

Why is Open Theism Growing In Acceptance?

The aim of open theism, which is to “rescue our understanding of God’s relationship with His creatures” is noble and commendable. Sadly, the end result is heresy. The thinking has been allowed to flourish through the permission of such organizations as *Christianity Today*, Baker Books, InterVarsity Press and other popular authors. It is influencing scores of students on college campuses across the nation and has caused a stir not seen in decades within the ranks of the *Evangelical Theological Society*. This gathering of evangelical minds voted several months ago to challenge the membership of openness thinkers Clark Pinnock and John Sanders. Members voted 171 to 137 to against Pinnock and 166 to 143 against Sanders. Boyd resigned from the society after stepping down from his position of professor at Bethel College in May 2002. In the 2001 annual meeting, ETS members voted 253 to 66 (with 41 abstentions) in favor of a resolution that denied open theism.¹

One must ask, though, why open theism seems to be growing in some circles. William Davis, associate professor of philosophy at Covenant College, lists several reasons for the surprising level of acceptance. First, he says the times are favorable doctrinally and culturally.² As a systematic theologian, Davis says that the last century has seen a constant slow drift from evangelical beliefs. Mainline liberal theologians spend less and less time dealing with the actual words of Scripture. However, all camps are guilty. He says reformed thinkers stress God’s transcendence so much that it is hard to imagine having a close relationship with Him. Arminians apologists simply avoid the puzzling aspect of their theology that says God knows the future yet we still act completely freely. Evangelicals as a whole do not have a great affection for doctrine. All this has worked together to prepare a ready seed bed for open theism to prosper.

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

We have “Americanized” Christianity and inserted a “rights mentality.” As in civic government, authority is simply the consent of the governed. But spiritual authority does not rest on consent. American Christians come to expect that their consent is always necessary to command their obedience. A God who rules autonomously and completely from His throne in heaven is deemed tyrannical. The increased rise in prominence of various parachurch organizations has fed this independent spirit. Organizations such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Bible Study Fellowship, Promise Keepers, Young Life, Campus Crusade for Christ and others meet real needs in the lives of believers. However, the problem lies in the extent to which they allow Christian to treat the organization as their spiritual home. Parachurch is no substitute for church. This idea that “we are our own shepherds” leads to a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the “priesthood of the believer.” This doctrine is commonly thought to mean that each believer is free to interpret Scripture as he or she sees fit. That is not the case. The Church as a whole is the sole authoritative

¹ Doug Koop, “Closing the Door on Open Theists?” in *Christianity Today*, January 21, 2003 (online version found at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/001/14.24.html).

² William Davis, “Why Open Theism is Flourishing,” in *Beyond the Bounds*, 114.

interpreter of the Bible. Open theists exploit this thinking. They claim classic theism is in actuality the “God of the Greeks.” Instead, they have presented to us the “God of the Americans.”

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

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

Perceived Weakness of Classic Theism

The church has managed to hold a position of consensus on God’s knowledge of the future until fairly recently. The advent of open theism has cast a faint shadow on that position and it has slowly moved from the ivory towers of academia to the shelves of normally shallow Christian bookstores. One of the biggest inroads into the consciousness of the “man in the pew” came in the editorial pages of *Christianity Today*.³ In the article, David Neff urged both classic theists and open theists to study the Bible before engaging in debate. That is all well and good. What is surprising is that the editorial begins by speaking very negatively of the classical view of God (ironically quoting Pascal, who had a very strong view of divine sovereignty as a Jansenist!) and a very positive estimation of the benefits of open theism. Neff wrote that “There is no more boring concept of God than that traditionally presented by *philosophical* theism.”⁴ In the same article, Neff claims that open theism takes the “biblical high ground.” Really? What are the supposed weaknesses of classic theism?

Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge

Proponents of open theism are basically committed and more consistent Arminians. They affirm Arminian teachings such as the universal love of God for all humanity and His true desire that every individual in the world be saved, God’s creation with genuine (*libertarian*) free will given to all and the necessity of the freedom of the will for genuine worship and human moral accountability. However, they depart from classic Arminianism on this point: they object to the notion that the divine omniscience includes comprehensive knowledge of the future.⁵ Open theists demand that omniscience be redefined as God’s perfect knowledge of the past and present only. All of the future is unknown (and logically unknowable) to God since it has not yet occurred. They ask, “How can God know the future when much of that future is determined by the free choices and actions of free humans acting independently and autonomously?”

