On November 5-6, 2002, Dr. Clark H. Pinnock delivered the annual Fall Lecture Series at Ashland Theological Seminary. The lecture series achieved everything a theologian could desire from such an event: it raised important theological issues; it encouraged participants to consider the implications of theology for life and motion; it engaged the whole seminary community; and it required everyone, whatever their perspective, to reflect on their own understanding of God.

Open theism is a controversial issue within evangelicalism. It has been the focus of numerous books and articles, Internet web sites, and the 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. It has led to thoughtful discussions, lively debates, and, on occasion, personal attacks and denunciations of heresy. How should as evangelicals approach this issue? In what follows, I will give some background on open theism and attempt to locate it in relationship to Calvinism, classical Arminianism, and process thought. I will address several misconceptions about open theism and conclude with some reflections on how we might proceed.

Open theism is a movement that has grown up within the Arminian wing of evangelicalism. The movement has attracted biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers; people associated with it include Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Gregory Boyd, and a number of others. It is not a monolithic movement; those involved in it do not agree on every issue. This perspective has been developing for over twenty-five years. Some of its proponents had been involved in developing Arminian responses to Calvinism, resulting in the essay collections *Grace Unlimited* (1975) and *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (1989). Exploring the issues that divided Calvinists and Arminians led some of them to become dissatisfied with traditional Arminianism as it.

What happened for some was a collision between evangelical theology and angelical piety. The doctrine of God as traditionally taught in seminaries seemed adequate to deal with practical Christian life, particularly with personal tragedies. If God controls everything, how can we say that he is not responsible for the evil and suffering in the world? Why do we pray, if we believe that the future is already settled and prayer can't change anything? What is the character of the God we worship? Does he govern his creation through coercive power or through the self-denying love we see in Jesus? These questions and others led to the publication in 1994 of *The Openness of God*, in which several scholars proposed modifying some aspects of the traditional view...
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of God in order to make it more biblical and more relevant to Christian experience. Since that time, numerous books have been published by scholars on both sides of the debate. Open theists have argued that we should not understand God as a timeless, distant, impassive deity who decrees everything that happens, but as a dynamic, trinitarian community of love who desires to form real give-and-take relationships with human beings. To achieve this aim, God has chosen to create a world that allows human beings significant creaturely freedom—a world whose future is partly open even for God.

Open theism has come under intense fire from Calvinists, for at least three reasons. First, open theists are currently the most visible evangelical advocates of Arminianism, and therefore they represent the greatest challenge to evangelical Calvinism. Second, the primary theological strategy of Reformed theologians is to pack everything they can into the doctrine of God. The sovereignty of God is the theological starting point, and they have made God's exhaustive controlling sovereignty the basis for everything else in their system. They believe that the doctrine of God, when properly understood, logically leads to Calvinism. Arminians, in their view, are logically incoherent because they accept the traditional understanding of God but fail to recognize its logical implications. When open theists critique the traditional doctrine of God, therefore, they are attacking the foundations of the Calvinist system.

Third, open theists have brought to the foreground the question of what theological systems imply about the character of God. They have pointed out that the all-controlling God of Calvinism cannot be said to respond to human beings or answer prayer. God always initiates, and prayer serves only to bring human beings into alignment with God's eternal will. It also makes no sense to say that the Calvinist God grieves at the sin and suffering of human beings, since he causes everything that happens to them. This picture of God is problematic for evangelical believers, who assume that God is quite different.

Some non-Calvinists have also reacted against open theism, although the reaction has been less vehement and has developed more slowly. Because open theism developed out of Arminianism, the contested issues tend to be more narrowly focused. Also, since free will theists pack less into the doctrine of God, their disagreements with open theists are usually less foundational. The greater part of open theism is congenial to other varieties of free will theism, since it focuses on God's relationality and responsiveness.

The 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Colorado Springs focused on drawing the boundaries of evangelicalism, with a particular view toward deciding whether open theism was inside or outside those boundaries. The membership passed a resolution affirming God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge.
Central Issues in the Debate

Open theists have argued that the early development of Christian theology was influenced by Greek philosophy, resulting in a doctrine of God that was not biblical. This influence affects the doctrine of God in at least four areas. Space is limited to explore these areas in detail, but I will outline the main points. For her discussion from different perspectives, see the books listed in the footnotes to this article.

**God and time.** Traditional theology presents God as timeless, standing outside of time and seeing all time in a single, timeless instant. This model creates a problem: how can a God who cannot experience time act in human history, as the he repeatedly claims? Evangelicals have come to a variety of conclusions on this issue. Open theists argue that God experiences successive time as we do; he remembers the past and anticipates the future. They usually affirm that God is also transcendent with respect to time, but that tends to be less well defined.

