have been eternally planned, yet God interacted in the historical flow of events. After all, when could God have interacted with Israel’s sin, Moses’ prayer, Saul’s failure except for when it actually occurred in time.

I have often thought of this “repentance” as we see it from a human standpoint. It definitely looks like God has changed but we must ask, “Who has really changed?” In both instances (and all instances), it is not God who changes but man. God will always act true to His eternal character. It is like riding a bicycle against the wind and then turning around and riding with the wind. It appears to us that the wind has changed but it obviously has not. We have changed.

⁹³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 68-69.

⁹⁴ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 89.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

God's Repentance in Jonah

You have to wonder why God bothered telling some His plans to start with. God purposely chose to involve others in the situation, inviting the response of the people who became informed of God's *stated* intentions. Consider Jonah and his ordeal with the prophecy to Nineveh. In Jonah 4:2, we learn the reason Jonah did not want to obey God and preach to Nineveh is because he feared God would instead be merciful. This is odd considering the brief message Jonah was commanded to preach: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). We know Jonah would want nothing more than to see this prophecy fulfilled. Why was he reluctant, then, to deliver it? Evidently, Jonah suspected from the outset that God had a *secret* intention that was different from His *stated* intention. Only this will explain Jonah's reluctance to go. On a straightforward reading, God did change (in the narrow sense). But God did not change at all in the broad sense, for His secret intention from the start was to show mercy to Nineveh.

God's Repentance with Hezekiah

Another favorite example among open theists of divine repentance is found in the lengthening of Hezekiah's life in 2 Kings 20. In fact, Boyd states that this text was among the first biblical passage that led him to begin challenging the classical commitment to exhaustive divine foreknowledge.⁹⁶ In this narrative, we learn that King Hezekiah is ill and near death. In verse one, the Lord says to him, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live." This prompted Hezekiah to begin to pray fervently (as it would you, no doubt). Later, in verses 5-6, God says "I have heard your prayers, I have seen your tears; behold I will heal you. ... I will add fifteen years to you life."

Here is another example in which God could have simply acted directly and taken Hezekiah's life without warning. The Bible tells us of many instances where God acted unilaterally without warning in others lives (Sodom, Sennacherib to name a few). God did not have to tell Hezekiah this any more than He had to tell Jonah about Nineveh or Samuel about Saul or Moses about idolatrous Israel. So, why did God reveal His stated intentions to Hezekiah through Isaiah? It is plausible to think that God's ultimate purpose was to elicit from him such earnest, heartfelt dependence manifested through prayer.⁹⁷

Also, we note that God granted Hezekiah exactly fifteen more years of life – not one year or ten or twenty and most certainly "Let's both see how long you can make it!" Ware points out the irony that one of the favorite texts of open theists, which supposedly demonstrates God's lack of future knowledge, also shows God knows exactly how long Hezekiah will live. On openness grounds, how could God know this? Consider the mind-boggling amount of freewill decisions Hezekiah would make in the next fifteen years! Consider even more staggering the freewill decisions and actions of the multitudes around him over a fifteen year period! All of these choices and actions have a direct and indirect impact on Hezekiah's life and God could not *possibly* know them all. Yet God is absolutely confident in stating the prophecy.

⁹⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 7-8.

⁹⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 95.

However, even if we grant the interpretation of open theism, it is unlikely that God truly “changed His mind.” After all, God knew Hezekiah better than even Hezekiah knew himself. Surely God was not surprised by the king’s prayer. God must know that anyone would begin praying like that upon hearing of an impending death. How many prayers have been borne out of “foxhole conversions”? If the prayer did not take God by surprise, then it is hard to see how God truly changed His mind.

The classic view is supported by the broader context of the story. When Hezekiah did finally die, his son Manasseh, who was only twelve years old at the time, became king (2 Kings 20:21, 21:1). What this means is that Manasseh was born *during* the fifteen year extension of Hezekiah’s life. Sanders says that if Hezekiah had not prayed, “Biblical history would have been different.”⁹⁸ Tom Ascol says that is a woefully inadequate understatement.⁹⁹ Had Hezekiah died when Isaiah first spoke to him, he would have left *no* heir to the throne. This means that the promise God made to David three hundred years earlier would have been broken. The promise God made was that David “shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:4). If, as Boyd and others assert, that God was ignorant of the timing of Hezekiah’s death, then we are left with insurmountable doubts about the Lord’s faithfulness to and ability to keep His promises.

So the real issue is not whether these texts so precious to open theists yield the conclusion that God lacks exhaustive knowledge of the future *when interpreted in a straightforward manner*. The real issue is whether the intended and correct understanding of these passages is uncovered when they are simply taken at face value.¹⁰⁰ In other words, is the author’s true meaning found in the straightforward interpretation?

After all, surely most open theists would not be so proud or stubborn to not yield to the fact that a straightforward reading of Genesis 18:21 indicates God lacks exhaustive *past* knowledge, *present* knowledge and *omnipresence*. If they disagree with this, the burden is on them to explain WHY NOT? If they say that you cannot interpret Genesis 18 that way, then why can you interpret Genesis 22 and others that same way?

All the passages put forth by open theists as support for God’s limited foreknowledge can be explained in entirely adequate and reasonable and compelling ways which show the straightforward meanings are not the intended meanings at all. Also, we can see that the straightforward interpretation leads to many more, although unintended, blasphemous results in our understanding of God. The openness approach is deeply troubled and we have reason to doubt it and refuse its acceptance under the umbrella of conservative evangelical doctrine.

Scriptural Affirmation of God’s Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge

We must now turn to address a question raised earlier on page eighteen: Does Scripture teach with sufficient clarity and fullness that God in fact has exhaustive divine foreknowledge of the future. We have already seen that open theisms interpretations are dubious, to say the least. If it can then be

⁹⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 271.

⁹⁹ Tom Ascol, “Pastoral Implications of Open Theism,” in *Bound Only Once*, 185. Ascol, Ph.D., is the pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL and the editor of *The Founders Journal*.

¹⁰⁰ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 85.

shown that Scripture does indeed affirm God's exhaustive foreknowledge, then open theism will be revealed for the foolhardy heresy that it truly is and finally collapse upon itself.

Sadly for open theists, the Scriptural evidence is overwhelming. Steve Roy, a doctrinal student and faculty member at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has conducted a comprehensive biblical survey of passages related to divine foreknowledge. His findings reveal that 164 passages explicitly teach or affirm God's foreknowledge; 271 texts explicitly teach or affirm some other aspect of God's foreknowledge; 128 passages offer predictions of what God will do through nature; 1,893 texts state predictively that God will do something in or through humans; 1,474 texts state predictively what humans beings will do, apart from God acting in or through them; 622 texts state predictively what unbelievers will do or have happen to them; 143 texts affirm God's sovereign control of human choices; and 105 texts of apparent counter-evidence.¹⁰¹ In the next few pages, we will examine a small but crucial handful of these many passages.

One thing to keep in mind is the claim made regularly by open theists that texts that speak of God's knowledge of the future or His determination of the future are always limited to very specific situations. As such, they cannot be used to act as general teaching to support comprehensive divine foreknowledge. Boyd insists 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. . . . He knows it as *possibly* this way and *possibly* not that way."¹⁰²

God's Foreknowledge in Isaiah 40-48

Several chapters in Isaiah represent the strongest and richest portion of Scripture supporting God's knowledge of the future. These chapters have nine separate sections, all of which point to the same conclusion: *Yahweh, the God of Israel, is known as the true and living God in direct contrast to pagan idols, whose false claim to deity is evident on the basis that only the true God knows and declares the future accurately before it occurs, while imposters to the throne of heaven neither know nor declare such things.*¹⁰³ The passages to follow may be long but please take the time to read them slowly and completely. First, consider Isaiah 41:21-29:

²¹ "Present your case," the LORD says. "Bring forward your strong arguments," The King of Jacob says.

²² Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; **As for the former events, declare what they were, That we may consider them and know their outcome. Or announce to us what is coming;**

²³ **Declare the things that are going to come afterward, That we may know that you are gods;** Indeed, do good or evil, that we may anxiously look about us and fear together.

²⁴ Behold, you are of no account, And your work amounts to nothing; **He who chooses you is an abomination.**

¹⁰¹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 100 (Footnote 2).

¹⁰² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 15.

¹⁰³ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 102.

- ²⁵ "I have aroused one from the north, and he has come; From the rising of the sun he will call on My name; And he will come upon rulers as upon mortar, Even as the potter treads clay."
- ²⁶ Who has declared this from the beginning, that we might know? Or from former times, that we may say, "He is right!"? Surely there was no one who declared, Surely there was no one who proclaimed, Surely there was no one who heard your words.
- ²⁷ "Formerly I said to Zion, 'Behold, here they are.' And to Jerusalem, 'I will give a messenger of good news.'
- ²⁸ "But when I look, there is no one, And there is no counselor among them Who, if I ask, can give an answer.
- ²⁹ "Behold, all of them are false; Their works are worthless, Their molten images are wind and emptiness.

In this passage, God challenges the idols to some sort of spiritual duel. If they can, God is commanding them to prove they are rightly called "god." The middle of verse 23 declares the purpose of God's challenge: "That we may know that you are gods." Notice that the challenge is *general* in nature. There is no specific incident pertinent to this episode.

Also, notice the highly significant claim that God knows about and can predict specific future events. Furthermore, the test is a true test of deity. We see from this passage that true deity can announce generally what is coming. From this, we gather that true deity must be able to know the future generally and not merely in isolated, particular and selective elements.¹⁰⁴ God Himself declares the criterion by which the question of His deity is to be evaluated and established and that criterion is knowledge of the future. It is the height of presumptuousness to deny God divine foreknowledge and so deny the very basis by which God Himself has declared that His claim to deity shall be vindicated and made known.¹⁰⁵

Another important part of this passage is what is to happen to those who follow these "supposed" gods who are unable to declare and announce the future? Verse 24 offers very sobering words: "Behold, you are of no account, And your work amounts to nothing; *He who chooses you is an abomination.*" Open theists do just this in choosing a false god. Therefore, open theists are, by God's definition, idolaters! They have made God in their own image, an image eternally distant from who He truly is and God calls them an "abomination."