However, numerous passages seem to state, in the openness hermeneutic of “straightforward understanding” that God does know all things, including the future. Just in studying the

³ “God vs. God,” *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, 34-35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine to show author equating classic theism with philosophy while equating open theism with biblical scholarship).

⁵ Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 32.

atonement of Christ, we find God working the future out according to His will before the world began. Consider the following:

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

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

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

If words have meaning, then somebody somehow was chosen in Christ to holiness and blamelessness before the world was made. But if anyone was chosen for salvation, or known as receiving salvation, before the world was made, then that means that such persons were genuine objects of God’s knowledge (as the Arminian holds) or genuine objects of God’s redemptive love (as the Reformed hold). In either case, God’s knowledge of the future is clearly seen. God knew that sin was going to occur and He created the world anyway – having already planned the salvation of sinners.⁶

It is important to understand the phrase “if words have meaning.” This is because of the irony that people (read: open theists) can hold reason in very high esteem to rationalize our understanding of God, as well as time and eternity, and yet “when it comes to reason’s legitimate job – determining what the words are actually saying – then such reason falls to the ground.”⁷

Lack of Genuine Freedom among the Creatures

Open theists claim that if the will we possess is not libertarian free will, then we are not truly free at all. This libertarian free will is defined such that a moral agent is free *only* as long as he or she

⁶ Douglas Wilson, *Knowledge, Foreknowledge and the Gospel* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1997), 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*

could choose differently from which he or she actually did choose. That is, given all the conditions that are true of the situation in which he makes the choice, the agent is free so long as he could have chosen differently within that identical situation in which he makes the choice. It is, therefore, literally impossible for the choice to be known (by God or that person).⁸ The logic is simple: How can humans be really free if God knows perfectly what they will actually do? Are we really free if God already knows what we will do, therefore insuring that we will indeed make that choice or perform that action?

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

Lack of Genuine Providential Control among the Godhead

Many Arminians suggest that God's simple foreknowledge (the classic Arminian position) puts God in the best position to regulate the future. Open theists disagree. If God simply knows the future, there is no opportunity for God to influence or respond to any free choices or actions that take place in the future. God knows and accepts what free creatures will do but he is not in a position to use such knowledge in a providentially beneficial way.⁹

What Options Exist?

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

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

Perceived Benefits of Open Theism

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

A "Real" Relationship between God and His People

This matter of genuineness in relationships is the heart of the matter in open theism. Classic theism makes a mockery of this notion, says the open theist. They say we may live under the illusion of acting freely but in fact are merely acting according to God's script.¹⁰ Open theists

⁸ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 210-211.

even claim that classic Arminian thinking, though devoid of any scent of divine determinism, renders real God/human interaction and real human freedom illusory.

Risk in the Creation Project

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

Instead of demeaning God, Greg Boyd suggests that taking responsible risks is a virtue. He asks, “Don’t we ordinarily regard a compulsion to meticulously control everything as evidencing weakness, not strength? Of course we do.”¹¹ He further exclaims that “everyone who is psychologically healthy knows it is good to risk loving another person, for example. You may, of course, get hurt, for people are free agents. But the risk-free alternative of not loving or of not trying to control another person is evidence of insecurity and weakness, if not sickness.”¹²

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

The Repentance of God

The God of open theism must face the possibility that He would have to change His plans from time to time. God is the “best learner.”¹³ (*Does He play well with others and not run with scissors?!?*). As God reacts to the swirling changes all around Him, He must realize that He has made the *wrong* decision and must step back, reevaluate and basically “punt.” Greg Boyd presents this strongly in two statements found in I Samuel 15:11 and 15:35, where we read that God regretted making Saul the king. Boyd wonders how God could truly experience regret if He knew all along, as adherents to foreknowledge assert, that Saul would turn out badly. Boyd says, “Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than what we expected or hoped for when the decision was made.”¹⁴

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

¹¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 57-58.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 124.

¹⁴ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 56.

The Reassessments of God

In addition to repenting, God also changes His assessment of His own actions and beliefs regarding some past situation. One example is when Sanders tells us that the first sin was, in God's estimate, unexpected and implausible. When man sins, God must reevaluate His previous belief regarding His creatures. Another example offered by Sanders is that God, upon learning what He did through the flood, promised never again to send another flood.¹⁵ Here, God "second-guesses" Himself. Sanders says that "God must have felt very badly about what He had done."¹⁶

The Response to Suffering

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

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

¹⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*