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THE OPENNESS OF GOD: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Stephen J. Wellum

There is one Form of Godhead, which is also in the Word; and one God the Father, existing in himself as he transcends all things, and manifest in the Son as he pervades all things, and in the Spirit as in him he acts in all things through the Word. Thus we confess God to be One Godhead in Trinity which is much more godly than the heretics' conception of Godhead with its many forms and its many parts.

ATHANASIUS, CONTRA ARIANOS, 3:15

Over the last decade, careful readers of *Christianity Today* will have detected a major paradigm shift occurring within evangelical theology which is now leading to its potential breaking point. First it was a megashift in our *language* about God, sin, and salvation, that is, a shift away from the language of divine holiness, wrath, and justice to that of relationships, self-fulfillment, and love.¹ Now, in recent days, it is a megashift, not only in how we talk of God, but in the very *doctrine* of God itself, especially in the crucial formulations of divine sovereignty, omniscience, and providence.² At the heart of this shift is the view of "open" or "freewill theism," promoted by a growing number of evangelicals such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Richard Rice, William Hasker, David Basinger, Robert Brow, and Gregory Boyd, which proposes to be a "new" understanding of God for our generation, a middle position between classical theism and process thought.³ As the proponents of this view tell us, no longer should we view God as the sovereign Lord who for his own glory works out all things according to the counsel of his will. Rather, we should view God as the self-limiting, fellow sufferer, and loving parent who relates to his creatures in such a way that he comes to know events as they take place since he does not know the future in exhaustive detail before it happens.

Without doubt, this recent debate within evangelical theology is a symptom of an incredible division within

evangelicalism-at-large. It is important to stress that this debate between open and especially classical theism is not merely the age-old debate between Calvinism and Arminianism over perennial issues of divine sovereignty, foreknowledge, and providence, as some would have us believe.⁴ Rather it is a debate that goes to the very heart and soul of historic Christian theology. Theology, as J. I. Packer reminds us, is a "seamless robe, a circle within which everything links up with everything else through its common grounding in God."⁵ In other words, theological doctrines are much more organically related and intertwined than sometimes people realize. That is why reformulation in one area of doctrine, especially in our view of theology proper, will inevitably affect our *whole* theology. Clark Pinnock and open theism advocates realize the importance of this very point. Pinnock rightly points out that "no doctrine is more central than the nature of God. It deeply affects our understanding of the incarnation, grace, creation, election, sovereignty, and salvation."⁶ That is why, in my view, this recent shift within evangelicalism literally to redefine God is no minor debate. In the end, if this viewpoint is adopted, it will redefine the very structure of Christian theology in disastrous ways—ways that we are just beginning to see.⁷

In many ways, R. Albert Mohler, Jr. is right in placing evangelicalism's debate over the doctrine of God in the larger context of our contemporary culture's debate about God.⁸ In the larger culture and theological world, classical theism with its conception of a sovereign Lord—"the royal metaphor"—has been replaced with a more process or pantheistic understanding of God.⁹ Evangelicalism, then, in its debate over open theism, is simply reflecting the larger cultural debates. This, I think, is important to remember, especially as we come to evaluate this "new" proposal. We must constantly be vigilant to follow the command of Scripture to "not be conformed to this world, but be trans-

formed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2). With that said, let us turn to the view of open theism, first in terms of description and exposition, and then in terms of evaluation and critique.

OPEN THEISM: WHAT IS IT?

Two Key Components

As already stated open theism attempts to chart a middle course between classical or traditional theism and some version of a finite or process God.¹⁰ There are two main components of the proposal, which take us to the heart of the view.

First, there is a very strong emphasis on divine love and the relationality of God as the supreme characteristic of God. Richard Rice states it this way:

From a Christian perspective, love is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God. According to 1 John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." The statement *God is love* is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality. . . . Love is not something God happens to do, it is the one divine activity that most fully and vividly discloses God's inner reality. Love, therefore, is the very essence of the divine nature. Love is what it means to be God.¹¹

Given this emphasis on God's love and relationality, open theists contend that we should view God's relation to the world in more dynamic ways, that is, in a give-and-take relationship. They insist that classical theism has left us with a static, non-relational deity who "never experiences novelty, adventure, spontaneity, or creativity,"¹² an "aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of his being, as an all-deter-

mining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks."¹³ But, as open theists contend, this is not the relational and loving God of Scripture. In Scripture, we see a God who not only influences us, but one that we influence as well; indeed a God who responds to our responses, a God who takes risks. Thus, in contrast with classical theism, open theism does not believe that God controls all things. Instead God, like us, learns and grows in his knowledge and experience as history unfolds.