**God and change.** Traditional theology describes God as immutable, a quality that was interpreted by the church fathers as static perfection. Since God is perfect, any change in God would be change for the worse. When extended to the emotional realm, the idea of immutability means that God must be impassible—that is, he cannot feel the emotions as we do. Since emotions change, feeling emotion would make God changeable and therefore imperfect. To maintain this perfection, God must be unconditioned (unaffected by creation). God acts upon creation, but God himself remains the Uncaused Cause and the Unmoved Mover.

The problems with this view are obvious. How can such a God actually respond to human beings or form relationships? How can such a God be said to love? Many theologians have been questioning the traditional understanding of God’s mutability, although Reformed theologians have been the most resistant. On this point, open theists agree with other free will theists. God’s character and purposes do change, but he alters his specific actions in response to the actions of human beings. For example, Jeremiah 18:1-11 describes how God will change his plans of judgment or meeting if the people concerned change in their attitudes and actions. So God’s actions are partly dependent upon what we do—and on what we pray.

**God’s sovereignty.** This is the issue that has traditionally divided Calvinists and Arminians. Does God have to control everything that happens in order to be sovereign? Calvinists argue that he does. Any diminishing of God’s direct control...
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diminishes God's sovereignty. Like other Arminians, open theists agree that God is sovereign, but they believe that he has chosen to exercise his sovereignty differently. He has chosen to grant human beings free will and allow them to make significant choices. Although God has established the boundaries of his ultimate purposes for creation, he allows human beings to make meaningful decisions within those boundaries—including the choice of whether or not to accept his gift of salvation.

**God's foreknowledge.** This is the most controversial aspect of open theism and is where open theists divide from classical Arminians. Calvinists contend that God knows the future in complete detail because he has predetermined it. Classical Arminians believe that God simply knows all that will happen in the future, but that foreknowledge does not determine those events. Open theists respond that, if God knows the future in complete detail, then the future is settled and cannot be changed even by God's knowledge of future events does not cause these events, but it renders them certain, because God's knowledge must be infallible. Thus, as the events occur, people do not have the freedom to do otherwise than God has foreseen from eternity. Since the future is fixed, prayer can never change anything except the attitude of the person praying.

According to open theists, God knows the past and present in exhaustive detail. He knows everything about the future that he has decided to do, so he can fulfill prophecy and keep his promises. He also knows all the necessary consequences that will result from previous choices. But his knowledge of future human choice is probable, not definite. Because he knows people better than they know themselves, he can predict their actions with a high degree of accuracy, but he does not know the actions with certainty. This view is known as presentism.

Opponents charge that open theists are limiting God's omniscience. Open theists deny this. They argue that we should understand God's omniscience just as we understand God's omnipotence. Classical theists have noted that if we simply say that God can do anything, this gives rise to logical absurdities, such as the question whether God can make a square circle or a rock that is too heavy for him to lift. Instead, we should say that God can do anything that is logically possible to do. Similarly, open theists say that God knows all that it is possible to know—but that the future decisions of free creatures are not logically knowable. In other words, God knows the future perfectly—but he knows some of it as certainties and some of it as possibilities. The future is thus partly fixed and partly open.
Open Theism in Context

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<tr>
<th>Immutability</th>
<th>Open Theism</th>
<th>Classical Calvinism</th>
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<tr>
<td>God is the creator of the world. God is both immanent and transcendent.</td>
<td>God does not create the world, which is eternal. God is immanent only, like the soul of the world.</td>
<td>God is constant in his character and purposes, but he changes his actions toward human beings as needed.</td>
<td>God is in control but allows humans libertarian freedom (the freedom to choose otherwise).</td>
<td>Exhaustive definite foreknowledge</td>
<td>Presentism</td>
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| God does not change in any respect. | God evolves along with the world. | God controls everything. | God doesn't control anything. | Past, present, and future in complete detail (because he has predetermined it) | Past, present, and future in complete detail (because he simply knows it) | Past and present in complete detail. Of the future he knows what he has decided that he will do (e.g., prophecy) and the necessary consequences of previous choices. He knows the future free decisions of others as probabilities, not as certainties. |?

| The past and the present. Nothing of the future; God hopes to draw the world toward a more ideal state but cannot guarantee that this will happen. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Classical Open Theism | Classical Arminianism | Open theism | Process thought |
| Augustine | David Hunt | Clark Pinnock | A. N. Whitehead |
| John Calvin | | John Sanders | C. Hartshorne |
| B. Ware | | Greg Boyd | John Cobb |
| T. Schreiner | | | |
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Charting Open Theism

One of the liveliest topics in the debate over open theism concerns how to classify open theism. Can it be considered evangelical? Can it be considered orthodox at all? Is it just a watered-down version of process thought? The accompanying chart shows how open theism compares with Calvinism, classical Arminianism, and process thought in some of the areas I have just discussed. How one locates open theism depends upon what question one is asking.

