

A Tale of Two Providences

John Sanders*

This is a review of three books on divine providence: *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware. Baker Books (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1995, 2000), 356 pages. *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, Gregory A. Boyd. Baker Books (Grand Rapids, Mich. 2000), 175 pages. *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, Bruce A. Ware. Crossway Books (Wheaton, Ill. 2000), 240 pages.

Debate on the doctrine of divine providence has been heating up in recent years. A spate of books, journal articles and conference papers has appeared for and against “freewill theism” in general and the openness of God model in particular. Throughout this essay I will interact the broader topic while concentrating on these books. These three books tell the stories of two different views of divine providence: two from a strong Calvinistic (meticulous providence) perspective and one from an openness/Arminian (general providence) perspective.

Still Sovereign

The thirteen essays in *Still Sovereign* attempt to present a case for Calvinism and rebut many of the arguments found in two volumes edited by Clark Pinnock which sought to defend Arminianism.¹ The book was first published in two volumes in 1995, but in 2000 a number of essays were omitted in order to republish it in a single volume. The editors, Schreiner and Ware, are to be commended for producing a fine collection of essays that are, for the most part, well researched and well written. The book is divided into three parts: biblical analysis (nearly two-thirds of the book), theological issues and pastoral reflections (very brief).

The purpose of the book is to “defend the classical view of God’s sovereignty” from the corrosive acids of our culture that exalts the human over the divine. Arminian theology, they claim, is pushed around by cultural forces and exalts the human over the divine such that the divine glory is stolen away from God and given to humanity because, for Arminians, humans are the “ultimate determiners of salvation.” (pp. 11, 49, 101, 237, 286 and 323). “The doctrines of grace are questioned” today (p.18). The “plain teaching” of scripture is distorted by Arminians who, as “rationalistic” logicians, impose their system onto scripture.

*John Sanders is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Huntington College, Huntington, Indiana.

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Several points need to be made regarding these general claims before surveying the chapters individually. First, by “the classical view” and “the doctrines of grace” the authors mean the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition. However, the claim that they represent “the” classical view cannot be supported for the simple reason that, as some of the authors in the book note, the early fathers along with the Eastern Orthodox, Anabaptist, Arminian, Wesleyan, and Pentecostal traditions along with many Roman Catholics have always affirmed “freewill theism” and rejected theological determinism. If any tradition has the right to the title “the classical view” it would seem the older and more widespread strand of the tradition, freewill theism, has the better claim. If the authors simply claimed they were defending the “classical Calvinist” view, I would have no qualms. Second, throughout the book the authors decry as “caricature” when Arminians claim that humans are puppets in the Calvinistic schema, yet they repeatedly claim that humans “save themselves” according to Arminian theology. Each side fails to see itself in the description of the other. Moreover, both camps believe the “plain teaching” of scripture supports their respective views. Both sides affirm the clear teaching of scripture to be exactly opposite positions. How shall we resolve these contestations? Will appeal to more scripture be of benefit? Should we conclude that the hermeneutical skills of one side are depraved while those of the other are elect? Apparently, on this issue, the Bible is capable of being read by very devout Christians in quite different ways. It would seem that some epistemic humility is in order. The doctrines of human finitude and the noetic effects of sin (sin distorts our reasoning) ought to chasten us from making extravagant claims about the correctness of our theologies. Moreover, if culture affects the thinking of all of us, then we should be cautious about claiming that our theological opponents are the only ones “pushed around” by cultural forces. None of our theologizing escapes being conditioned by cultural trends, and it is high time evangelicals not only admit this, but make it an active part of our hermeneutical processes. It simply will not do to have one side making the “culture” accusation of their opponents while claiming themselves to be cultural virgins.