A second key component of open theism is their embrace of libertarian human freedom. In the current philosophical literature there are two basic views of human freedom which are primarily discussed and adopted—an indeterministic notion referred to in various ways such as incompatibilism or libertarian freewill, and a deterministic notion referred to as compatibilism or soft determinism. The view of incompatibilism maintains that a person's act is free if it is not causally determined. For incompatibilists this does not mean that our actions are random or arbitrary. Reasons and causes play upon the will as one chooses, but none of them is *sufficient* to incline the will decisively in one direction or another. Thus, a person who acts freely could always have chosen otherwise than he did.¹⁴ In contrast to libertarianism is the view of compatibilism. This position maintains that human actions are causally determined, yet free as long as the agent is not forced to act contrary to his desires.¹⁵

It cannot be emphasized enough that open theism's embrace of libertarian freewill is not a minor point but rather it is central to its very proposal. In fact, open theists, in my view, are quite consistent (i.e., logically, not biblically) in noting two major entailments that result from their acceptance of libertarian free will: a reduced view of divine sovereignty and a redefined view of divine omniscience.

Because God has chosen to create free human creatures, he has voluntarily chosen to limit himself in order to invite human beings to have dominion over the world as fellow-partners with him. However, since God has delegated power to his creatures, he has chosen to make himself vulnerable—i.e., a risk-taker. The entailment of this for divine sovereignty is that God *cannot* guarantee that nothing can go contrary to his will, but rather that "God is able to deal with any circumstances that may arise"¹⁶—not unless he intervenes in such a way as to take away our freedom. Open theists believe that God has the capacity to intervene in this way to "keep things on track." However, they deny that God could consistently and pervasively exercise his power to intervene in this manner given his commitment to create and uphold libertarian freewill.¹⁷ So, in the end, God must respond and adapt to surprises and to the unexpected. Clark Pinnock states it this way: "God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B."¹⁸

In addition, given libertarian freewill, open theists maintain that God is omniscient (i.e., knowing all that can be known), but his knowledge does not include the future free actions of human beings since it is not logically possible to know those actions before they are chosen.¹⁹ For open theists, God's knowledge includes all things past and present as well as the range of future possibilities, but even God cannot know what will actually happen in the future until it happens.²⁰ Hence, to a large extent, reality is "open" rather than closed. As Pinnock reminds us,

Genuine novelty can appear in history which cannot be predicted even by God. If the creature has been given the ability to decide how some things will turn out, then it cannot be known infallibly ahead of time how they will turn out. . . . I stand against a classical theism which has tried to argue that

God can control and foresee all things in a world where humans are free.²¹

Even in this brief description of open theism, it should be quite obvious that open theism is a major departure from historic Christianity's understanding of God. With its denial of God's ability to know future free human choices; its presentation of an ad hoc deity viewed either as the "master chess player" or "ultimate psychoanalyst" working out his intentions for the world in response to our actions;²² its over-emphasis on divine love at the expense of God's holiness, majesty, and glory; open theism, if adopted, presents a serious challenge to Christian theology. But what are the arguments given for such a radical view? And especially what are the Scriptural arguments? Let us now briefly turn to four main arguments for the view under the following categories: biblical, philosophical, historical, and practical.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE VIEW

First, how does open theism attempt to justify its position biblically? Open theists acknowledge that there are many Scriptural texts that present God as the sovereign and all-knowing God of history. Classical theism is correct on this point. However, open theists also insist that classical theism has too often de-literalized²³ or anthropomorphized other biblical texts that present God as responsive to what happens in the world, particularly the texts which speak of God "changing" his mind or "repenting" of his actions. Thus, for example, God changes his mind in response to the intercession of Moses and changed his intention to destroy the nation (Exodus 32:12-14); God changed his mind toward Ninevah when they repented under the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3:10); and God tested Abraham to find out whether he would choose him above all else (Genesis 22).²⁴ If we take these texts seriously, open theists maintain, then

we must conclude that God's will "is not an irresistible, all-determining force,"²⁵ that the future is not literally settled, that God really does change his mind or "experiences regret or unexpected disappointment"²⁶ as he interacts and relates with his creatures in the warp and woof of history. Thus, in the end, the biblical argument of open theism is that their proposal is better able to handle the diversity of biblical teaching—the sovereignty and majesty texts, along with the texts that speak of God's vulnerability, suffering, and change of mind in response to human choices and decisions.

To be sure, there are many problems with open theism's handling of biblical texts, more of which I will discuss below. But there is an important question that must be asked at this point. How does open theism make sense of predictive prophecy in Scripture? One of the great declarations of Scripture is that the Lord, unlike the idols of humanity, is the one who knows the end from the beginning, who brings about what he plans, and declares the future with infallible accuracy (e.g. Isaiah 44-48). But this raises an important question. If God is able to declare the end from the beginning, then how is it possible to reject divine foreknowledge of future free human actions? How can God infallibly predict the future if the future is really open?