Later in 42:8-9, God continues to present His case:

- ⁸ "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images.
- ⁹ "Behold, the former things have come to pass, Now I declare new things; *Before they spring forth I proclaim them to you.*"

¹⁰⁴ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 104.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

We see here that God absolutely refuses to give His glory to another, especially a pretender deity. He continues in verse nine, saying that He is known as God and alone deserving of glory *because* He has brought to pass what has happened and *because* He now declares new thing that will come to be.¹⁰⁶

As with 41:22-23 above, God's claim to deity and glory rests not on some specific item of foreknowledge or specific event over which He has control. Rather, God speaks in broad and comprehensive ways of knowing and declaring what is to come. To attempt to restrict these claims to particular items of future reality, as open theists do, denies the full meaning of these texts. In doing so, they make God fail His own test and undermine His claim to exclusive deity and glory.

God continues to stake His claim as sole supreme deity in the universe in Isaiah 48:8-13, where He says:

⁸ Bring out the people who are blind, even though they have eyes, And the deaf, even though they have ears.

⁹ All the nations have gathered together So that the peoples may be assembled. **Who among them can declare this And proclaim to us the former things? Let them present their witnesses that they may be justified, Or let them hear and say, "It is true."**

¹⁰ "You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "And My servant whom I have chosen, So **that you may know and believe Me And understand that I am He.** Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me.

¹¹ "I, even I, am the LORD, And there is no savior besides Me.

¹² "It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, And there was no strange god among you; So you are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "And I am God.

¹³ "Even from eternity I am He, And there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?"

Again, we are able to clearly see the contrast between the true God and false substitutes on the basis of whether they have proclaimed things that have subsequently occurred. The pretenders have not declared the future, therefore they are not true gods. God then repeats in verse twelve that "It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed." In this passage, God links not only His deity and glory but also His rightful roles as Savior to the proof He offers of declaring the future.¹⁰⁷ He continues in Isaiah 44:6-8:

⁶ "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.

⁷ **'Who is like Me?** Let him proclaim and declare it; Yes, let him recount it to Me in order, From the time that I established the ancient nation. And **let them declare to them the things that are coming And the events that are going to take place.**

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 106.

⁸ 'Do not tremble and do not be afraid; **Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it?** And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.'

God again claims His general knowledge of “things that are coming” and “events that are going to take place.” Again we see the general nature of God’s knowledge of the past and the future. God has announced and declared what has happened in Israel’s history. They are witnesses of His revelation and of the accuracy of what He has said. This proves that God alone is God and there is no other. Therefore, Israel (and we) can take heart and have hope. As if this is not enough, God gives yet another declaration in Isaiah 44:24-28:

²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, "I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself And spreading out the earth all alone,
²⁵ Causing the omens of boasters to fail, Making fools out of diviners, Causing wise men to draw back And turning their knowledge into foolishness,
²⁶ Confirming the word of His servant And performing the purpose of His messengers. It is I who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited!' And of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built.' And I will raise up her ruins again.
²⁷ "It is I who says to the depth of the sea, 'Be dried up!' And I will make your rivers dry.
²⁸ **"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.'** And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'"

Here, we read of specific divine predictions as opposed to all the earlier declarations which were general in nature. However, this particular passage has something in common with the earlier ones: contrast between the true God and pretenders to deity. In doing so, God brings shame and ridicule to these same false gods.

Very specifically, God predicts that in the future, He will reinhabit the city of Jerusalem and rebuild the cities of Judah. This is incredible when you consider all the freewill decisions that must be made by hundreds of thousands of people to rebuild and move back to Jerusalem.

Even more remarkable is the prediction of a future king to whom God gives the name CYRUS, nearly two hundred years before his own parents gave him that exact name. God states that He will use this pagan king as His tool to fulfill His will and prediction. Consider all that must happen for this to occur as God says. At the time Isaiah prophesies this, God must already know about

- the fall of Assyria,
- the rise and fall of Babylon,
- the rise of Medo-Persia,
- the fall of Israel,
- the fall of Judah,

- the meeting and marriage and birth of several generations prior to Cyrus,
- the particular meeting of Cyrus' parents and the particular sperm cell joining with the particular egg,
- the life and growth of this king,
- his ongoing life into adulthood,
- his selection as king,
- his willingness to consider helping the Israelites,
- his decision to assist in rebuilding Jerusalem, and on and on and on.

The above list is only the short list. We could also consider neighboring countries who might interfere with all the pre-history of this single act or with the act itself. How does an open theist deal with this?

Greg Boyd explains Isaiah's predictive naming of Cyrus (and Josiah in I Kings 13:2) by saying, "This decree obviously set strict parameters around the freedom of the parents in naming these individuals. . . . It also restricted the scope of freedom these individuals could exercise *as it pertained to particular foreordained activities*."¹⁰⁸ In this explanation, we see that Boyd acknowledges that he must leave behind openness' general tenets to libertarian free will. God must curtail this autonomous free will in this instance. However, what seems to be absent here is an awareness of the vast multitude of factors relating to the naming of Cyrus (and of course, Josiah). God would have to "curtail" much of humanity's free will in the two hundred years between prophecy and fulfillment to make these very specific predictions come true.

God is not done with His prophecies about Cyrus. He continues in Isaiah 45:1-7:

- ¹ Thus says the LORD to **Cyrus** His anointed, **Whom I have taken by the right hand**, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:
- ² "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars.
- ³ "I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
- ⁴ "For the sake of Jacob My servant, And Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me.
- ⁵ "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, **though you have not known Me;**
- ⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other,
- ⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.

¹⁰⁸ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 34 (emphasis in original).

Here God explains how Cyrus will work to fulfill His prophecies. Cyrus will destroy other nations, often easily. All this will take place without Cyrus even *knowing God*. Clearly God predicts and then directs a multitude of future actions and events, all of them exactly as He designs. Again, we are stunned when we consider the incredible amount of freewill decisions that humans must make for all these prophecies to be fulfilled. Yet they are.

Isaiah 46:8-11 continues the theme with a major sweeping prediction of general future actions and events. This is made clear by the repeated use of "I will . . ."

- ⁸ "Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors.
⁹ "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me,
¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose **will be** established, And **I will** accomplish all My good pleasure';
¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly **I will** bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely **I will** do it.

From these passages in Isaiah, we see that most have stressed God's claim to know and declare the future in broadly sweeping general language. These passages indicate that God wants His children to think of His foreknowledge as broad and comprehensive and not merely selective and tied to minute specific and occasional incidents. Also, we can surmise that all the specific predictions in these passages involve a great number of free choices and actions of free human agents. Finally, as Ware states, how can we possibly state in sufficiently weighty language that God has chosen to vindicate Himself as God by declaring what the future will be, so that when God's predictions come true, people will testify that He alone is God?¹⁰⁹ It is on this singular claim to be able to know the future that God demonstrates:

1. His exclusive claim to deity;
2. His absolute rejection of all pretender deities as false god;
3. the fullness of the glory that is His alone and that He will not share with any other;
4. the truthfulness of His promise that He alone is Savior;
5. The faithfulness of His pledge to be Israel's Rock and defender;
6. His ability to reign over a multitude of actions and events that will come to pass;
7. His ability to rule over nations, kinds and peoples;
8. the righteousness of the Word that goes forth from His mouth;
9. the righteousness of His character from which this Word proceeds; and
10. His demand that all bow before Him and testify that He alone is God and that His Word is true.¹¹⁰

Ware states that he "shudders to think of how God may judge any proposal that would deny of Him His self-chosen and self-proclaimed means by which to demonstrate all these truths. For the sake of the sole

¹⁰⁹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 120.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 120-121.

uniqueness of God and His matchless glory, we must magnify, not diminish the “Godness of God” as we uphold, not call into question, His exact and sweeping foreknowledge.¹¹¹

God’s Foreknowledge in Deuteronomy 31:16-21 and Isaiah 5:1-7

In Isaiah 5:1-7 God describes Israel as His vineyard and Himself as the vinedresser. Twice in this short passage, God says that He is deeply disappointed because He expected His vineyard, Israel, to bear good grapes. However, in spite of His loving care, they bore only worthless fruit. Boyd comments on this passage, saying, “If everything is eternally certain to God, as the classical view of foreknowledge holds, how could the Lord twice say that He “expected” one thing to occur, only to have something different occur? . . . If we take the passage at face value, does it not imply that the future of Israel, the “vineyard,” was not certain until they settled it by choosing to yield “wild grapes?”¹¹²

The answer to Boyd’s pondering was written 700 years before Isaiah’s words, before Israel had even entered the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy 31:16-21, God, through Moses, predicts with incredible detail the future rebellion and idolatry of Israel. It is vital to notice in the text God’s precise assertions of how Israel *will* act and that God *knows precisely* what they will do.

¹⁶ The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers; and **this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land**, into the midst of which they are going, and **will forsake Me and break My covenant** which I have made with them.

¹⁷ "Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and **I will forsake them** and hide My face from them, and they will be consumed, and **many evils and troubles will come upon them**; so that they will say in that day, 'Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?'

¹⁸ "But **I will surely hide My face** in that day because of all the evil which they will do, for **they will turn to other gods**.

¹⁹ "Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, so that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel.

²⁰ "For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, **then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant**.

²¹ "Then it shall come about, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify before them as a witness (for it shall not be forgotten from the lips of their descendants); **for I know their intent which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land which I swore.**"

Especially worthy of note is the concluding statement in verse 21. God knows their future rebellion. He predicts it seven centuries prior to its occurrence. This passage also explains that God can know something fully and yet still express the appropriate emotion when it actually happens. As open theists

¹¹¹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 121.

¹¹² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 59-60.

want so desperately to maintain, this shows God enters into a very real emotive relationship with His people in their time and circumstances, yet does not deny His exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

God's Foreknowledge in Psalm 139

Several verses in this wondrous psalm tell us of God's intimate acquaintance with all our ways. Verse 4 declares that "even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all." Could God do this unless He knows the future? Is this merely God's best educated guess at what we will say? After all, sometimes we even shock ourselves with the words that escape our lips. Yet, God says He is not surprised; He knows all.

Furthermore, God knows when we sit and arise (v. 2). God underscores our every thought (v. 2). God scrutinizes our paths (v. 3). God encloses us behind and before (v. 5). God also knows all our words before they are uttered.

Very importantly, verse 16 declares that God has "seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them." How can God ordain all our days when (as open theists claim) He does not know the incredible multitude of freewill choices each of us makes throughout our lifetimes.