Now let me turn to the individual chapters. The first three chapters of the book present a defense of specific sovereignty (everything that occurs is specifically ordained by God to happen) from the Old Testament, the gospel of John and the Pauline corpus. They cover many of the standard Calvinist texts used to support meticulous providence and so provide a beneficial survey. The opening chapter by Ortlund correctly argued that, according to meticulous providence, God cannot be said to “respond” to creatures since this would make God dependent upon creatures (p. 30). It makes no sense to say that everything that happens is precisely what God has ordained to happen and then claim that God is responding to something we do. I shall return to this point latter in the

article. Ortlund's discussion of the Old Testament texts on divine repentance is very poor. He fails to interact with any of Terence Fretheim's detailed studies of these texts.² If someone is going to claim that the three dozen or so texts affirming that God changes his mind do not really inform us what God is like, then they need to take Fretheim's thorough discussions into account. Moreover, in this chapter and throughout the book the well-know "pancausality" texts are cited and interpreted to teach that God specifically ordains each and every calamity that occurs (e. g. Amos 3:6; Isa. 45:7). It would be good to see these authors interact with the work of Fredrik Lindström who thought the Bible taught divine pancausality, but, after a thorough analysis, came to the conclusion that the biblical authors do not teach this.³

Thomas Schreiner presents a well-researched and irenic study of Romans 9 and individual election. The chapter seeks to counter two views. First, Schreiner argues that Craig Blomberg and others are wrong to see Romans 9 referring to "historical destiny" rather than salvation. Although the original references about Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament may well refer to peoples (nations) and not individuals, Schreiner believes that Paul applies these texts to the salvation of individuals. Though I think Schreiner is correct that Paul is applying these texts to the topic of divine election to salvation, I do not believe Paul is addressing the Calvinist-Arminian formulation of this debate. It is so difficult for us today not to read our debates into the text. Schreiner also rejects the notion that Romans 9 is about "corporate" rather than individual election. Here he discusses William Klein's book on the topic.⁴ Schreiner uses the analogy of buying a professional baseball team to argue that election involves specific individuals, not merely an abstract entity. When you purchase the franchise (an abstract entity), he says, you also purchase all of the individual players and coaches that are included. Well, this is true if you buy an existing franchise, but if you purchase the right to a brand new franchise, say the Geneva Supralapsarians, there are no individual players or coaches at the time of purchase.

John Piper's chapter argues that though the Arminian "pillar texts" (e. g. Jn 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4) speak about God's love for all, they do not override unconditional election. He argues that there are "two wills" in God: one that all people enjoy salvation, and the other that only those specifically chosen by God will enjoy salvation. Piper, following Jonathon Edwards, correctly identifies a similarity here between the Calvinist and Arminian perspectives since Arminians claim that God wills that all people enjoy salvation and also that God wills that only those who exercise faith in Christ will enjoy salvation. Hence, there are two wills or, as I would prefer to say, two areas about which God makes decisions. The difference, he notes correctly, between Arminians and Calvinists lies in where each view locates God's higher commitment.

Whereas Arminians locate it in God's desire to grant us the freewill necessary for a relationship of love, Calvinists locate the higher will in God's desire to manifest "the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy" (p. 124). For Piper and others in this book, God's glory would not be fully displayed unless God both saves some and damns others.⁵ Calvinists are often asked why God does not redeem everyone when it seems it is within the divine power to do so. The typical Calvinist response is to say that God is not obligated to save anyone (p. 245). But, according to these authors, if God were to save everyone then the full force of God's wrath would not be displayed and if none were saved then the full force of God's love would not be displayed (e.g. p. 85; 124). That is, the divine glory needs some people to be redeemed and some to be damned. Though there is nothing in the creature that obligates God to save some of them, it is the case that the divine glory obligates (necessitates) God to save some people and to damn others in order for the divine nature to be fulfilled. Consequently, God needs human beings for redemption and damnation in order for God himself to be fulfilled.

By far the longest chapter in the book is Wayne Grudem's fine study of the warning passages in Hebrews. He argues that the specific terms used in 6:4-6 may legitimately be read as describing either genuine Christians who have fallen away or as referring to non-Christians who were attracted to the gospel but then lost interest. However, he argues that only one of the terms used in Hebrews to describe the truly regenerate is found in 6:4-6. From this and other arguments he concludes that the warning passages are directed against people who have experienced many of the blessings of the gospel but who were never actually saved in the first place. Without taking anything away from Grudem's solid work, I would like to suggest that John Wesley was correct that arguing about whether genuine Christians can become unsaved is a moot point until we first answer: How do we know whether one is actually saved now? After all, both those who say genuine believers can lose their salvation and those who argue that those who fall away were never genuine believers to begin with, are looking at precisely the same people.