Open theism has not ignored this problem. Their response has been to distinguish three different kinds of prophecy—all of which do not entail divine foreknowledge. What, then, are these three different kinds of prophecy? First, there is a kind of conditional prophecy which does not require a detailed foreknowledge of what will actually happen since the purpose of it is to call God's people back to covenant faithfulness and repentance.²⁷ In fact, conditional prophecy assumes that "what is foretold may *not* happen."²⁸ Second, many prophecies in Scripture are "pre-

dictions based on foresight drawn from existing trends and tendencies"²⁹ which do not require God to have foreknowledge of future contingents in order to give us predictions. An example of such a prophecy is God's prediction to Moses about the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. Richard Rice suggests that "the ruler's character may have been so rigid that it was entirely predictable. God understood him well enough to know exactly what his reaction to certain situations would be."³⁰ Third, many prophecies include things that are foreknown because it is God's purpose or intention to bring them about irrespective of human decision. After all, God is God, and if he intends to accomplish a certain task, he does not have to foresee it before he can know about it; he can simply declare it so, and it will be accomplished. Thus, as Richard Rice explains, "If God's will is the only condition required for something to happen, if human cooperation is not involved, then God can unilaterally guarantee its fulfillment, and he can announce it ahead of time. . . . God can predict his own actions."³¹ Most of the events of redemptive history—the prediction of the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Second Coming—are all placed in this last category.³²

A second set of arguments for open theism relates to a number of philosophical concerns, especially the debate over the nature of human freedom, divine omniscience, and the problem of evil. The issue of theodicy is of particular concern for open theists. Most, if not all, adopt the strategy of the free will defense in attempting to answer the problem. However, since the free will defense requires a notion of libertarian freedom, open theists believe that their solution to the problem of evil in turn justifies their reformulation of divine omniscience and sovereignty. Ultimately, open theists insist that their view has fewer philosophical difficulties than classical theism.³³

A third argument for open theism is an historical one. If

Scripture really teaches an open view, then why is it that the enormous testimony of church history stands opposed to it? The universal answer of open theists is that the church's theology has been significantly distorted by the influence of Greek philosophy. Instead of affirming the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, theologians, especially Augustine, Aquinas, and even the Reformers, have imbibed too much of the God of the philosophers, thus distorting the "literal," and "natural" reading of the text. However, in our day, due to developments in philosophy and science that have emphasized a more dynamic view of reality, we are now in a better position to read the biblical text as it should be read.³⁴

Fourth, the open view argues that it coheres better with the practical dimensions of the Christian life. Thus, for example, with respect to petitionary prayer only the open view can make sense of why prayer makes any difference in the world. A classical view of prayer, so argue open theists, only affects the person doing the praying; it does not change what God is going to do since he has already determined it ahead of time. Other examples of similar argument could be multiplied such as discerning God's will for our lives, our responsibility to preach the gospel and to change the world in terms of social action.³⁵ In the end, open theism's claim is that it can make better sense of our everyday Christian experience and relationship with the Lord than classical thought.

OPEN THEISM: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

What should we think of open theism? Given the serious nature of the view and the challenge set before us, it is unfortunate that space does not allow me to give a point-by-point evaluation of the arguments of open theists.³⁶ However, in my brief response I want to give five lines of criticism that lead me to conclude that the open proposal

must be rejected as a viable proposal for evangelical theology.

First, the argument that the classical view derives from Greek thought is reductionistic and not historically accurate. No doubt, Christian theologians employed such Greek terms as immutability, impassibility, aseity, and so on. In fact, for theology to communicate effectively to its generation it must inevitably use the language of its day. Furthermore, I do not question the fact that sometimes theology has been too influenced by Greek thought, as well as other thought for that matter, in every generation including our own! However, it is quite a different story to argue that crucial points of our doctrine of God have become so infected by the "Hellenistic virus"³⁷ that the church has been led astray in our understanding of divine sovereignty, omniscience, and providence all of these years. Is it really the situation that it is only today, given our cultural emphasis on "reality as dynamic and historical" that we can now see things in the Bible that "we never saw before?"³⁸

The truth of the matter is that the Fathers, and later Reformers, often used the cultural language of their day, but transformed its content and meaning in such a way that was biblically faithful and radically different from what had been customary before. In fact, when one reads Calvin and Luther, one gets the impression that they are correcting scholasticism at many points from a misuse of Greek thought, but not in such a way that the majesty and sovereignty of God is compromised. Their reading of Scripture, along with the Fathers, was much more biblically attuned than openness advocates allow. In fact, the same is true of recent evangelical treatments on the doctrine of God, treatments that do not surrender the sovereign rule and Lordship of God over the world.³⁹ In the end, the charge that classical theism has misread the Bible due to Hellenistic influences is not sustainable.⁴⁰