Furthermore, without foreknowledge of a contingent future, God could not even know that we would *BE*, much less know the days that would make our lives. After all, we could have suffered miscarriage or abortion or died in childbirth. This means that not only must God know about all the contingencies in our lives, He must be in control of them, as well.

Boyd attempts to deal with this psalm by appealing to the odd King James translation of verse 16, which reads "all my *members* were written." However, the KJV puts "my members" in italics, indicating that these words do not appear in the original Hebrew. It is puzzling why the KJV translators did not translate what is there. The Hebrew word in question is the very common word *yamim* (or days). The Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) used the word *hemara*, the common Greek word for "day." There is absolutely no legitimate grammatical basis for using "members" in this passage.¹¹³ Open theism claims to be on the "cutting edge" of theological scholarship. This speaks ill of their ability to maintain that edge.

God's Foreknowledge in Daniel

There are numerous specific and highly detailed predictions in Daniel's book. These predictions span many centuries and involve many nations and millions of people. When you consider the rise and fall of the world's largest and most powerful empires of the day, you cannot dismiss these predictions by saying that God merely controls a "portion" of the future, especially when you consider, once again, the staggering amount of freewill decisions involved.

¹¹³ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 125.

Daniel 11, by itself, contains an amazing array of instances where God predicts and therefore foreknows many future events. In the first year of Cyrus, Daniel predicts three kings after Cyrus, followed by a fourth (11:2). This fourth king (we now know as Alexander the Great), died young and his sons were murdered. Daniel predicts this, along with the fact that his kingdom would be divided into four parts (11:4). Amazingly, this is just what happened. Daniel then accurately predicts an ensuing war between two of these four parts (11:5-35). Daniel then concentrates on one particular ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (11:21-35). It is no wonder that liberal scholars date Daniel so late, implying that this book is more history than prophecy.

God's Foreknowledge in John

John portrays Jesus as Isaiah portrays God. In several places, we find Jesus appealing to His knowledge of the future as the reason why people should believe in Him. For instance, in John 13:19, after Jesus predicts that Judas will betray Him, Jesus says, "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He." The point is the same in Isaiah: Jesus' knowledge of the future is evidence that He is God in human flesh (John 1:14). It is also important to note that in the Greek, Jesus basically says, ". . . you may believe *I AM*." The "He" is supplied by the translators. Here Jesus is equating Himself with the Great I AM of the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14) and saying we can be sure of this due to His ability to know the future.

Sanders attempts to deal with Jesus precise prediction of Judas' betrayal are remarkable. He begins by saying that Judas was not actually betraying Jesus but was acting to bring Jesus and the High Priests together so that they "could resolve their differences and bring about needed reforms."¹¹⁴ Sanders flatly states that "in this light, it is clear that Judas is not betraying Jesus and that Jesus is not issuing any prediction of such activity."¹¹⁵ He also argues that the Greek word "*paradidomi*" does not mean "betray" in this instance. It does almost everywhere else. Why not here?

He further argues that since Judas has the present-day context of villainy, we read villainy into Judas' actions. However, we think Judas is a villain simply because Matthew, Mark, Luke and John portray him that way. John reveals Judas' motive for acting as he did "because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:6). Matthew clearly links Judas' actions with Jeremiah's prophecy in Matthew 27:9-10:

⁸ For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

⁹ Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "AND THEY TOOK THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET BY the sons of Israel;

¹⁰ AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME."

¹¹⁴ Chris Hall and John Sanders, "Does God Know Your Next Move?" in *Christianity Today*, June 11, 2001 (online edition found at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/008/8.50.html).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

In other places, Jesus tells Peter of his three (exactly) denials before the rooster crows (13:38 and 18:19-27), predicts the kind of death Peter would die (21:18-19) and predicts that Judas would be the one to betray Him (6:64, 70-71). All of these require that other humans do precisely what Jesus predicts. This is amazing in light of their supposed libertarian free will. Especially amazing is Jesus' very specific prediction that Peter would deny Him exactly three times – not one or two or four or forty, but THREE.

We have already seen that Boyd says this is possible because Jesus knows Peter's character to such a remarkable degree. This might explain Jesus predicting that Peter would deny Him but it does little to explain how Jesus knew Peter would deny Him *three times*! Peter could have been frightened off after the first denial. What if those around him had grabbed Peter and dragged him away to court, prior to the second or third denial? If they had, would Peter had denied Christ many more times in the presence of that court? What if James and John were with Peter and had given him strength to remain faithful? What if those around Peter failed to question him to begin with? They also had to confront Peter *exactly* three times, no more and no less. Furthermore, they had to do all this before the rooster crowed. If just one of these or a multitude of other contingent possibilities had occurred, Jesus would have been wrong about Peter and would have been a "false prophet."

We read in Luke 22:31-32 that Jesus knew Peter would fail. He tells Peter that Satan has asked permission to "sift Peter like wheat" and Jesus grants it. Jesus then says that "*when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*" Jesus not only knows Peter will fail, but that Peter will return. Jesus knowledge of the future demonstrates to us that He is indeed God.

Open Theism's Rationalization of these Passages

In reading Boyd's answer to many of these passages in question, you read over and again the refrain that just because God did know/determine the future here does not mean he knows/determines all of the future. This is repeated after almost every instance used to describe classical theism's interpretation of Scriptural authority for God's exhaustive foreknowledge. It is easy to see the reason for doing so but also easy to see the duplicity. Unless the Bible recorded every single event known to man and described it as foreknown to God, you always have this handy rationalization at the ready.

Answering Open Theism's Philosophical and Theological Questions

Open theism veers off the biblical path often, just as any other theological system does. In studying the philosophical and theological questions raised by open theism, it soon becomes clear that there is one single defining concept held dear to the belief: libertarian free will.¹¹⁶

Understanding Libertarian Free Will

The concept of man's free will is hugely controversial in theology but it is the cornerstone for open theism. John Frame, professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, says that this understanding of free will is the "engine that drives open theism" and a presuppositional "grid through which all other theological assertions must pass."¹¹⁷ Sanders says that he agrees with free-will theists and that "these are the watershed issues in our debate!"¹¹⁸ He continues by saying "Thus, we are solidly on the Arminian side of the fence. However, we do have some family squabbles with our fellow free-will theists and only time will tell whether Arminians and openness theists can resolve their differences."¹¹⁹

To the honest open theist, only those doctrines that are compatible with libertarian freedom are worth considering and all others must be rejected almost out of hand. It is for this very reason that open theists in general do not handle didactic passages and rely almost exclusively on historical narrative passages. Didactic passages are "teaching passages" that explain the concept of divine action. Which set of passages should have precedence? Obviously, while both are important and should be understood, the teaching passages should be studied first and used to explain the narrative.¹²⁰ For instance, John Sanders does not even address the pivotal verse found in Ephesians 1:1, which says "also we have obtained an inheritance, *having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.*" The verse does not appear in Greg Boyd's scripture index. Richard Rice deals with this passage only in a section entitled "Problem Passages."

Frame points out that open theists do not argue the case for libertarian free will; they assume it. He writes that he "has yet to find a serious argument for libertarian freedom" in the major writings of open theists.¹²¹ Of course, most non-scholars do the same thing. Libertarian freedom is often called the "commonsense view" of freedom.¹²² If a person is asked why he does what he does, the answer is basically, "I just do because I chose to do so." If pressed further, no answer is really available or even

¹¹⁶ Frame, *No Other God*, 119.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Chris Hall and John Sanders, "Does God Know Your Next Move?" in *Christianity Today*, June 11, 2001 (online edition).

¹¹⁹ Frame, *No Other God*, 119.

¹²⁰ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 691.

¹²¹ Frame, *No Other God*, 119.

¹²² Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, Baker: 1998), 81.

considered necessary. If asked how you *know* you are free, again argumentation is usually absent. We, as humans, just seemingly know intuitively that we are free.

William Hasker, an open theistic philosopher defines libertarian free will as a person who is “free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.”¹²³ This basically means is that the choices of men and women are absolutely undetermined and uncaused. They are not foreordained by God, by our circumstances or even by our own character or desires.¹²⁴ As such, humans are totally unpredictable creatures, even to God. Our character may influence us to some degree but we always have the freedom to act or think contrary to our desires and circumstances. God may have caused the universe, but we are the first cause of our own thoughts, decisions and actions.

Libertarianism has a long history in Christian theology. Most of the church fathers held more or less to this position until Augustine in the 4th century. Augustine wrote in reference to the Pelagian controversy. Basically, Augustine believed that God foreordained all that has and is to happen. Pelagius, in contrast, believed in the free will of man to make his own decisions and decide his own actions. Since that time, a contest has existed between the Augustinian and Pelagian concepts of freedom. The basis for the disagreement was over original sin and its effect on the will of man.

The views of Pelagius and his chief disciple, Celestius, were soundly condemned by the church at the Council of Carthage in AD 418 and again at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. However, Augustinianism was not wholly accepted, either. Human nature resists the idea that God determines our choices and actions. Therefore, a middle-of-the-road compromise was eventually adopted and this system widely accepted still today in evangelicalism: semi-Pelagianism. Over against Pelagius, Semi-Pelagianism does have a doctrine of original sin but there remains a moral ability within man that is unaffected by the Fall. This so-called "island of righteousness" means that fallen man still has the inherent ability to incline or move himself to cooperate with God's grace. This is the adopted teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and numerous Protestant groups. It was condemned at the Council of Orange in AD 529.

This theological battle between Augustinians and Pelagians continued throughout history. Luther and Calvin followed Augustine, but Molinists, Socinians and Arminians argued strongly for libertarianism. This libertarian viewpoint exists throughout much of today’s evangelical world.

Libertarians like Pinnock and Rice make libertarian free will the nonnegotiable central truth of open theism. If libertarianism is not true, then the whole system falls like a house of cards. An incidental error in thinking can be corrected. A fundamental error in thinking is death to the system.

Implications of Libertarian Free Will

John Sanders declares that several things must follow if God’s will is not the final explanation for all things that we choose and do. If libertarianism is the final explanation for all events, then we should expect some things to be true.

¹²³ William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, 136-137.

¹²⁴ Frame, *No Other God*, 144.