D. A. Carson picks up this issue in his essay on assurance. He has a helpful study on what should and should not be the basis of our assurance. Though our works are some evidence that we are truly saved, Carson believes the Puritans went overboard with this. He suggests that our assurance of salvation is based primarily on the objective work of Christ and secondarily on our own works and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he says that we will not attain any "absolute, epistemologically tight Christian assurance" (p. 276). Nonetheless, he does claim that Calvinism provides a psychological comfort that is impossible for Arminianism. This is because, for Calvinism, the believer's security is in God, not in any introspection of conscience or

observation of works. However, Carson overreaches here because the doctrines of unconditional election and the perseverance of the saints provide assurance for the believer only if we can confidently identify ourselves as one of the elect.⁶ Granted, our assurance is in Jesus. But how do we know that we actually are in Jesus? The Arminian will question whether she is deceiving herself that she is a genuine Christian while the Calvinist will wonder whether he is truly one of the elect. After all, perhaps God has simply ordained that I “look like” one of the elect when I am actually not. How can I know the difference? Evangelicals still have a ways to go in developing a theology of assurance.⁷

S. M. Bough’s chapter on foreknowledge claims that it means “to choose,” and so the Arminian view of election will not work. Although the chapter contains some helpful research, Bough repeatedly makes claims that go way beyond his evidence (an error not limited to his chapter alone, however). Even more distressing is the caustic tone and use of fallacious reasoning against his opponents. For instance, because the openness of God view agrees on one point with Socinianism, Bough calls it “Neo-Socinianism.” Since view A has one point in common with view B, views A and B must be identical. Given such reasoning, we could arrive at all sorts of interesting connections. For instance, Baptists agree with Roman Catholics that Jesus is the messiah so Baptists must be “Neo-Catholics.” Since Calvinists agree with Stoicism on divine determinism, Calvinists are “Neo-Stoics.” It is unfortunate that some evangelicals use such deceitful practices in order to disqualify their opponents a position at the dialogue table.

Bruce Ware’s chapter seeks to demonstrate that the biblical teaching on divine election, calling and grace supports a Calvinistic soteriology. Ware begins by noting that “Calvinists and Arminians have more points of agreement than disagreement.” Nonetheless, he believes that Calvinism provides a better cumulative case for explaining the data of scripture for these three doctrines. Ware surveys a number of favorite Calvinist texts and explains them clearly.

Schreiner’s second chapter in the book seeks to refute the Wesleyan notion of prevenient grace. He briefly explains and then critiques four arguments used in favor of prevenient grace. Schreiner concludes that the idea of prevenient grace is not taught in scripture but is an imposition read into scripture in order to solve logical problems and justify God’s love. Though I do not agree with all of Schreiner’s exegesis, I do believe that he is correct that some of the biblical texts used to support the notion of prevenient grace do not do so. True, the texts may be read in a way compatible with the Wesleyan teaching, but they do not necessarily support the Wesleyan teaching. However, I see the same thing being done by many of the authors of this book—the texts used to support Calvinism may be read in ways compatible with Calvinist teaching, but they do not necessarily support Calvinist teaching. Doing theology

is much more complex than most evangelicals allow. There is no easy way to “disprove” either Calvinism or Arminianism for they are complex theological formulations integrating scripture, logic, personal and social proclivities, and traditions. Evangelical theology needs to come of age, recognize these complexities and learn to live with epistemic humility.

J. I. Packer’s chapter articulates the nature of God’s love, both universal and particular. Packer says that “God loves all in some ways” and “he loves some in all ways” (p. 283). God grants blessings to all, but loves some in a way that regenerates them. He calls this teaching “strong meat, too strong for some stomachs” such as for the Arminians. Of course, Arminians do not find the meat too strong, but too rancid. Moreover, Packer claims that Arminians do not allow for the mystery of God’s ways, but instead make God into the image of a giant man who is frustrated and disappointed. However, Arminians may counter that they are not anthropomorphizing God, but simply acknowledging God’s theomorphizing humanity.