Probably, one of the reasons openness advocates get away with this charge, aside from the fact that most of their readers know little about historical theology, is due to their caricature of classical theism and particularly of Augustinian-Calvinistic thought. Over and over again, as D. A. Carson points out, they erect absolute antitheses that are reductionistic at best.⁴¹ One of the ways this is done is through the use of prejudicial language that portrays an inaccurate and distorted view of classical thought. For example, they describe the God of classical theism as "unaffected," "inflexible," "disengaged," "aloof Monarch," "distant king," "sovereignty with tyranny," "puppet-master controlling the movements of a puppet," "a ventriloquist having a conversation with his dummy," and so on. In contrast, their position is presented as the only view that allows for a "real relationship with God," a God who is "truly personal," and human beings whose "lives are truly significant."⁴² Granted, if these are the only two options available to us, then open theism seems very attractive indeed. But I for one, as a Calvinist, do not even recognize my theology in their description. Why then this distortion? I am convinced that openness advocates have to distort the evidence in order to justify their massive move away from historic theology, especially with respect to their view of divine sovereignty and omniscience. But their historical arguments cannot be sustained, and in their distortion of their opponents they make their own view suspect.

And open theist advocates are quick to point out Hellenism's influence on classical thought, but they hardly seem aware of contemporary culture's influence on their own formulation, particularly that of process thought.⁴³ To be sure, we must all go back to Scripture and make our case, but it is amazing how little open theist literature wrestles with the influence of the current *Zeitgeist* on their own pre-suppositions. In fact, at one point, Pinnock argues that

unless we change our view of God to fit with a more dynamic view of reality, then belief in God will decline—a similar argument made by Friedrich Schleiermacher many years ago! One cannot help but think that Timothy George is correct when he states:

In their desire to defend “God’s reputation,” and to construct “plausible models” and “convincing conceptions” that would make it easier “to invite people to find fulfillment,” they have devised a user-friendly God who bears an uncanny resemblance to a late-twentieth-century seeker. They need not be so concerned about “God’s reputation.” They only need to let God be God.⁴⁴

Second, the biblical underpinning for the open view is highly questionable, especially in their treatment of the biblical language of divine repentance. No doubt these issues are complex. They involve a proper discussion of the complicated issue of univocal versus analogical language, the meaning of the word “literal” and the proper use of anthropomorphisms. But, when all is said and done, one cannot help but think that the Scriptures used by open theists are carefully selected, and others that do not fit their view are eliminated or re-interpreted. It is true that everyone uses some sort of hermeneutical motif in interpreting various passages regarding the doctrine of God, but we must strive to do justice to the total evidence of Scripture. In this regard, I am convinced that the “open view” has selected one set of texts—repentance texts—and made them the grid by which they interpret the sovereignty and majesty texts of Scripture.⁴⁵ But this, in the end, is reductionistic and an improper way to do theology.

D. A. Carson is correct to point out that the Bible speaks of God as transcendent *and* immanent, sovereign *and* personal.⁴⁶ On the one hand, God is transcendent, sovereign,

and absolute, so much so that nothing can thwart his will and he does whatever he pleases (Psalm 115:3; Daniel 4:34-35). His knowledge is without limits (Psalm 139:1-6; 147:5) and all things are part of his eternal will and plan (Ephesians 1:11). He is the God who is unlike us—he does not lie, nor does he change his mind (1 Samuel 15:29). He declares the end from the beginning and his purposes stand (Isaiah 46:9-10). On the other hand, God is immanent, involved, and personal. He is the one who interacts with his creatures; he is the covenant-making God. As Carson reminds us, “He [God] asks Adam where he is; he decides to test Abraham or Hezekiah; he longs for his image-bearers to intercede with him; he is sorry that he made the human race and all but wipes it out in the flood.”⁴⁷

Now in doing the theological work of putting these two strands of biblical evidence together, we must do justice to *both* strands. But it is precisely at this point that open theists reduce the sovereignty and transcendence texts to mean something they do not mean—e.g. God is not really sovereign after all; God has chosen to limit himself in ways that Scripture does not affirm; God is ignorant of the future free actions of human beings so much so that his plan is often thwarted and he is limited to an *ad hoc* rule of history. In fact, as I have already stated, open theists so reduce the options of how to reconcile this diverse biblical data into a coherent theology that they leave us either with their reductionistic synthesis or a Christian fatalism. But are these the only two options? I highly doubt it.