First, Sanders says that if libertarianism is not true, then God has not really given us the “room to be genuine or significant.”¹²⁵ Without libertarian free will, it is repeatedly asserted that we are reduced to puppets on a string or robots and the Bible’s claim to have a personal relationship with God would be a sham. This “robot” argument has been used for centuries and again belies an ignorance of sorts regarding the true claims of reformed theology.

Libertarian free will is in contrast to an alternate view of man’s will called *compatibilism*, which simply means that man’s will is free yet is compatible with God’s foreknowledge and foreordination of all things. Libertarian freedom is described as having the freedom to “do what you want to do.” We act and speak according to our character and our own desires. We follow the deepest desires of our heart all the time. We are free in the sense that we are not outwardly coerced into doing anything. Basically, every act we do is determined by God and yet we are free because we are doing what we truly wanted to do anyway. The problem is that, as fallen human beings, are will is depraved and we only want that which is not pleasing to God.

Second, the lack of libertarian free will would mean that we could not be held to be “morally responsible for good and evil in a way that really makes a difference.”¹²⁶ For libertarians like Sanders, it is appropriate to praise or blame individuals only if they were truly and totally free to choose to do the praise-worthy or blame-worthy act. That person’s choice must be the final reason he or she did what he or she did.

Third, the lack of libertarian free will would mean that God must bear the ultimate responsibility for sin and evil.¹²⁷ Does God ordain evil? Can open theism solve the problem of evil? We will look at these three areas of thought and try to show that open theism does not give the adequate answer it wants to put forth.

Are we “Genuine” or “Puppets”?

A major point made by open theists is that if God truly knows the future in meticulous detail, we are not engaging in an authentic and real relationship with Him. Furthermore, if God knows our choices and actions prior to them happening, are we really free? Traditional theists say yes but open theists say no. In the preface to “The Openness of God,” Pinnock says that God grants to humans “significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God’s will for their lives.”¹²⁸ By significant, Pinnock means “real” or “genuine.”¹²⁹ The *only* way this genuine freedom can occur is if humans possess *libertarian free will*. Boyd explains this in his book, saying, “Prior to creation, God possessed 100 percent of all power. . . . When the Trinity decided to express their love by bringing forth creation, they invested each creature

¹²⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 176.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹²⁸ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 7.

¹²⁹ See also Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 214, 251.

(angelic and human) with a certain percentage of their say-so. The say-so of the triune God was at this point no longer the only one that determined how things would go.”¹³⁰

Another aspect of this libertarian understanding is that only this type of free will allows us to be held morally responsible for our actions. If our decisions are caused by anyone or anything, they are not ultimately our decisions. Some open theists believe that God will never intercede in someone’s life to cause them to choose. Richard Rice, one of the original contributors to “The Openness of God,” wrote that “where human decision is presupposed . . . God can not achieve His objectives unilaterally. He requires our cooperation.”¹³¹ Boyd and others disagree with Rice’s use of the words “can not.” Boyd says that God sometimes determines people’s choices. In discussing Jesus’ alleged knowledge of Judas’ betrayal, Boyd says that “a dreadful time may come when God discerns that it is useless to strive with a particular group any longer. At this point, He withdraws His Spirit from these people, hardens their hearts and thus seals their destinies.”¹³² Of course, as Boyd points out, it is a “dreadful time” when God dares to intervene.

Libertarians cry that if we are not free in the libertarian sense, then we are not free at all and God has not given us the “room to be genuine” – or “significant.”¹³³ This is a crucial issue and it forces us to think of God’s ultimate goals and plans in creation and redemption. Open theists deal only with the present state. But what about the life to come? We were created to fellowship with God, Christ and the Spirit? Is this fellowship a sham? A better question is, “What will the perfected fellowship be like?”

Salvation means that God changes our character and nature so that we are no longer slaves to sin (John 8:34 and Romans 6:6). In the new heaven and new earth, perfect Creation will be restored and there will be no moral or natural evil. We shall be like Jesus, the sinless one (Hebrews 4:15). No longer under sin’s curse, we will “be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). It should be noted that this *freedom* in Romans 8:21 is *not* libertarian freedom – with the freedom to sin and the freedom to not sin. In our final eternal state with God, we cannot sin. This is a final and irreversible state. God will then grant us the greatest freedom of all – compatibilist freedom! We are free from sin and will forever be “slaves to righteousness” (Romans 8:16).

Are we Morally Responsible?

The biblical view is that God has ordained or willed or planned everything that happens in our world from before creation. God is the primary agent, the primary cause of everything. However, we also acknowledge that the causal relationship between God and His creatures is such that His having foreordained everything is compatible with and takes nothing away from their creaturely freedom.¹³⁴ Human activity is correctly labeled as “secondary” causes. We hold then that human beings are responsible, even while holding that what they freely do was ordained by God.

¹³⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 97.

¹³¹ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, 56.

¹³² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 38.

¹³³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 176.

¹³⁴ Talbot, “True Freedom,” in *Beyond the Bounds*, 98.

Some object immediately. They ask the same question that Paul assumes will be asked in Romans 9:19 but we must understand that if we ask the same question, *we are in fact arguing with Paul*. In this context, Paul is arguing about God's absolute control in all things, specifically in salvation. Frankly, although hard for some to accept, God declares that He will have mercy on whom He will and will harden whom He will. Paul is declaring that God alone decides who is elect and who is not. The matter is not one of man's will or ability but rather God's choosing (Romans 9:16). After declaring God's "unfair" choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, Paul then uses Pharaoh as an example of God's determination of everything (including Pharaoh's hardened heart). This elicits the question in verse 19, where Paul answers, "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" The question is a good one: Does God still get angry at us for doing what He has foreordained we will do?

Amazingly, in Sanders' lengthy treatment of Romans 9-11, he does not mention this verse. That is striking considering this is the very question open theists repeat over and over. Perhaps Paul's answer to this question is one they do not seek. If Paul is teaching that God is *not* in control of all things, including salvation, then this would have been a perfect time for Paul to say so. John Feinberg imagines what Paul could have said:

I must have misled you; I never said that God decrees or chooses for us to do evil deeds. I can see how you could wonder how it would be fair to hold us guilty for what God decided we would do. But, I'm not saying that God decides everything that happens.¹³⁵

Paul says nothing of the sort. Paul responds directly to the proud human attitude behind the asking of this question but his response does nothing to undercut the basic idea: God decrees all things, even evil acts. He goes on to say that if we do not find that palatable, we do not have the right to "call God on the carpet" to accuse Him of wrongdoing and demand that He explain Himself to us. Consider the weight of Paul's words:

- ²⁰ **On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?**
- ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?
- ²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?
- ²³ And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,
- ²⁴ even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

There are two basic fundamental principles in play here. They are:

¹³⁵ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 711-712.

- 1) God is absolutely sovereign over all creation, including the free actions of man.
- 2) Man is absolutely accountable and morally responsible for his actions and choices.

In reading the two statements above, we find there is nothing inherently contradictory. Both are biblical. There is a contradiction ONLY if you assume another premise:

- 3) Man cannot be held morally accountable for his actions if he does not have libertarian free will.

This premise, unlike the other two, cannot be sustained by Scripture. If this premise is false, then there is still no contradiction between premises 1 and 2. The onus is on the open theist to provide Scripture which proves premise #3, *without assuming premise #3 as your starting point*. Remember, our presuppositions must be based on Scripture.

This assertion will immediately raise the hackles of Arminians and their more consistent brethren, open theists. It makes absolutely no sense to them. How can this be? The correct answer to that question is that “we don’t actually know.” That may be unsatisfactory to some but we can answer that we can understand why we cannot understand. It is because our attempts to understand involve our trying to understand the unique relationship between Creator and creature in terms of our understanding of some creature-to-creature relationship.¹³⁶ This involves us in some sort of “category mistake,” which is to think about some topic under the wrong category. How the Creator relates to the creature is in an entirely different category than how creatures relate to fellow creatures. The difference is infinite. A similar situation is trying to understand how God can create *ex nihilo* yet we can only create from present “stuff.”

The truth is that Scripture clearly affirms both God’s foreordination and human responsibility and culpability. Therefore, we should affirm both, as well. There are two prominent passages of Scripture that reveal God’s predetermining influence on humans and the affirmation that those same humans were held morally responsible by God for those same actions. We will consider Isaiah 10 and Acts 4.

Assyria in Isaiah 10

Isaiah 10 is not a chapter one turns to often. It has “lots of historical stuff” in it which many find boring, if not useless. However, we find a great truth presented by God through His prophet in how God deals with the evil nation of Assyria. We begin by reading God’s woe set against this nation in verses 5-7:

- 5 Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hands is My indignation,
- 6 I send it against a godless nation And commission it against the people of My fury To capture booty and to seize plunder, And to trample them down like mud in the streets.
- 7 Yet it does not so intend Nor does it plan so in its heart, But rather it is its purpose to destroy, And to cut off many nations.

¹³⁶ Talbot, “True Freedom,” in *Beyond the Bounds*, 99.

Samaria was captured in 720 B.C. and the Assyrians are known to God as “the rod his [His] anger.” Note in verse 6, however, that God declares that He will send Assyria against Israel, “the people of [His] fury. Verse seven goes on to declare that Assyria did not “intend” or “plan” to do all this “in its heart.” Instead, Assyria’s purpose is to destroy Israel and cut off many nations. Assyria is *most definitely not* seeking to serve the purposes of God in attacking Israel. Yet, when we read further, in verses 12-17, we see a different spin put on this historical event by God:

- 12 So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness."
- 13 For he has said, "By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this, For I have understanding; And I removed the boundaries of the peoples, And plundered their treasures, And like a mighty man I brought down their inhabitants,
- 14 And my hand reached to the riches of the peoples like a nest, And as one gathers abandoned eggs, I gathered all the earth; And there was not one that flapped its wing or opened its beak or chirped."
- 15 Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it? Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who wields it? That would be like a club wielding those who lift it, Or like a rod lifting him who is not wood.
- 16 Therefore the Lord, the GOD of hosts, will send a wasting disease among his stout warriors; And under his glory a fire will be kindled like a burning flame.
- 17 And the light of Israel will become a fire and his Holy One a flame, And it will burn and devour his thorns and his briars in a single day.

We read here that God is still going to judge Assyria for its attack on Israel. That doesn’t seem fair but that is exactly what the Bible says. God is judging them on the “intentions of their heart.” They intended to do evil but God intended their evil acts (remember, He sent them) for good.