The three final chapters discuss sovereignty in daily life, prayer and preaching. Jerry Bridges claims that the type of sovereignty we affirm makes a big difference in the way we live our daily lives. He says that every detail of our lives, including every instance of blindness, cancer, and loss of job, is woven by divine sovereignty into the framework of God’s eternal plan. Consequently, we can trust God that everything that happens to us is for the best: to “bring glory to himself and good to his aching child.” Does Bridges mean that each and every instance of suffering is for the individual good of the sufferer? The rape and murder of a young girl is for her good? It would be more believable if Bridges said, following the Stoics, that such instances of evil were somehow for the overall good rather than each individual’s good. Furthermore, he says that God ordains everything that happens to further the divine glory. But he also says, “that all our plans should aim for the glory of God” (p. 296). My question is: if everything, including my sin, does, in fact, further the divine glory, then what sense does it make to say we “should” aim for the divine glory? How can we fail to enhance the divine glory given meticulous providence? More on this below.

A typical criticism of Calvinism is that it reduces the motivation for evangelism and the urgency of prayer. This is incorrect, however, as C. Samuel Storms shows. For the Calvinist, prayer and evangelism are the divinely ordained instruments through which God has decided to work. God not only ordains the end that Gary will be saved on a particular day, he also ordains the means by which Gary will hear the gospel and be saved. Hence, Calvinists have certain motivations for prayer and evangelism even though they may not be all identical to those available to Arminians. Regarding our prayers for the unsaved, Storms says that our prayers do not render “God’s choice contingent.”

God's decisions, according to the authors of this book, are never dependent upon our prayers. Inconsistently however, Storms twice says that God is "pleased to ordain that he will save them in response to the prayers of others" (pp. 316, 320). Use of the word "response" by a proponent of meticulous providence is inappropriate because it implies that God is reacting to something we have done which God has not ordained. That Storms does not really mean that God "responds" to our prayers, however, is evident when he later says that "from the human perspective" it might be thought that "God's will for Gary is dependent upon me and my prayers" (p. 320). But God is not dependent upon my prayers since God also "by an infallible decree, has secured and guaranteed my prayers as an instrument." Hence, it "as though he were prevailed upon by prayer" but God is not actually prevailed upon. Earlier in the book, Ortlund correctly observed that, according to specific sovereignty, God does not respond to humans (p. 30). What Storms should have said is that God may be said to save Gary "after" my prayer but not in response to my prayer.⁸ Why then do Storms and others continue to say God "responds" to our prayers? Could it be that the cultural forces of American evangelicalism are shaping their theology? Evangelicals will not buy into a theology in which God does not respond to our prayers so it is not surprising that many Calvinists would fudge at this point.

I will close the review of this book by quoting Carson: "we will always have some mystery. The important thing will be to locate the mystery in the right place" (p. 273). This is quite correct and brings out a fundamental difference in theologies. Whereas Arminians locate the mystery in heart of sinful humanity—why humans spurn the divine love is the mystery of iniquity—Calvinists locate the mystery in the heart of God—why God chooses some for salvation and not others.

God of the Possible

General providence, the view that God does not meticulously control everything, is the second "tale" of providence. Greg Boyd defends this view in his popular level introduction to the open view of God. He first wrote much of this material for pastors and laity in his denomination, the Baptist General Conference, who were receiving misinformation from Boyd's critics. The openness of God view affirms that God created *ex nihilo* and sovereignly chose to endow humans with the libertarian freedom necessary for a relationship of love to develop. Openness teaches that God enters into genuine give-and-take relations with us. God, of course, does the initiating, but unlike classical theism in which God cannot receive, proponents of openness believe that God does receive some things from us. God truly responds to our prayers and our actions. Open theism is, in large part, a derivation of Arminianism, which is why Bruce

Ware calls it “neo-Arminianism” in contrast to “classical Arminianism.” There are two areas in which openness departs from classical Arminianism. First, whereas most Arminians have held that God is timeless (experiences an eternal now) open theists maintain that God, at least since creation, experiences before and after (temporal progression). Second, and clearly this is the lightning rod issue, classical Arminians have affirmed what is called **simple foreknowledge** whereby God simply “sees” all that we will do in the future but God does not determine or cause us to do what we will do. Thus, God has **exhaustive definite foreknowledge** (EDF hereafter) of all future contingent events. Proponents of openness, however, affirm a view called **presentism** wherein God knows all the past and present exhaustively and that part of the future that is determined to occur (e. g. earthquakes and God’s decisions to act unilaterally). God does not have EDF of future human decisions. Rather, God has beliefs about what we will do based upon our habits, character, circumstances and the like. Hence, some of the future is definite or closed and some of the future is indefinite or open. Some of the future is open and does not become definite until God and humans make it definite by their actions.