But what about the divine repentance texts? Has classical theism not taken these texts “literally”? Have we reduced them “merely” to anthropomorphic descriptions of God? This is the charge of open theists.⁴⁸ But the charge is quite unfounded. Open theists are certainly not the first to discover these texts; theologians have wrestled with them for years. And it must be stated that as one interprets these

texts, one must do so with care. As with any biblical text, they must fit with an overall description of God and do justice to *all* of the data. To be sure, openness advocates reject the traditional way of handling these texts. They charge us with not taking them "literally." But what does this really mean? In the past, theologians have rightly argued that biblical language is both accommodated and analogical (i.e., there are both similarities and differences when the same word is applied to the Creator and creatures). In fact, even open theists have to admit that biblical language is used in this way when it comes to speaking of God's eyes, hands, arms, and so on. But when it comes to texts which speak of God "repenting," open theists now want to interpret these texts "literally," or as God "actually is." The problem is that they are inconsistent. At some points they want to be "literal;" at other points they do not, indeed they cannot be. The way forward is the way of the past.⁴⁹ We must read all the biblical language as it really is—accommodated, analogical, trustworthy and true—language that takes seriously the Creator-creature distinction and does not relativize both strands of biblical data concerning the sovereign *and* personal God of Scripture.⁵⁰

Third, contrary to open theism, Scripture affirms that God knows and ordains the future free actions of human beings (e.g. Genesis 50:19-20; Isaiah 10:5-19, 40-48; Acts 4:27-28; Psalm 139:16; John 6:64).⁵¹ For me, the only way to do justice to this Scriptural affirmation is to embrace a biblical compatibilism. However, open theist advocates reject this alternative with very little argumentation, due to their acceptance of a libertarian view of human freedom. But the cost is indeed great. No doubt, their view is a logically consistent view, but is it a biblical one? Probably the strongest reason they give for accepting the libertarian viewpoint is the perceived advantage it has in solving the problem of evil. But is this the only viable solution? Again, I dis-

agree.⁵² In fact, one may seriously question, given the proposal of open theism, whether God, in the end, can *guarantee* that evil will ultimately be overcome. For if God is not sovereign over the human will then what assurance is there that God will ultimately triumph? The perceived benefit of open theism is not really a benefit at all.

Fourth, open theism's treatment of predictive prophecy is not adequate and if taken seriously undermines the whole plot line of Scripture that leads us to Jesus Christ and his atoning work. No doubt, the prophet's role was primarily to call the people back to the covenant and as such, many prophecies are of a conditional nature. However, does the openness proposal do justice to those *unconditional* predictions of Scripture where God declares what will certainly occur even though their occurrence happens *through the means of future human actions*? I would contend that it does not. Are there such predictions in Scripture? Yes and particularly they are found in relation to the most central event of the Bible's plot line—the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When it comes to the cross, Scripture is very clear that it was in accordance with "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23; cf. 4:23-30). It will not do to reduce this event merely to God's purposes and intentions irrespective of human actions. Yes, God declared that Jesus was going to die, but he also declared the manner of his death and the intricate details concerning all those humans who would freely be a part of his death in the precise fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture (e.g., Psalm 2, 22). No matter how open theists attempt to get around this issue, we must admit that the planning of the cross requires much more than God's general knowledge and strategies of the future. Instead, it requires nothing less than God's detailed providence—a providence that entails a sovereign, omniscient deity, as well as responsible human beings. D. A. Carson states it well when he writes:

It will not do to analyze what happened as an instance where wicked agents performed an evil deed, and then God intervened to turn it into good, for in that case the cross itself becomes an afterthought in the mind of God, a mere reactive tactic. All of Scripture is against the notion. The Biblical theology of sacrifice, the passover lamb, the specifications for *yom kippur*, the priestly/sacrificial system—all together anticipate and predict, according to the New Testament authors, the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice of the ultimate Lamb of God. But neither will it do to reduce the guilt of the conspirators because God remained in charge. If there is no guilt attaching to those who were immediately responsible for sending Jesus to the cross, why should one think that there is guilt attaching to *any* action performed under the sovereignty of God? And in that case, of course, we do not need any atonement for guilt: The cross is superfluous and useless.⁵³

If the open view cannot do justice to the central event of redemptive history, it should make us pause. In fact, when we read how some open theists, such as John Sanders, try to explain the cross, we soon discover how hard it is to reconcile the openness proposal with the overall story of Scripture. It will not do to suggest that the cross was not part of the plan of God from all eternity, but instead only came about as a mutual conclusion of the Father and Son, reached in Garden of Gethsemane.⁵⁴

In order to sustain such a proposal as this, it is not only a text here or there that needs to be reinterpreted, but the whole plot line of Scripture. For Scripture presents the cross as that which was planned from all eternity (Revelation 13:8). In Jesus Christ, we are told that all of God's promises are summed up and fulfilled. There is no place in Scripture that presents these events as contingent or uncertain. Indeed the whole story of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to the new creation, from old to new

covenant, is tied to these events. God's remedy to our fallen, helpless, and hopeless state is in Jesus Christ alone and the new covenant he inaugurates and consummates. To make the cross and the central events of redemptive history as merely ad hoc responses of God in human history is to nullify them of any scriptural meaning. Ultimately, it is to deny the whole plot line of Scripture.