Here we see very plainly that God ordains the event, though it is evil, yet God also holds the Assyrians responsible for their actions brought forth through their intentions. This is similar to Joseph’s brothers selling Joseph into slavery. God intended it but the brothers acted freely within their own desires and God held them responsible (see below for further discussion on Genesis 50).

Pilate and Herod in Acts 4

The New International Version gives an interesting perspective in this same vein. Read Acts 4:27-28:

- 27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city *to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.*
- 28 *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*

As in the Isaiah text, we read of four free “players” deciding freely to conspire against Jesus Christ. When you consider the sheer number of free wills involved in this event, it becomes staggering to think of all that must have happened exactly as it did in order for Jesus to be handed over, tried and crucified. Open

theists state that all these individuals acted independently from each other and from God to bring the event to being. But God did not know that it would turn out this way! He did not know that Pilate would go along with the scheme of the Pharisees! God did not know the citizens of Jerusalem would turn on Jesus! Any single free act by Pilate or Herod or the Chief Priests could have derailed God's "plan." This means that it is theoretically possible that *no one* would have chosen to carry out the crucifixion of Christ. I suppose you could say that God could have raised up someone else. But what if *that* person chose not to cooperate?

This is not, however, the Bible's account. Note in verse 28 that all those mentioned above "did what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen." God plainly foreordained the entire incident from beginning to end and all happened just as He planned and willed it to happen. Here we see creatures acting freely to choose according to their own desires and wills and yet are also, at the same time, acting according to the foreordained will of God the Father.

Yet, the apostles, in the biblical record, attribute no wrong doing to God. All the blame lies at the feet of the human individuals. Peter makes this clear in his sermon, saying "this Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*" (Acts 2:23). In one brilliant sentence, Peter linked God's foreordination and man's responsibility. They were not "forced" to act against their wills, but God brought about His plan through their willing choices for which they were nevertheless culpable.

God and the Problem of Evil

Free will theists reject the claim that God orders or ordains everything because that would mean He must be the "author of evil." We know evil exists. How did it come into existence? One of the most persuasive arguments in favor of open theism is its self-proclaimed ability to provide a solution to the problem of evil.

The problem is this: How could there be any evil in the world, if God exists? If God is good, He does not want evil to exist. If God is all-powerful, He is able to prevent its existence or its consequences? Nevertheless, evil does exist. Therefore, either God is either not good, not all-powerful or He doesn't exist at all. Is this correct thinking?

God's Holy Use of Evil Events

We must first note that the Bible never attributes moral evil to God; even while it emphasizes that He has ordained and brings about what is in fact evil.¹³⁷ To equate "moral evil" with "ordaining evil" is to fall into another one of those "category mistakes." This is obviously hard to understand but we must remember the test of the truth of a doctrine is not that we find it plausible or attractive but that we find it in Scripture.¹³⁸ The Bible shows us that God can and does bring good out of evil and even brings evil about to fulfill His glorious purposes. You will not find these readings below "attractive" but

¹³⁷ Talbot, "True Freedom" in *Beyond the Bounds*, 101.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

you cannot deny their place in God's Holy Word. Wayne Grudem, in his "Systematic Theology," provides this list:¹³⁹

- Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and *create evil*: I the Lord do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7). The Hebrew word for create is *bara*, the same word used in Genesis 1:1.
- In Exodus, God declares that He will harden Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20; 14:4, 8). The Bible also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34). God's promises came first because of His desired purpose: "to raise [Pharaoh] up for the very purpose of showing my power in [him], so that My Name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Romans 9:17).
- When Joshua led Israel into Canaan, we read, "it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed" (Joshua 11:20, see also Judges 3:12 and 9:23).
- When Samson demanded to marry a Philistine girl, we read that this desire "was from the LORD; for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. At that time, the Philistines had dominion over Israel" (Judges 14:4).
- The sons of Eli, when rebuked for their evil deeds, "would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the LORD to slay them" (I Samuel 2:25).
- We read that an "evil spirit from the LORD" tormented King Saul (I Samuel 16:14).
- When David sinned, the Lord said to him through Nathan the prophet, "I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this think before all Israel, and before the sun" (2 Samuel 12:11-12; fulfilled in 16:22).
- In further punishment, "the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David and it became sick" and eventually died (2 Samuel 12:15-18).
- We read that the Lord "incited" David to take a census of the people (2 Samuel 24:1) but afterward, David recognized this as sin, saying, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (2 Samuel 24:10). God then sent punishment on Israel for David's sin (2 Samuel 24:12-17). Further, we read that "the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel," meaning that God's inciting of David was the instrument by which He brought punishment on the country. In a parallel account, we read that "Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to number Israel" (I Chronicles 21:1). Here we see remarkable evidence of the three influences: God, in order to bring about His purpose, ordained that Satan would incite David to sin, but Scripture regards David as responsible for that same sin.
- In the story of Job, God gave Satan permission to bring harm to Job's possessions and children. This harm came from foreign peoples and nature but Job looks beyond these secondary causes to the primary cause: God (Job 1:21).
- The Lord "put a lying spirit in the mouth" of Ahab's prophets (I Kings 22:23). Paul writes of this same account when he writes "Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12).
- God sent the evil Babylonians, led by Nebuchadnezzar, against Israel, saying, "I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants" (Jeremiah 25:9). Later, God promised He would punish Babylon, saying, "I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste" (Jeremiah 25:12).

¹³⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 322-325.

- In the context of bringing judgment on Israel for their idolatry, God declares that “if the prophet is a deceiving prophet who gives a false message, then the Lord says, ‘if the prophet be deceived and speak a word, I, the Lord, have deceived the prophet and will stretch out My hand against him and will destroy him for the midst of my people Israel” (Ezekiel 14:9).
- Finally, Peter tells his readers that those who oppose them and persecute them, who reject Christ as Messiah “stumble because they disobey the word, *as they were destined to do*” (I Peter 2:8). If the above list is not sobering and sufficient, Moses records the story of Joseph in the later half of Genesis. This account provides us with another clear example.

God’s Foreknowledge of Evil Acts in Genesis 50

I assume you know the story of Joseph’s life in Egypt after being sold as a slave by his brothers while a teenager. He is finally reconciled to his brothers, who still doubt that Joseph has completely forgiven them for their deed. To quash all fears, Joseph “takes them off the hook.” He tells them “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph is referring to one single specific event: the day his brothers sold him to a traveling caravan of Ishmaelites who proceeded to take him to Egypt. We see two concurrent causes: Joseph’s brothers truly wanted him removed from their lives and God wanted him in Egypt in order that God’s plan with the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would continue as He ordained. For open theists, the two are incompatible. For the compatibilists, there is no problem. Even John Sanders observes that “the story of Joseph . . . commonly serves as *the* paradigm in discussions of providence.”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, it is important to see how he interprets it. He acknowledges that the compatibilist interpretation “is possible.”¹⁴¹ However, he prefers a different interpretation based on three observations.

First, Sanders says that “the text explicitly ascribes responsibility for selling Joseph into Egypt to the brothers.”¹⁴² Of course, the Bible does say that the brothers did, in fact, sell Joseph. However, that is ALL the Bible says. After all, who else was going to do it? Sanders mistake is in assuming that Joseph’s brothers exercised libertarian free will in doing so. As mentioned before, this type of free will is a presuppositional grid through which the Bible must be interpreted. If that is the case, then Joseph is wrong in ascribing *any aspect* of the incident to God at all. Even if God were able to “rescue” Joseph from his brother’s free act, he is in error for giving God glory for that which God had nothing to do – the autonomous acts of his brothers. Yet Joseph seems to actually discount the brother’s involvement in the act. They appear secondary to God’s primary causation.

Second, Sanders observes that Joseph’s description of his brothers’ act as “evil” means that God could not have been behind the event.¹⁴³ Again, Sanders makes a simple error. He believes that you must describe the event the same way from God’s perspective as you do in describing the event from man’s perspective. When Joseph describes the event in 45:7-8, he gives a fuller treatment: “And God sent me before you *to preserve* for you a remnant in the earth, and *to keep you alive* by a great deliverance.

¹⁴⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 54.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 55.

Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and *He has made me a father* to Pharaoh and *lord* of all his household and *ruler* over all the land of Egypt.” Notice how Joseph describes God’s actions as inherently good. Genesis does not ascribe any evil to God.

Third, Sanders takes Joseph’s claim that what his brothers intended for evil, God intended for good as meaning *merely* that “God has brought something good out of their evil actions. God was not determining everything in Joseph’s life but God did remain ‘with’ him.”¹⁴⁴ It is noted that Sanders gives no exegetical reason for preferring this interpretation over any other. Sanders concludes by saying that “the text does not say that God caused or necessitated the events. In fact, the text is remarkably silent regarding any divine activity until Joseph’s speeches. . . . It is in retrospect that Joseph identifies God’s activity in his life working for the preservation of human life.”¹⁴⁵

As Talbot points out, Moses, the author of this story, may have a very good reason for not stressing God’s part in Joseph’s life. Such a storytelling device can drive home the point that even when God seems absent, He is present and working all along behind the scenes. The mere fact that we do not yet understand why God has ordained some dreadful event does not mean that we will not someday come to realize that God did not indeed have a good reason for ordaining it.¹⁴⁶

That does not remove the assertion of Genesis 45:4-8 of God’s activity of sending Joseph to Egypt in order to accomplish His own good purposes as stronger than Joseph’s brothers activity. Scripture places Joseph’s brothers’ actions (“you sold”) and God’s actions (“you meant”) in obvious and precise parallel when explaining how Joseph ended up in Egypt. God’s will is the ultimate explanation for what happened.

God and the Problem of Evil

The open theistic view is that God did not bring evil into the world. Rather, He made creatures who are free in the libertarian sense and they brought evil into the world by the own free choices.

Boyd raises the issue by relating a question his agnostic father asked him: “If God foreknew that Adolph Hitler would send six million Jews to their death, why did He go ahead and create a man like that?”¹⁴⁷ To do so is to say that God is ultimately responsible for the behavior of evil people and events that he “unleashes” on the world. Therefore, Boyd came to the conclusion that “the only response I could offer then, and the only response I continue to offer now, is that this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler.”¹⁴⁸ Boyd continues and says that “if you claim that God foreknew exactly what Hitler would do and created him anyway, . . . we must conclude that God believed that allowing Hitler’s massacre of the Jews (and many others) was preferable to His not allowing it.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Mark Talbot in “The True Freedom: The Liberty that Scripture Portrays as Worth Having,” in *Beyond the Bounds*, 93.