The bulk of Boyd’s book is given over to an explication and defense of presentism as a biblical and theologically sound understanding of divine omniscience. The debate is not whether God knows all that can be known (omniscience). Rather, it is about what can be known. The debate concerns “the nature of the future: Is it exhaustively settled from all eternity, or is it partly open? That is the question at hand, nothing else” (p. 17). For Boyd, God is omniscient. It is just that the future actions of beings with libertarian freedom do not yet exist so there is nothing there for God to know. Just as omnipotence is not denied by saying that God cannot do the logically impossible, so omniscience is not denied by saying that God cannot foreknow the logically unknowable. Half of the book is devoted to expounding biblical texts, both those that are used to support the open view and explaining how an open theist might interpret the texts typically used in support of EDF.

In chapter one Boyd explains the varieties of EDF and the reasons why thoughtful Christians arrived at this view. He then seeks to interpret texts such as the prediction of Peter’s denial and Psalm 139:16 in ways compatible with presentism. Chapter two marshals a wide array of biblical texts used to support presentism. Some of these evidences are: (1) God expresses “regret” (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:10); why would God do that if he always knew these things were going to happen? (2) God confronts the unexpected where God thought Israel would do one thing when she, in fact, did another (Isa. 5; Jer. 3:19-20, 19:5). (3) God gets frustrated with Moses’ resistance (Ex. 4:10-15) which seems incongruous if God always knew Moses would go. (4) God tests people to

discover what they will do (e. g. Deut. 8:2 and Gen. 22 where God tests Abraham and says “now I know that you fear me”). (5) God speaks in indefinite terms of what may or may not be (Exod. 4:1-9), and uses words such as “if” (Ex. 13:17), “perhaps” (Ezek. 12:3), and “might” (Jer. 26:19). (6) God strives with people trying to get them to believe and is grieved when they resist him (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30; Acts 7:51)—why would God strive with people he always knew would not believe anyway? (7) People may be blotted out of the book of life (Rev. 22:19), and (8) God changes his mind in response to what people do (Exod. 32:14; Jer. 18; 2 Kings 20:1-6).

Chapter three explores the difference openness theology makes in everyday life. Boyd addresses the liberating nature of living with possibilities instead of prescribed pathways for divine guidance. He rejects the “myth of the blueprint,” the notion that God has everything laid out for us to follow. Boyd claims that the urgency of prayer in the open view is the strongest of any theological position because God may or may not do something because we prayed or failed to pray. The problem of evil and suffering is discussed, wherein Boyd argues that we need not feel anger at God for “doing this to me” since these are not part of the divine plan. He tells a particularly poignant story of a young woman whose husband abused her and destroyed her life’s dream of becoming a missionary. Though much of the practical applications of openness theology are in line with classical Arminianism, there are distinctives, particularly when it comes to divine guidance since, according to open theism, God does not know with absolute certainty what beings with freewill will do in the future. Some classical Arminians think this a terrible defect in openness thought since they suggest that if God possesses EDF, then if God foresees something is going to happen that God does not want to happen, God can prevent it from happening. However, Boyd is correct that the Arminian view of simple foreknowledge—where God simply sees the future—does not do God any good. The reason is simple: if God knows the actual future, then God cannot change the future since this would make his foreknowledge incorrect. For example, suppose that God has eternally foreseen my death in a car accident on a specific day. Your prayers that I arrive safely are useless since God has foreseen the actual, not the possible, future and cannot change it. The problem with the traditional Arminian view of foreknowledge is that God is “cursed with the ability to foresee disaster while being unable to do anything about it” (p. 101). Simple foreknowledge is useless for providence.