On the most fundamental question, the God-world relationship, open theism aligns itself with Calvinism and classical Arminianism, all of which affirm that God created the world out of nothing and is both transcendent and immanent with respect to creation. In process thought, God did not create the world, which is eternal. God is immanent rather than transcendent with respect to the world and participates in the world’s process of development.12

Views of God’s immutability form a spectrum. Most Calvinists reject change in God. Since God determines everything, God has no need to change. At the other extreme, process thought pictures a God who evolves along with the world toward more ideal states of being. Between these views, open theism agrees with Arminianism that God’s character and purposes do not change, but he changes his actions in response to the behavior of human beings.

Views of God’s sovereignty are similar. Again open theism aligns itself with classical Arminianism as opposed to Calvinism, believing that God allows human will rather than causing all things. But all of these views differ from process thought which holds that God is not really sovereign at all. Because he is evolving along with the world, God cannot exercise control over the world’s development. God desires to draw the world toward greater perfection, but he cannot guarantee that this will actually happen.

On the question of God’s knowledge, Calvinism joins with classical Arminianism in affirming God’s exhaustive knowledge of past, present, and future. Open theism asserts that God knows past, present, and a good deal of the future. Process thought affirms God’s knowledge of past and present but denies God’s definite knowledge of the future.

On these four issues, open theism has more in common with classical Arminianism—and even with Calvinism—than it has in common with process thought. Beyond that, where one draws the line depends upon whether one thinks the issue of God’s knowledge is more foundational than the issues of immutability and sovereignty. Is open theism simply another variety of Arminianism, to be evaluated as such, or classical Arminianism in basic agreement with Calvinism, leaving open theism beyond the bounds of orthodoxy? Where is the great divide?
Having read and listened to several Calvinist polemics against open theism, I observed that Calvinist scholars have great difficulty attacking open theism without attacking Arminianism as well. This places them in some rhetorical difficulty, for they want to enlist Arminians in the effort to defeat open theism, but they cannot resist taking shots at their potential allies. For example, Paul Helm believes “what is at the heart of the contrast between open theism and classical theism is . . . profoundly different appreciation of the plight of humankind and the saving grace of .” Open theism has “a shallow view of the need of humans and the power of God.”

Helm acknowledges that “[this] same point applies also to those who espouse Arminianism or middle knowledge.” His objection boils down to the fact that open theists, like other non-Calvinists, reject irresistible grace. With this rhetorical move, Helm has redefined “classical theism” to exclude all views except Calvinism. Similarly, Bruce Ware admits that his criticisms of open theism also apply to Arminianism. Although he discusses open theism only briefly in No Place for Sovereignty, R. K. M. Wright regards it as a logical development in free will theism’s inevitable drift toward liberalism: “[The] assumption of human autonomy creates a continual pressure toward finite godism,” which he identifies as idolatry.

The perspective of these scholars reinforces my own sense that the great divide indeed between Calvinism and all varieties of free will theism, open theism included. Issues illustrated in the accompanying chart seem to bear this out. One’s view of God’s foreknowledge is dependent upon one’s view of the kind of world God chose to create and the kind of relationship God chose to establish with that world. For example, if an immutable God has created a world in which he controls everything that happens, he must know the future in exhaustive detail. If God is evolving along with a co-eternal world, he cannot know anything about the future with certainty. If God created a world of genuine give-and-take relationships with free human beings, then future may not be completely predictable.

Although its model of divine foreknowledge is what makes open theism distinctive, this is a secondary point compared with the issues on which open theists and Arminians agree. For that reason, I would classify open theism as a version of Arminianism. Any limitations on God’s foreknowledge were freely chosen by God when he decided what kind of world he would create. Different varieties of Arminianism operate with different theological models in other areas, as well. For example, Arminians subscribe to various theories of the atonement. They also disagree about whether election means God’s choice of a people in Christ or God’s choice of individuals for salvation on the basis of his foreknowledge of their response to the gospel. Some who are otherwise Arminian believe in eternal security. Disagreement
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on the nature or extent of God's foreknowledge need not exclude open theism from the Arminian tradition.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Before making some suggestions on how to proceed, I would like to address some misconceptions. First, open theism does not deny God's sovereignty. Like the early church fathers, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, the Anabaptist tradition, the Arminian/Wesleyan tradition, and all other non-Calvin traditions, open theism asserts that God remains in control while allowing his creatures to make free decisions within the boundaries of his set purposes for creation. Second, open theism does not say that God does not know the future. As I have explained earlier, open theists affirm that God has extensive knowledge of the future. They reject exhaustive definite foreknowledge, the idea that God knows every detail of the future already settled. Third, open theism does not affect issues of salvation. Where significant differences exist between Calvinist and Arminian views of salvation, open theists are in agreement with classical Arminians on these issues.