¹⁴⁷ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Boyd and Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*, 29-31.

¹⁴⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 98-99.

However, the question is also raised that once God saw Hitler acting as He did, why did God allow Hitler to *continue* for twelve years, killing six million Jews and others? The *blame* is squarely on God if He *allowed* Hitler to continue after the first killing. If ignorance of the future is the excuse for Hitler's beginning, then what is the excuse for Hitler's continuation in evil acts: *God's slow response time?!?* The open theists can only say that either God was not *able* to stop Hitler or that God respected Hitler's free will too much to intervene.

Boyd makes it clear that he cannot accept this because it places the onus for evil on God rather than "the nature of free will."¹⁵⁰ In his opinion, the open view presents a more palatable solution to the problem of evil. He reasons that his view "allows us to say consistently in unequivocal terms that *the ultimate source for all evil* is found in the will of free agents rather than in God."¹⁵¹ This is possible because humans can and do "thwart God's will for their lives and interfere with God's will for others."¹⁵²

Paul Kjoss Helseth, assistant professor of Bible and theology at Northwestern College insists, however, that the God of open theism cannot be rescued from the problem of evil. He asks, "How can we rescue God from the problem of evil when the prevention of evil is within His power and there is sufficient precedent for His unilateral activity?"¹⁵³ Open theists make the problem worse with their insistence that God retains the power to act determinately when He strongly desires to curb evil or have His will accomplished without the cooperation of man. God is always able to keep things on track. However, if God sometimes acts unilaterally to accomplish things He desires above all else, why did He not intervene to prevent the Holocaust of the Jews in Germany? The only answer compatible with open theism is that He did not care enough! He simply did not want to!

Not only does God's ignorance of future reality empty pain, suffering and evil of all purpose and meaning, His reluctance to prevent the pain and suffering that He has always known was possible raises questions about the love of God that are far more serious than any questions that can be leveled against compatibilists! When push comes to shove, adherents of open theism must believe that people suffer not because the gift of free will is irrevocable or because God ordained the suffering but rather that God was simply disinterested or disinclined to intervene at their particular point of suffering.¹⁵⁴ Simply put, God could have stopped your suffering but *He just didn't feel like it!* A further problem is that *when* God decides to intervene, it appears that choice of God's must be purely arbitrary.

John Frame believes that even if libertarian free will does exist, it is not adequate to provide a solution to this long known problem. Traditional Arminians do not believe that God causes evil, but do believe that He is able to prevent it and that He made the world knowing in advance that evil would occur. However, if this is true, how is His action (inaction?) any different from causing or foreordaining evil? Is allowing evil any different than causing evil? Does His passivity excuse Him from responsibility? If God set everything in motion, knowing how it would turn out, how can He not be responsible?

¹⁵⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 99.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 102 (emphasis added).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 156, 147.

¹⁵³ Paul Kjoss Helseth in "The Trustworthiness of God and the Foundation of Hope," in *Beyond the Bounds*, 301-302.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

Open theists hold the same position as Arminians, except they deny God's foreknowledge.¹⁵⁵ Remember, creation was a risky endeavor. This makes God into some sort of "mad scientist," mixing potentially explosive elements together. If God is not directly responsible, He is at least guilty of "reckless endangerment." Open theism does not remove the problem of evil, it merely backs it up one step.

Also, we must ask if God really cares more about man's libertarian freedom than He does about righteousness and goodness and truth? Is God willing to risk the loss of goodness to save libertarian free will? Scripture mentions often God's love of righteousness and truth. The Word never mentions God's love for free will.

So, then, seeing that open theism fails in its claim to solve the problem of evil, we must ask if there is a solution at all. No answer is fully satisfying. It is possible that this issue is one of those transcendent mysteries that we are not meant to understand. Some theologians seem to be willing to pay any price to solve the problem of evil. It would appear that denying God's omniscience of all future events is too large a price to pay. The transcendence of God plays a significant role in the biblical responses to the problem of evil. When God is questioned about His responsibility with evil, His response is one of rebuke for asking (Job 23:1-7; 31:35-37; 38:3; Romans 9:19-21). God does not have to defend Himself, especially to us. In fact, when considering the passages above, it is amazing what is NOT said.

In Romans, Paul writes "One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (Romans 9). You must understand that if Paul believed in libertarian free will, he would not have answered the way he did. In fact, he would not have even supposed the question be asked in the first place.

Also consider what God did NOT say to Job when Job questioned God about all the calamity that befell him. As Bruce Ware puts it, God surely would have said, "Job, why are you blaming me for this suffering? I am not the one behind it! In fact, I feel as badly about your suffering as you do and I wish it could have been avoided. Unfortunately, Satan is a very powerful being whose free choices I cannot control and he has brought on you this suffering. So stop blaming me . . . and realize that sometimes pointless evil is inflicted on others in a world of sinful creatures who possess moral freedom."¹⁵⁶

To the open theist, that answer would not be shocking. However, God says nothing of the sort. God emphasizes His sovereignty over the whole course of nature and history. We know from Scripture that Job's suffering came directly from God (Jon 1:21 and 42:11). Boyd, in "God at Ware: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict," cites passages from Job sixty times in trying to understand the problem of evil. He never mentions 1:21 ("the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the

¹⁵⁵ Frame, *No Other God*, 136.

¹⁵⁶ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 201-201.

LORD.”) and 42:11 (“they consoled him and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought on him.”).

There is nothing in the problem of evil that requires a belief in libertarian free will. In fact, there are many reasons not to believe in it.

Answering Open Theism's Historical Questions

As mentioned earlier, open theists claim that classical theism is thoroughly tainted with the influence of pagan Greek philosophy. The Greeks believed that "God" was perfect and unchanging and that change of any kind was a weakness. This attack is not new. Adolph von Harnack alleged that "everything from Nicea to Thomas Aquinas (and beyond) resulted from the Hellenization of theology."¹⁵⁷ Open theists add their "amen" to Harnack. They argue that as heresies arose in the early church, the church fathers had to look outside the Hebrew camp for ammunition. They subsequently faced the difficulty of defending two traditions. Basically, as the two fused, Pinnock declares that "classical theism, so influenced by Hellenism, . . . makes God impassive and unable to relate."¹⁵⁸ They further claim that Greek philosophy was not the sole outside influence. In the medieval and Reformation church, Latin legal traditions entered the mix, causing the church to view God as judge.¹⁵⁹ Are open theists correct in their understanding of history?

Modern rabbinic authorities deny that Greek philosophy influenced the Rabbis of the first few centuries. Those men were not philosophers, nor students of philosophy. Indeed, their outlook was extremely limited, having no interests outside their Religion and their Law. The Old Testament was practically the *only* book they had. This Bible was their entire world. Saul Lieberman, arguably the greatest Rabbinic authority in the last century and a leading expert in Hellenistic influence in Judaism, says that the Rabbis never quoted a Greek philosopher, never use Greek philosophic terms and then mention only one prominent Greek philosopher: Epicurus, the embodiment of infidelity and the "symbol of heresy."¹⁶⁰ The Rabbis thoroughly distrusted Greek wisdom. The Talmud indicates the proper time to study Greek philosophy, saying, "May one such as I who have studied the whole of the Torah learn Greek wisdom? . . . Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and learn then Greek wisdom."¹⁶¹

Sanders wrote much in "The Openness of God" of historical considerations. His claims and appeals are hopeless. That fact has not been shown adequately in this paper, for lack of space and time. One can study this area in more detail in "Beyond The Bounds." The first two chapters in that book deal explicitly with this issue. The conclusion of that author is that Sanders' claims should raise the eyebrows of competent historians.

These errors are serious. They are ominous with implications and grave with consequences for the openness view because their theological claims are partially joined at the hip to their historical claims. For instance, openness proponents readily admit that Judaism and Christianity maintain the traditional

¹⁵⁷ Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, translated by Neil Buchanan (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1976), 1:43-59 as found in *Beyond the Bounds*, 45.

¹⁵⁸ Clark Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 50 as found in *Beyond the Bounds*, 46.

¹⁵⁹ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 72.

¹⁶⁰ Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 225-226 as found in *Beyond the Bounds*, 26.

¹⁶¹ Lieberman, *Texts and Studies*, 228 as found in *Beyond the Bounds*, 26.

view. What Pinnock, Boyd and Sanders ask you to believe is that all Jews and virtually all Christians throughout history have completely misread the Old Testament and formed a false concept of God!

However, traditionalists claim that open theism stems directly from pagan philosophy. This paper has already shown the incredible parallels between openness and Socinianism.

Answering Open Theism's Practical Questions

Having considered important doctrinal areas central to the open view of God, we find that open theism has revealed serious deficiencies. We can now consider areas of practical application, such as prayer, God's wise guidance and how we should view suffering and pain.

Open Theism and Prayer

How and why we pray is a crucial question. Is prayer effective and if so, towards what ends? Do our prayers truly make a difference to God? As mentioned previously, a strong selling point for open theism is its proclaimed search for a "real relationship" with God. However, the open model is fundamentally flawed in areas its supporters promote as its strengths. The area of prayer is particularly problematic.

We all want to believe that our prayers make a difference. After all, why pray at all if our prayers are merely superfluous. According to openness proponents, prayer matters because the future is not exhaustively settled and foreknown by God. Boyd says "there is no divine blueprint." Therefore, what we bring to God in prayer can truly make a difference in what happens in the future. God takes into account our prayers before He finally decides what to do next. As initially appealing as this approach may sound, consider some of the difficulties attending to the nature of prayer in the construct of open theism.

The Problem of Prayer and God's Omniscience

Basically, open theists do not go far enough to support their position. They believe that since future free choices and actions cannot in principle be known, God cannot know them. Yet, they say He knows all else. That's the problem. It is impossible for human beings to inform God of their thoughts, concerns, longings, feelings and requests. We remember that Boyd states that God "knows us perfectly, far better than we know ourselves."¹⁶² He goes on to say that God "knows the thoughts and intentions of all individuals perfectly and can play them out in His mind like an infinitely wise chess master anticipating every possible combination of moves his opponent could ever make."¹⁶³ It becomes difficult to see how our prayers can influence God's decision-making process *when He already knows everything we tell him in those prayers*. Can we rightly believe we tell God something He doesn't already know or has not at least fully anticipated? God can gain no new knowledge through our prayers.