The final chapter of the book answers eighteen common questions and objections raised against the open view.⁹ For instance, has anyone else ever held this view in the history of the church? How do you explain the anthropomorphic expressions in scripture about God’s arms and eyes? Does not the open view “limit God?” What is the relationship between God and time?

Although his answers are brief and written for a popular audience, Boyd does a good job overall of providing possible answers to these questions. I say “possible answers” because not all proponents of openness agree with one another regarding all the details of the position. At times, Boyd uses biblical texts that do not support the open view. For instance, rhetorical questions in scripture (pp. 58-59), though compatible with openness, do not provide evidence that God does not know the future. Nonetheless, Boyd accomplishes his objective of giving a readable introduction to the open view.

God’s Lesser Glory

Bruce Ware’s book is an invective against open theism.¹⁰ He rails against publishers, such as InterVarsity, Baker Books and Christianity Today, for even discussing this issue. He laments that the Baptist General Conference, after several years of debate, failed to rule openness theology out of bounds. Fortunately, says Ware, the national meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention passed several changes to their doctrinal statement, one of which affirms that God has EDF, thus ruling out presentism as a viable theory. However, Ware fails to mention that the state conventions have to ratify such changes and the largest groups of Southern Baptists, including the Texas Baptist Conference, have refused to endorse the changes. Ware and John Piper seem to believe that open theism is the most serious threat to the church today. It will “destroy churches” if left unchecked.

The book is divided into three parts: describing open theism, critiquing open theism biblically and theologically, and criticizing how openness theology applies to the Christian life. Chapter two correctly identifies open theism as a subset of classical Arminianism and clearly explains the arguments used by open theists to critique the views of omniscience known as simple foreknowledge and middle knowledge. As with *God of the Possible*, this book also deals primarily with whether or not divine omniscience includes EDF.

Chapter three gives some of the theological arguments for the open view. For the most part, Ware states these correctly, though with some exaggeration. Though Ware acknowledges that any view that affirms libertarian freedom for humans entails God taking risks, he believes that the open view implies a greater degree of risk taking on God’s part than in classical Arminianism (pp. 48-9). However, this is wrong. For simple foreknowledge, it may be said that once God decided to create this world and then provisioned all that would happen in this world, God “learned” about all the things humans would do against his will—all of the risks God would take. When God begins to create he is aware of all the risks. However, this does not lessen, in the least, the actual risks God takes because what God provisions is not under his control. Hence, a God with simple foreknowledge takes precisely the same risks as does

a God with present knowledge.¹¹

In the next chapter Ware attempts to rebut the biblical arguments (see the summary in Boyd above) used by open theists in support of their view. Ware opens the chapter by claiming that the denial of EDF is the watershed issue separating open theism from all forms of “classical theism” including Calvinism and traditional Arminianism (p. 66). Again, this is not the case. Though Ware correctly states the providential uselessness of simple foreknowledge (p. 37), he fails to understand the wide-ranging import of this. If the traditional Arminian view offers no providential advantage over presentism, then EDF simply cannot be the watershed issue. In the history of the church there have been two major understandings of God. The first, developed by the early fathers and held by the Eastern Orthodox and Arminians, is that God has chosen to be, for some things, affected (conditioned) by the creatures. God grants humans libertarian freedom such that God does not control our actions. God genuinely responds to our prayers and what we do. I call this major strand of theology “freewill theism.” The other major understanding of God, developed by Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and others, denies that God is in any respect affected by creatures—God is impassible. God grants humans compatibilistic freedom whereby we are free to act on our strongest desires, but our desires are determined by forces beyond our control. God never responds to what creatures do, rather creatures respond to what God has decreed they do. This view, known as classical theism, affirms that God is absolutely unconditioned by any being external to God, so God is strongly immutable and impassible.

The great divide separating the freewill and deterministic theistic traditions is actually (1) divine conditionality (including impassibility and immutability) and (2) the type of freedom God decided to grant humanity. Classical theism affirms God’s absolute unconditionedness and compatibilistic freedom while freewill theism affirms that God is affected by us and that God grants humans libertarian freedom. At times, Ware admits that his real gripe is against all forms of freewill theism, including traditional Arminianism, and not merely against openness (pp. 42, 48, 143, 153, 208, 214, 223, and 226). Though Ware spends most of his time addressing the denial of EDF, he seems to understand that this is not the crucial issue (though highlighting it will certainly help sell books).