Fifth, open theism undermines the theological grounds for an infallible, inerrant Scripture. In theology, there are at least two ways to evaluate theological proposals. First, does the proposal do justice to *all* of Scripture? I have argued that open theism fails in this regard. But there is also a second way to evaluate a proposal by asking whether such a proposal leads us to affirm and not contradict other areas of our theology that we know to be true. For evangelicals our "transcendental" condition for the possibility of doing theology is an infallible, inerrant Scripture. Without the living God who discloses himself in this way, we would not have much to say.

But it is precisely at this point that I see a problem for open theism. For all of its affirmation of Scripture, I do not see how its view of divine sovereignty and omniscience is able to uphold what the Scripture claims for itself and what evangelicals have affirmed about Scripture, namely that Scripture is nothing less than God's Word written through the free agency of human authors, the product of God's mighty action through the Word and by the Holy Spirit whereby human authors freely wrote exactly what God intended to be written, without error. Why do I think that the proposal of open theism has a problem upholding this view of Scripture? Because given its acceptance of libertarian freewill and its understanding of divine sovereignty, how can God infallibly *guarantee* that what the human authors of Scripture freely wrote was precisely what he wanted written? The only way around this is either to affirm that God

dictated the text or that the biblical authors "just happened" to write everything that God wanted them to write, without error. But both of these options are very difficult to maintain.⁵⁵

Furthermore, if one believes that Scripture does contain predictive prophecy which involves human free actions, then can God *guarantee* that his predictions will come to pass or are they more like expert guesses and hypotheses? Is it possible that the prophet of Scripture could make a prediction under the inspiration of the Spirit, but then it turns out to be mistaken? Given open theism, this seems like a very likely possibility. But does not this very possibility render the openness proposal suspect? If it cannot sustain our view of Scripture, then it seems that the openness proposal is not a viable alternative for evangelical theology.

CONCLUSION

What are we to think of open theism? There is certainly more that can be stated than I have said in this article, but my conclusion regarding the open theist proposal is that it must be rejected. Yes, it is always necessary to go back and rethink cherished viewpoints, especially when it comes to our doctrine of God. We are all guilty of attempting to shrink God and bring him down to our level, and that is why we constantly need to go back to Scripture time and time again. However, I am convinced that the open theist proposal is not the direction to go. At too many points it is exegetically unconvincing, historically reductionistic, and theologically dangerous.

I do not doubt that this view is widely pervasive, both among academics and in the pew. In many ways it is a view that is culturally relevant, but that, in my view, is precisely the problem. Our doctrine of God, though we want it to be culturally compelling, must be, in the end, biblically faithful. Open theism fails in this regard. In many ways, I think

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. is correct when he lays out the significance of this debate for evangelical theology by stating:

The integrity of evangelicalism as a theological movement, indeed the very coherence of evangelical theology is threatened by the rise of the various new "theisms" of the evangelical revisionists. Unless these trends are reversed and evangelicals return to an unapologetic embrace of biblical theism, evangelical theology will represent nothing less than the eclipse of God at century's end.⁵⁶

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Notes

1. "Evangelical Megashift," *Christianity Today*, 34:2 (February 19, 1990), 12-17.
2. See the article "Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy?" *Christianity Today*, 39:1 (January 9, 1995), 30-34, and the editorial "God vs. God" *Christianity Today*, 44:2 (February 7, 2000), 34-35.
3. The literature on open theism is growing by the month. For the most accessible works of open theists in order of publication see the following: Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994); Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow, *Unbounded Love* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994); David Basinger, *The Case for Free Will Theism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity,