Fourth, open theists do not say that the outcome of God's plan for creation is in doubt. They sometimes use the analogy of a chess master playing a novice. The master does not need to know in advance what moves the novice will make. The master has such an extensive knowledge of possible moves and countermoves, as well as so much wisdom from experience, that he or she can handle any moves the novice makes and still win the game. God is the "infinitely intelligent chess player" who can anticipate any possible move and plan to counter it. Furthermore, unlike the chess master, God retains the ability to intervene coercively if necessary in order to ensure that his goals are achieved.

Finally, open theism does not violate inerrancy. Those who make this charge are confusing the authority of Scripture with the interpretation of Scripture. The differences between open theism and traditional theism arise from different interpretations of a Bible that all sides hold in equally high regard. In fact, open theism depends upon inerrancy, in that it affirms that the language of Scripture must be taken with utmost seriousness because it is divinely inspired. Most expositions of the doctrine of inerrancy have assumed that we should follow the plain sense of Scripture whenever possible, as open theists are attempting to do. The debates that open theists have with their critics over the interpretation of particular passages of Scripture would never take place in a liberal setting. But open theists, because of their commitment to Scripture, are obligated to consider every biblically based critique carefully and respond to it thoughtfully.
So where do we go from here? I would suggest that we should not be afraid of asking questions, because asking questions is how we discover truth. Questioning additional doctrinal formulations in light of Scripture is an appropriate task for anyone who affirms the authority of Scripture. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to guide God’s people into truth (John 16:13-15). The Anabaptist tradition, in which I cate myself, has always been convinced that doctrinal issues are best worked out within the body of believers functioning as a hermeneutical community. A community of believers who read Scripture in submission to Christ and to one another can be confident that the Holy Spirit will lead them to discern the mind of Christ.

In order to do this, however, we must keep talking to one another. I am deeply concerned about the efforts of some evangelicals to silence the discussion of open theism and disfellowship its proponents. Ironically, some of those attempting to do this are Calvinists who say they believe in God’s exhaustive sovereignty. The reasons they give for their actions are the need to oppose false doctrine and prevent people from being led astray. Surely, in the Calvinist universe, people can never be led astray unless God wants them to be led astray. After all, God’s will is never frustrated. Whether we are Calvinists or non-Calvinists, we can surely affirm that God in his providence can cope with open theism.

We must also be willing to give one another time to reflect on these issues. Most Calvinists will probably reject open theism, for the reasons mentioned earlier. However, non-Calvinist evangelicals need time to interact with open theism and evaluate it from within their own free will traditions. Open theism itself is still developing; constructive interaction should help all of us refine our theological models and make them more biblical. I would like to hope that such interaction could be conducted in a spirit of mutual love and concern for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Open theists are asking important questions out of a desire to honor God and be faithful to Scripture. Whether we come to agree with them or not, their proposal deserves serious study and prayerful reflection, and they deserve the respect due to all members of the body of Christ. As we seek the mind of Christ on this matter, I hope that we can practice the adage adopted by the Brethren and other groups influenced by Pietism: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

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4 Clark Pinnock believes that Calvinists tolerate classical Arminians because they believe Arminians are simply confused. According to Pinnock, Calvinists perceive open theism as a greater threat because it is more logically coherent than classical Arminianism. *Most Moved Mover*, 12, 14.

5 For example, simple foreknowledge proponent David Hunt observes: “So while I disagree with Boyd on whether God changes his mind and on the best way to interpret Scripture, I can’t get too exercised over our differences. No one’s salvation hangs on this dispute.” Beilby and Eddy, 54. However, Robert E. Picirilli argues that open theism’s rejection of God’s exhaustive definite foreknowledge is significant enough that it cannot be considered a variety of Arminianism. “An Arminian Response to John Sanders’s *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001): 491.

Openness of God, 59-60.

For an example of a Reformed theologian who modifies God's immutability and possibility, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 308.


See Erickson, 303.

See Boyd, 15-17.


Beilby and Eddy, 64.

Ware, 42.

Wright, 229, 226.

Boyd, 127.