If one of the two watershed issues between classical and freewill theisms is divine unconditionality and its attending doctrines of impassibility and immutability, then what are we to make of Ware’s claims that God is affected by us in that God has emotional responses to what we do? God does not, he says, change in his purposes, will or knowledge (p. 73), yet God can “literally change” (pp. 73, 92) in his emotional experiences to what we do as

those situations arise in time. Ware calls this “relational mutability.” Several comments are in order. To begin, if Ware is repudiating strong formulations of impassibility and immutability and saying that we can actually affect (condition) God, then he should beware of throwing around the charge of heresy since the Council of Chalcedon anathematized anyone who says God is passible or changeable.

Moreover, it is not clear to me what Ware believes about God’s relationship to time. It seems that he affirms divine timelessness or sempiternity (all time at once), yet he says, “God literally sees and experiences in this moment what he has known from eternity” (p. 73). However, this seems to suggest that a timeless deity experiences time which, as Aquinas and Calvin clearly understood, is contradictory. Timelessness just means that God does not experience “moments.” A number of evangelicals want a timeless being who nonetheless experiences events along with us in history. This is due, in part, to our desire for a “personal relationship with God.” However, the great luminaries of the faith (as well as contemporary Christian philosophers) understood that a timeless being cannot experience any sort of change since change involves time.¹² A timeless being cannot be said to plan, deliberate, respond, regret, grieve, or get angry. That is why classical theists have maintained that these biblical expressions are anthropomorphisms that do not actually inform us about the way God is. If Ware wants to attribute responding and grieving (p. 92) to a timeless deity, then he will have to explain how it does not contradict the metaphysics of timelessness.

In a similar vein, it is incoherent to affirm both that God’s will is never thwarted or frustrated in the least detail (p. 149) and also affirm that God has changing emotional responses to what we do. How can a deity who ensures that everything happens precisely as he wants it to happen, grieve over what happens? Is God unstable? Again, the great classical theists understood that these affirmations are contradictory. Clearly, Ware either has to revise more of the divine attributes of classical theism and move closer to freewill theism or he must return to standard classical theism.

Chapter five presents numerous biblical texts in support of God having EDF. The bulk of the chapter focuses on Isaiah 40-48. Ware interprets these chapters to mean that God puts his very claim to deity to the test: “If I can accurately predict what will happen then I am God, if I fail, then I am not God. “[H]is exclusive claim to deity, set in contrast to the false gods, demands that God *as God* get *everything* right” (p. 109). Ware does a good job of bringing out much of the meaning in these passages. It is disappointing, however, that he does not interact with Boyd’s explanation of these same texts. According to Boyd, God does not put his deity on trial by claiming to accurately predict the future, but by claiming to be able to announce something and bring it about

(Isa. 46:10-11, 48:5; see Boyd, pp. 29-31). In other words, the test concerns divine omnipotence not foreknowledge. There are a number of biblical prophecies that are problematic for proponents of presentism to explain and Ware discusses them. More work needs to be done by proponents of presentism on various biblical texts.

Ware's remarks on "conditional predictions" are somewhat baffling. "*Conditional predictions*, by their nature, give to God a 'back door,' as it were. If things don't go as he hoped or thought, he can always change what he had said. In all such cases, we *cannot rightly expect exact fulfillments* of these predictions" (p. 137, emphasis his). After belaboring the point that God puts his very deity at stake by predicting the future with 100% accuracy, Ware now says that we cannot expect God to accurately predict the future all of the time. If that were not bad enough, what sense does it make to affirm that God's will is always accomplished (p. 149) and also to affirm that things may not "go as he hoped or thought?" How can they fail to go as God foreordained they should go?

In the next chapter, Ware raises three objections to open theism: it has an excessively immanent view of God, it believes that God takes risks, and it implies that God cannot achieve all of his purposes. Are these criticisms of openness only? "To a great degree, the openness proponents are saying only what their Arminian colleagues have long argued" (p. 143). Yet, Ware believes that the denial of EDF exacerbates these problems. As I explained above, however, simple foreknowledge functions for divine providence in precisely the same way presentism does.