- 1998); Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2000). In addition, see the helpful overview and critique of open theism by Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2000), 71-118, 289-336.
4. In the gaping divide between open and classical theism, some have tried to reduce it merely to a Calvinist-Arminian polemic. Greg Boyd attempts to do this in his book, *God of the Possible*, 15-17, 114-18. He attempts to argue that the debate between open and classical theism is really over the nature of the future and not over the omniscience of God since open theism embraces the omniscience of God redefined as "God knowing all that is possible to know" (which does not include future free actions of human beings). However, this redefinition will not diminish the divide that exists between open and classical theism. In reality, open theism, in its denial of divine foreknowledge of future contingents, is much closer to the heresy of Socinianism. See Robert Strimple, "What Does God Know?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John Armstrong (Chicago, Illinois: Moody, 1996), 140-41. Granted, the comparison between open theism and Socinian thought is *not* correct at all points, but on the issue of divine foreknowledge it is a correct comparison. Arminianism, on the other hand, in its affirmation that God has the ability to know future free actions of human beings is in agreement with Calvinism. See Arminius's statement of this in *The Writings of James Arminius*, translated by James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1956), 3:66.
 5. J. I. Packer, "Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture," in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, edited by James M. Boice (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), 61.
 6. *Openness of God*, 8. R. C. Sproul also makes this same important point: "Because theology is systematic, every doctrine of the faith touches in some way every other doctrine. . . . Perhaps no doctrine has greater bearing on all other doctrines than the doctrine of God. How we understand the nature and character of God himself influences how we understand the nature of man, who bears God's image; the nature of Christ, who works to satisfy the Father; the nature of salvation, which is effected by God; the nature of ethics, the norms of which are based on God's character; and a myriad of other theological considerations, all drawing on our understanding of God (*Grace Unknown*, [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1997], 24-25).
 7. As the literature on open theism grows we are beginning to see the effects of this viewpoint on other areas of Christian theology—the diminishing of the doctrines of original sin, penal substitution, eternal punishment, as well as the influence of inclusivism. See Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992) and *Flame of Love* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996) and "The Conditional View" in *Four Views of Hell*, edited by William Crockett (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992), 135-66; Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*; John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992).

8. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. "The Eclipse of God at Century's End: Evangelicals Attempt Theology Without Theism" *The Southern Baptist Theological Journal*, 1:1 (1997), 6-15.
9. See Peter C. Hodgson, *God in History: Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), 11-50, where he discusses the reasons why postmodern theology has moved away from the royal metaphor to a more process understanding of God. For an excellent discussion of some of these important issues see Kevin Vanhoozer, "Effectual Call or Causal Effect? Summons, Sovereignty, and Supervenient Grace" *Tyndale Bulletin*, 49:2 (1998), 213-51.
10. For a helpful summary of process theism see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1998), 49-66.
11. Richard Rice, "Biblical Support" in *Openness of God*, 18-19.
12. *God of the Possible*, 128.
13. *Openness of God*, 103.
14. David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *Religious Studies*, 22 (1986), 416, states it this way: "For a person to be free with respect to performing an action he must have it within his power to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could actually occur; which will actually occur has not yet been determined."
15. John Feinberg, "Divine Causality and Evil: Is There Anything Which God Does Not Do?" *Christian Scholar's Review*, 16 (1987), 400, nicely summarizes this view when he states: "If the agent acts in accord with causes and reasons that serve as a sufficient condition for his doing the act, and if the causes do not force him to act contrary to his wishes, then a soft determinist would say that he acts freely." Also see Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994), 66-68.
16. *Openness of God*, 114.
17. For a further discussion of these points see Basinger, *Case for Freewill Theism*, 32-37.
18. *Openness of God*, 113.
19. On the issue of open theism's denial of divine foreknowledge of future free actions of human beings see *God of the Possible*, 120-123; *Case for Freewill Theism*, 39-55.
20. See *God of the Possible*, 15, where Boyd states that "God knows it [the future] as a realm of possibilities, not certainties."
21. Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge" in *Predestination and Free Will*, edited by David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1986), 150-51. Cf. *God of the Possible*, 120-31.
22. William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 195-96, unashamedly presents God as the "master chess player" who is able to predict what human beings will choose with relative accuracy. David Basinger, in *Case for Freewill Theism*, 40, views God as "the ultimate psychoanalyst or behaviorist"

who is able to predict "with great accuracy what individuals will freely decide to do in the future in many cases." However, it must be noted that if God can predict with great accuracy what individuals will freely decide in most cases, it is also true that it is possible that God could be mistaken in other cases!

23. This is Greg Boyd's charge. See *God of the Possible*, 53-87.
24. See *Openness*, 11-58; *God of the Possible*, 53-87; *God Who Risks*, 39-139, for a more in-depth treatment of these kind of texts from an open theist perspective.
25. *Openness*, 38.
26. *God of the Possible*, 86.
27. *God, Time, Knowledge*, 194. Cf. Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," 158.
28. *God, Time, Knowledge*, 194.
29. *God, Time, Knowledge*, 194.
30. *Openness*, 51.
31. *Openness*, 51.
32. In regard to the cross, open theists argue that God did not foresee it; instead he declared that it was going to happen, because he fully intended to bring it about. However, open theists do not all agree on the timing of this intention. Greg Boyd, for example, argues that "it was certain that Jesus would be crucified, but it was not certain from eternity that Pilate, Herod, or Caiaphas would play the roles they played in the crucifixion" (*God of the Possible*, 45). John Sanders, on the other hand, does not even view the cross as planned from the creation of the world. For him, it only comes about as late as Gethsemane, as Jesus wrestles with the will of his Father and comes to the conclusion that he must now go to the cross (see *God Who Risks*, 98-104).
33. See the discussion of these issues in William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *Openness of God*, 126-54. Also see *Case for Freewill Theism*, 83-104. The charge that classical theism flounders on theodicy is not a new charge, but it has become especially strong in our day. It is my view that much of the impetus for open theism has come from theodicy questions which have then been worked out consistently (i.e., logically, not necessarily biblically) in the area of theology. In this sense, it has not been exegesis that has driven the agenda, but apologetics, particularly the issue of theodicy.
34. John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *Openness of God*, 59-100; *God of the Possible*, 17-18; 114-18.
35. David Basinger, "Practical Implications," in *Openness of God*, 154-76; cf. *God of the Possible*, 89-112.
36. For some helpful critiques of various aspects of open theism see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2000); A. B. Caneday, "Putting God at Risk: A Critique of John Sanders's View of Providence," *Trinity Journal*,