This is not how prayer is described in open theistic writing but it is the only way it can be described truthfully. Instead, openness writers lead us to believe that God waits to hear what we think, that He

¹⁶² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 35.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 152.

learns what our thoughts are when we come to Him, that he adjusts His plans only after learning from us what our longings are, and so on.¹⁶⁴

So, what function does prayer really have? The answer is crucial. In open theism (and classic theism), prayer *can* function to foster a deeper relationship with God, it can bind us closer to God and it can even reinforce the urgency or importance we attach to requests to God in prayer. However, we must admit that prayer *cannot* instruct or inform God. In another example of a “category mistake,” we align our conversations with other creatures with our conversations with God. We do not know what our acquaintances will say next so our relationships are truly dynamic and constantly changing.

What would it take to make our relationship with God truly dynamic in this same sense? We would only have to deny God’s foreknowledge of the future *along with* God’s omniscient knowledge of the past and present. Of course, this requires an even further departure from orthodoxy.

The Problem of Prayer and God’s Wisdom

Another logical problem exists in relation to God’s wisdom. Openness advocates make it sound like a good thing that God would listen to us and make His decisions based on our input. However, when you consider that “*only God* knows all that can be known and *only God* has unsurpassable wisdom to discern the best and *only God* has purity of motives and freedom for the distortion of sinful urgings and *only God* is in the optimal situation to judge the probably effects of future decisions, it begins to make one wonder why it such a good thing that God’s activity is at times dependent on our freely offered but totally flawed petitions.”¹⁶⁵ In all honesty, do we really want God to do what *we* think is best? Furthermore, do we really want God to do what *someone else* thinks is best? What if our desire conflicts directly with another believer’s desire?

It seems to be the height of arrogance to demand that God must wait to hear from us before He acts on certain occasions. This silly (at best) and pretentious (at worst) notion that we possess some special human insight that God needs must be cast aside. Consider this from God’s perspective: is it not an indictment on Him to follow advice from us that He knows to be impractical and unrighteous, wrong and misguided?

Isaiah 40:15 declares that “the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales.” All the collective insight and wisdom of entire nations are infinitely small to the omniscient mind of God.

Another problem in the openness perspective is that while God’s wisdom is supposedly unsurpassable, it is often the case that God is capable of getting things wrong. In fact, since He does not know how things will truly turn out, it must be that every belief of His about the future is potentially wrong.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps we should change the words of Jesus and pray, “Father, I forgive You for You know not what we are about to do.”

¹⁶⁴ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 166.

¹⁶⁵ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 168.

¹⁶⁶ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 50.

The Problem of Prayer and God's Power

According to this perspective, God's power is pretty much relegated to that of persuasion. Therefore, one's prayers on another's behalf must be for God to work in a *persuasive* way to accomplish what he or she believes is best for that person. However, because God's power of persuasion cannot necessarily succeed because of the "trumping" power of man's libertarian free will, one must realize how very much God's power is limited and stifled by human freedom.

First, if we truly believe when we pray on another's behalf that God *can* work decisively in that person's heart so that God *can guarantee* that the person will choose what God wants, then this view calls into question the reality of libertarian free will that is cherished above all in open theism.¹⁶⁷ Remember, this definition of free will demands that we are free if, and only if, for any choice we make, we are free to choose otherwise given the identical set of circumstances. If this is so, then God cannot work in such a way to guarantee that we will choose what He wants. We must choose only what we want, completely independent from God and all other influencing conditions.

Second, if we truly believe that when we pray on another's behalf, God *cannot* work decisively in another's heart and so *cannot guarantee* that the person will choose what both we and God want, then this view of prayer calls into question the effectiveness of prayer so cherished in open theism.¹⁶⁸ If we know that God cannot penetrate the stubborn free will of man, then are we not asking God to do something He simply cannot do?

It is evident that one of open theism's most highly touted elements – prayer – is embroiled in several major conceptual and practical difficulties.¹⁶⁹ According to Bruce Ware, something must give. Either God's knowledge of the past and present is truly exhaustive, in which case we can offer Him no new information or we deny of God even more than has already been denied of Him (His past and present omniscience along with His future knowledge). Either God's wisdom is so much more vast than ours that it is silly and foolish for us to want God to hear from us before He proceeds or we must acknowledge that God is faced with the option of disregarding what we say or going against His best judgment to honor our requests. Either God is truly wise and His decisions are always right and good or God repents literally, showing that His wisdom is fallible, His judgment impaired and His decisions sometimes untrustworthy. Either God's power is such that He really can act in ways that accomplish His purposes in our lives, in which case libertarian freedom is called into question, or God's power is limited so that He cannot accomplish what He and others would like Him to do. Serious problems emerge with any path taken.¹⁷⁰

Open Theism and God's Wise Counsel

One of the greatest desires of man is to "know God's will." We want to believe that His ways are best. If we cannot have confidence in God's will, where can we turn? Chronic anxiety and constant fear loom ahead if even God does not know the best for our lives. We are then left with following our own

¹⁶⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 174.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁷⁰ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 175..

instincts and thoughts and desires. If open theism is considered honestly, the conclusion that it fails miserably cannot be denied.

First, consider the openness denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge. God is severely limited in His ability to make plans and give direction for the future. So much is unknown to God that His help is akin to that of a very good psychic. There can be no certainty, only possibilities and probabilities.

Second, open theists hold that God cannot control the free actions of His moral creatures. The unyielding commitment to libertarian free will renders God impotent to guarantee His will be accomplished. Open theists allow that God *sometimes* moves unilaterally to get the outcome He desires. This seemingly does not occur very often for fear of displacing libertarian freedom.

Third, God constantly reassesses His own beliefs and prior actions as He learns new things from all that transpires before Him. God learns and is in fact, the “best learner.”¹⁷¹ The believer then must realize that to follow God is a spotty recommendation because God can and will fail again.

Open theists are not deterred from these debilitating facts. They counter with three assertions of their own. First, open theists proclaim that the security of divine guidance is based on the unconditional and uncompromising equal love of God for all creatures. We can always be assured that God wants our best and that His motive in providing guidance is of genuine love. This rules out the fact that God controls the future and sometimes brings evil and suffering into the life of His creatures in order to accomplish His purposes, which we saw He clearly does throughout Scripture on page 43-44. We may “gain” God-as-friend-through-life but we may, at the same time, “lose” God-as-Lord-over-life!¹⁷²

Second, while God does not know the future, He does know the past and present exhaustively. Open theists are confident that God’s leading will be based only on the best and most complete data available at the present moment.

Third, even though God cannot control the future free choices and actions of His moral creatures, He nonetheless is an eminently resourceful and extremely capable God. God can “fix” any of our messes created by our free wills.

In this scenario, we see that fact that God’s will is constantly “evolving.”¹⁷³ This brings serious problems. If God’s will is evolving, His guidance may be questioned from the very outset as to whether His directions are indeed best. God must always lack some morsel of vital information because some knowledge of the outcome is still future. It may comfort some to know that God loves them and “hopes for the best,” but the fact remains that He will often steer you in the wrong direction.

Also, if God’s will is evolving, the believer must then constantly *keep* seeking God’s will for the same event. A lingering question will always be, “Has God’s will for this matter changed since the last time I asked?”

¹⁷¹ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 124

¹⁷² Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 188.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 180.

Open theist David Basinger comes to the aid of his comrades by saying that God's guidance is more accurate with short-term problems than with long-range problems.¹⁷⁴ Does this really help? Are not most of the weightiest problems dealing with long-range implications? We struggle with careers, homes, families, spouses and education. Those are not short-range problems. Matters that affect *just the present* are usually fairly trivial, along the lines of what clothes to wear today or what to eat this morning. On weighty matters, God's guidance is not fully reliable. However, He stands ready and able to provide answers to your menu and wardrobe this morning. Do we really even need God's help with these matters?

Open Theism and Our Suffering and Pain

How should Christians respond to the pain and tragedy and suffering they see around them and around the world? In open theism, God does not know the future and cannot totally control all the future. Therefore, while God feels the pain of our suffering, He is often unable to prevent it. When "pointless" evil occurs, we are not to blame God. After all, "He feels as badly as we do." According to open theists, we gain great comfort in knowing that God had nothing to do with our suffering and that His disposition toward us remains one of uncompromising love.

This sounds great, doesn't it? But is it right? What do the Scriptures teach us about suffering? A few passages offer us insight. Consider Romans 8:28-32, presented below:

Romans 8:28-32

- 28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
- 29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren;
- 30 and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.
- 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?
- 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

In an amazing denial of open theism, here Paul affirms that God *causes all things* to work together for good. We see that God *works* to ensure all things accomplish His good. There are no accidents or tragedies that catch God off-guard. God is always at work in our lives. Second, God works *all things* for good. Open theists believe God brings good about but is absent in the bringing of evil or suffering. Paul says the scope of God's involvement is comprehensive. Third, God works all things *for the good* of those who love Him. There is no "pointless" evil or suffering for believers.

¹⁷⁴ David Basinger, "Practical Implications" in *The Openness of God*, 163.

Notice how fundamentally different this interpretation is from Boyd's interpretation of the same passages. He writes that open theism "affirms that whatever happens, God will work with us to bring a redemptive purpose out of the event."¹⁷⁵ Notice that Boyd does not say God works "all things" but that God works "with us" in response to all things. This idea is not found here; it must be imported into the text. Sanders errs as well when he says that Romans 8:28 does not say that all things in fact work for good but that "God is working to accomplish good in all things," yet "the purposes of God meet with resistance and even God does not always get what He wants."¹⁷⁶ At the most, the God of open theism commits Himself to doing His best while trying within His significant limitations to work things out for good.¹⁷⁷

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

- 7 And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself!
- 8 Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me.
- 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.
- 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

In the same context, Paul speaks about a time of suffering he endured as coming both from God and from Satan. How can it be both? Paul's perspective is worlds away from the openness position. Paul's suffering was obviously brought by Satan (as a secondary cause) but Paul sees it ultimately from God (the primary cause). The main purpose of this thorn in the flesh, after all, was a good one: to remain humble and refrain from self-exaltation (verse 7). Paul did not think that Satan freely chose to torment him and then God stepped in to produce some good from all the bad. Rather, God chose to keep Paul humble and God decided to use Satan to do it. Paul's prayer indicates that he knew exactly this. Paul did not doubt that God was in control or think that God was watching helplessly while the completely free Satan toyed with His chief apostle. Nor did Paul appease himself by rationalizing that God "felt his pain." No, Paul knew that God had the power to cause the situation and the power to ease the situation. We also see, in God's answer to Paul's prayer for relief, that God designed this suffering. It is not pointless but purposeful.