Chapters seven through nine critique openness while explaining the Calvinistic view of prayer, guidance and suffering. Ware writes: "if divine guidance is an evolving reality, it would seem that one would need regularly to keep seeking God's leading on each specific question or burden, even if one had sensed strongly just what the Lord's leading was on that matter." If so, "How can you tell whether to persevere in difficulty?" (p. 181). This is an accurate description of the openness position, but if it is a "problem," it is a problem for Ware's theology as well. The Calvinist God may be guiding you into something for a time, all the while planning to lead you out of it after a time. Calvinists do not believe God guides you into one thing forever. True, whatever you are doing at the moment is precisely what God has ordained you to do, but God may have ordained you not to persevere in some endeavor and so stop what you were doing and switch to something else. Hence, the Calvinist, just as much as the open theist, has to regularly seek God's leading and question whether God wants him to persevere.

Regarding suffering, Ware accuses the Arminian God of being "foolish" to create a world of beings with libertarian freedom over which God

cannot control. Using the Joseph story, Job, and Romans 8:28, he argues that the “Christian” God is in total control such that every “evil” that occurs is actually for the good. Ware does observe, correctly, that openness does not entirely solve the problem of evil since God could prevent each and every instance of moral evil, but chooses not to do so. Again, it is disappointing that Ware fails to even mention the responses open theists have given to this question.

In the final chapter Ware claims that, “In my view, every other understanding of divine providence to some extent diminishes the sovereignty and glory of God. It brings God’s wisdom and power down to the level of finite human thinking” (p. 220). Moreover, “The conclusion that God’s glory is diminished by libertarian human freedom is impossible to avoid” (p. 226). Here, Ware lays his cards on the table and indicts every form of freewill theism, including traditional Arminianism, for diminishing the divine glory. Again, this is why the watershed issues dividing this debate are divine conditionality and human freedom—not the denial of EDF! Moreover, there is a subtle problem in Ware’s accusation: is it actually possible for freewill theism to rob God of glory if God exercises specific sovereignty? No, it is not, and the reason why is easy to see. According to Ware, God foreordains everything that happens and everything that happens is for his own glory. Nothing occurs that can detract from the divine glory. Well then, how can freewill theism (including openness) lessen God’s glory if God ordained it for his own glory? Is God, for his own glory, foreordaining that his own glory be diminished? Hence, given Ware’s own theology, it is impossible for open theism to lessen God’s glory and so the thesis (and title) of Ware’s book is shown to be incoherent on Ware’s own terms.

Endnotes

¹ *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1989) and *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975).

² Terence Fretheim, “Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Constancy, and the Rejection of Saul’s Kingship,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47, no. 4 (Oct. 1985): 595-602; *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991); “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10, no. 1 (June 1988): 47-70; “The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7-10,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 (1987): 81-92; *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

³ See Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament*, Frederick H. Cryer trans. (Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1983).

⁴ William Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁵ For criticisms of Piper's thesis see my *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998) pp. 217-219, 241-242.

⁶ See the excellent essay by William Abraham, "Predestination and Assurance" in Pinnock, *Grace of God*, pp. 231-242.

⁷ It is small wonder why evangelicalism has popularized an answer to this question by promoting a liturgical rite which, when performed, grants one assurance that one is a genuine believer. By reciting the "sinners prayer" parents and friends assure you that you are an actual Christian now.

⁸ See my *God Who Risks*, pp. 269-271 for more discussion.

⁹ For more questions and more answers from a number of proponents of openness visit the websites: www.opentheism.org and Christus Victor Ministries at www.gregboyd.org

¹⁰ Not all classical theists are so caustic, however. For a more civil discussion that makes use of many of Ware's objections see Chris Hall and John Sanders, "Does God Know Your Next Move?" *Christianity Today* (May 21, 2001): 38-45 and (June 11, 2001):50-56. Also see our forthcoming book with Baker, *Divine Debates*.

¹¹ I have explained this in some detail in my "Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (1977): 26-40 and the abbreviated version of this in my *God Who Risks*, pp. 200=206.

¹² For a discussion of the literature on God and time see *The God Who Risks*, p. 319 n. 78.