- 20 (1999), 131-63; D. A. Carson, "God, the Bible and Spiritual Warfare: A Review Article," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 42:2 (1999), 251-69; Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1998), 67-92; John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2001), 625-773.
37. *Openness*, 8-9.
38. Clark Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, Clark Pinnock, editor. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 27. In *Openness*, 107, Pinnock incredibly states: "Modern culture can actually assist us in this task because the contemporary horizon is more congenial to dynamic thinking about God than is the Greek portrait. Today it is easier to invite people to find fulfillment in a dynamic, personal God than it would be to ask them to find it in a deity who is immutable and self-enclosed. Modern thinking has more room for a God who is personal (even tripersonal) than it does for a God as absolute substance. We ought to be grateful for those features of modern culture which make it easier to recover the biblical witness."
39. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 141-396; *God the Father Almighty*, 95-277; Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974); *No One Like Him*.
40. For more on this important subject see Gerald Bray, *The Personal God* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Paternoster, 1998), 29-54, and the series of responses to open theism by Douglas Kelly ("Afraid of Infinitude"), Timothy George ("A Transcendence-Starved Deity"), and Alister McGrath ("Whatever Happened to Luther?") in *Christianity Today*, 39:1 (January 9, 1995), 32-34.
41. Carson, "God and Spiritual Warfare," 258-62; cf. Caneday, "Putting God at Risk," 146-49.
42. All of these expressions come from *The Openness of God*.
43. This is particularly evident in *God of the Possible*, 107-11. Boyd argues that open theism is more consistent with contemporary science, especially quantum theory, which views reality as thoroughly dynamic. Boyd believes that quantum theory has shown us that reality is partly open and partly settled at every level, including God. Boyd states: "From God to the smallest quantum particle, we find a dance structured by form and exemplifying freedom. Science confirms what the Bible declares: The future is partly open as well as partly settled" (111). What is so disturbing about Boyd's treatment of the relation between science and theology is that he seems to have denied the Creator-creature distinction. Instead, he has affirmed with process thought that God should not be treated as different than the rest of reality, but its chief exemplification. God, even though he is different in some respects from reality, is similar to reality in the sense that God's own being exemplifies the interplay between being "determinate and 'necessary' in some respects—he cannot fail to be triune or perfectly loving. But he is free in

- many respects—whether or not he would choose to express his triune love by creating a world" (110-11).
44. George, "A Transcendence-Starved Deity," 34.
 45. In fact, John Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 14, essentially admits this. He states: "I am examining providence through the lens of divine risk taking and am studying aspects of providence in order to see what should be said concerning a risk-taking God. This will lead some readers to judge the book 'imbalanced.'"
 46. See Carson, "God and Spiritual Warfare," 260-62.
 47. "God and Spiritual Warfare," 261.
 48. Particularly see *God of the Possible* and *God Who Risks* for this charge.
 49. "God and Spiritual Warfare," 265-66, makes this same point. Carson states that the "reason why Christians have heretofore concluded that such language is metaphorical or analogical is because the Bible has so many other passages that describe God in non-reactive, transcendent ways."
 50. See John Piper, "Why the Glory of God is at Stake in the Foreknowledge Debate," *Modern Reformation*, 8:5 (1999), 41, for a far better job in handling the divine repentance texts in light of all of the teaching of Scripture.
 51. See D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox, 1978).
 52. For other solutions to the problem of evil that do not utilize a libertarian view of freedom see John Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994); Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*.
 53. "God and Spiritual Warfare," 263.
 54. *God Who Risks*, 100-04.
 55. See the argument by David Basinger and Randall Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defense," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 55 (1983), 177-80. Also see a more extension treatment of this subject in my article, "The Importance of the Nature of Divine Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture" *The Southern Baptist Theological Journal*, 4:2 (2000), 76-90.
 56. Mohler, "The Eclipse of God," 6.