Genesis 37-50

We have already examined this story from another angle but we remember that Joseph acknowledged God's primary action in causing all the evil to befall him. He knew that God sent him to Egypt, working through his brothers. An open theist might think that the brothers acted and God "made the most of the

¹⁷⁵ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 155-156.

¹⁷⁶ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 127-128.

¹⁷⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 194.

situation” by raising Joseph to power in Egypt. That is not how Joseph or Moses, the author of this story, felt.

Various “Spectrum” Texts

The above passages speak very specifically. Several other passages speak of the whole spectrum of our lives – from birth to death. Open theists are simply wrong in their denial that God has nothing to do with pain, suffering, disease, hardship and death. Scripture clearly teaches that God not only has something to do with these matters – He ordains and governs them all.¹⁷⁸ Boyd denies this, ending his book by saying “the world is a scary place. . . . The open view grants this. . . . But the world is less scary in this [open] view than if we try to find consolation in the belief that everything that occurs is controlled by God and thus reflects His dubious character.”¹⁷⁹ Really? Is it truly comforting to know that you are at the mercy of nature and the combined free will actions of all around you, including those who desire to hurt you?

Let’s see what Scripture says. Consider the following passages that reveal God’s involvement in all facets of life, both good and bad.

- Exodus 4:11 - And the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him *dumb* or *deaf*, or *seeing* or *blind*? Is it not I, the LORD?"
- Deuteronomy 32:39 - See now that I, I am He, And there is no god besides Me; It is I who *put to death* and *give life*. I have *wounded*, and it is I who *heal*; And there is no one who can deliver from My hand.
- I Samuel 2:6-7 - The LORD *kills* and *makes alive*; He *brings down to Sheol* and *raises up*. The LORD makes *poor* and *rich*; He brings *low*, He also *exalts*.
- Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 - Consider the work of God, For who is able to *straighten* what He has *bent*? In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider-- *God has made the one as well as the other* So that man may not discover anything that will be after him.
- Lamentations 3:37-38 - Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, Unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That both *good* and *ill* go forth?
- Amos 3:6 - If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a *calamity* occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?

It is true that these statements apply to specific, historical situations. But the truths within transcend those events and apply to our lives today.

What About “Real Life”?

We see open theism’s view on suffering fails the biblical test. What about its veracity when placed within the framework of practical Christian living? Is it valid here? Is it a coherent approach that can be applied consistently?

¹⁷⁸ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 203.

¹⁷⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 156.

When confronted with a suffering believer, open theists issue these words of comfort: “God did not bring your suffering, so don’t blame God for it; instead, be encouraged because He feels as badly about the suffering as you do.” To some, this is encouraging and comforting.

Upon inspection, this potential pastoral counseling is deeply flawed. If God did not bring about the suffering, then it is either true or false that God could have prevented the suffering. In either case, He obviously did not prevent the situation in which you find yourself. How do you feel to find out that God *could have* prevented the suffering but *did not*? If this is true, God may not have actually brought the suffering upon you but He did consciously and deliberately permit it to occur. He did this to protect your libertarian free will. One must ask how this removes the culpability from God. Also, against the teachings of open theism, is there real comfort in knowing that God allows you to suffer?

What if God *could not* have prevented the suffering even though He truly wanted to do so? Is God standing helpless on the sidelines? If God could not prevent this suffering, we must ask, “*Who or what is* causing this suffering that God is powerless to stop?” We must also wonder how much of our lives lie outside the control of God? This also raises the question of the existence of a “greater power” in the universe, higher and mightier than God.

When the rubber meets the road, you must answer this question: Would you rather see your life as being at the mercy of the God of all knowledge, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, power and love who is in control of all things? Or would you rather see your life as being at the mercy of Satan, demons, wicked people and natural forces who have control over your life, bringing disaster and suffering upon you, some of which is entirely pointless in the great scheme of things, while God watches helpless and unable to intervene?¹⁸⁰

Do you want the “God who risks”? Then you must take with Him the uncertainty, the lack of confidence, and the despair to go along with those risks. Open theists can talk all they want about the heightened personal relationship offered with such a God but what you really have is great disappointment, fear of the future and shallow, faltering faith. On the other hand, do you want a God who controls all that is? Open theists retort that this view brings on the problem of evil. We have already seen that open theism cannot escape this question, either. What you really get with classical theism is the God in whom you can have complete and full confidence. His character is impeccable, His wisdom flawless, His will and ways righteous, His heart holy and good. What could be better?¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 213.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

Conclusion

Procrustes was the mythological giant of Attica. It is said that he placed all who fell into his hands on an iron bed. If they were longer than the bed, he cut off the extraneous parts of the body. If they were shorter than the bed, he stretched his prisoners until they fit. Open theists are attempting to fit God Almighty on a Procrustean bed of their making. God's definition of "freedom" is stretched beyond its biblical understanding or we must lop off parts of God, as it were, starting with His knowledge of the future.



However, believing that God ordains all that comes to pass, we must accept that God allows heresy and aberrant theology to appear, as well. It is through heresy that the Church has sharpened her understanding of the Word and the application and interpretation of that Word. As with the Gnostic and Judiazers' heresies of biblical days and the Arians, Pelagians, Romanists and Liberals of more modern days, so has the Church improved through more recent assaults on classic Christian theology.

It is always sad, though, to think of the lives forever tarnished because of the reckless teachings of heretical ideas such as open theism. They have denied God's sovereign lordship over His creation. They have denied His rule over time and His unchangeable eternal purpose. They have denied His exhaustive knowledge of the future (and past and present, if honest). All for what? They have done all this to make their theology consistent with libertarian free will – an incoherent, unbiblical speculation that denies God's sovereignty and elevates humans.

Both camps have major unanswered questions.¹⁸² Classic theists must admit they do not exactly know the answer to questions such as, "How can God ordain that we do evil willingly and yet not be blamed for evil?" and "How can God cause us to choose something willingly?" To both, classic theists would say the answer lies in God infinite greatness. This answer brings the effect of increasing the classic theist's appreciation for the greatness of God.

Open theists and Arminians also find some questions unanswerable. For instance, "Why would God allow evil when it is against His will?" and "How can we know that God will ultimately prevail in the end?" Their failure to answer these and other questions tends to diminish the greatness of God and exalt the greatness of man. In this, we see that open theists have robbed God twice: they have removed His regal robes and placed them on the backs of common, fallen man. We must remove those ill-gotten robes and sing once again of our "Immortal Invisible God, Only Wise."

¹⁸² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 351.

Contents

What is Open Theism?	1
Biblical Questions	2
Philosophical and Theological Questions	3
Historical Questions	5
Practical Questions	5
Perceived Weaknesses of Classic Theism	8
Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge	9
Lack of Genuine Freedom among the Creatures	10
Lack of Genuine Providential Control among the Godhead	10
What Options Exist?	11
Perceived Benefits of Open Theism	11
A “Real” Relationship between God and His People	11
Risk in the Creation Project	11
Making Sense of the Repentance of God	12
Making Sense of the Reassessments of God	12
Providing a Proper Response to Suffering	13
Implications for Inerrancy	14
Implications for Sin	15
Implications for the Gospel	15
Implications for the God’s Trustworthiness	16
Implications for God’s “God-ness”	17
Implications for Worship	18
The Historic Roots of Open Theism	19
Socinianism	20
Process Theology	21
Socinianism, Process Theology and Open Theism	22
The Historic Battle Against Open Theism	24
The Danger of Abusing Straightforward Interpretation	25
The Straightforward Interpretation of Genesis 3:8-13	25
The Straightforward Interpretation of Genesis 22:12	27
The Straightforward Interpretation of Genesis 18:9-21	30
The Straightforward Interpretation of Jeremiah 18	31
The Straightforward Interpretation of “Entering God’s Mind” Texts	32
The Straightforward Interpretation of “Divine Remembrance” Texts	33
The Straightforward Interpretation of “Divine Ignorance” Texts	33
The Straightforward Interpretation of “Conditional Future” Texts	34
The Straightforward Interpretation of “Questions About the Future” Texts	34
The Straightforward Interpretation of “Divine Repentance” Texts	35
<i>God’s Repentance in Numbers 23:19</i>	36
<i>God’s Repentance in 1 Samuel 15</i>	36
<i>God’s Repentance in Jonah</i>	38
<i>God’s Repentance with Hezekiah</i>	38
Scriptural Affirmation of God’s Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge	39
<i>God’s Foreknowledge in Isaiah 40-48</i>	40
<i>God’s Foreknowledge in Deuteronomy 31:16-21 and Isaiah 5:1-7</i>	46
<i>God’s Foreknowledge in Psalm 139</i>	47
<i>God’s Foreknowledge in Daniel</i>	47

God's Foreknowledge in John 48

Open Theism's Rationalization of these Passages**49**

Understanding Libertarian Free Will.....**50**

Implications of Libertarian Free Will.....**51**

 Are we "Genuine" or "Puppets"? 52

 Are we Morally Responsible?..... 53

Assyria in Isaiah 10 55

Pilate and Herod in Acts 4..... 56

God and the Problem of Evil**57**

 God's Holy Use of Evil Events..... 57

 God's Foreknowledge of Evil Acts in Genesis 50..... 59

God and the Problem of Evil**60**

Open Theism and Prayer**66**

 The Problem of Prayer and God's Omniscience..... 66

 The Problem of Prayer and God's Wisdom..... 67

 The Problem of Prayer and God's Power 68

Open Theism and God's Wise Counsel**68**

Open Theism and Our Suffering and Pain.....**70**

 Romans 8:28-32 70

 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 71

 Genesis 37-50..... 71

 Various "Spectrum" Texts 72

What About "Real Life"?**72**