

CLOSING THE DOOR ON OPEN THEISM (1): OMNISCIENCE VERSUS PREDICTABILITY

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Introduction

Christians have traditionally understood God in terms of three classic perfections, each with the prefix “*omni*” or “all:” omnipresent (everywhere present), omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing). These three attributes were until recently accepted by all orthodox theists. Today, theologians can take nothing for granted. God’s most fundamental perfections are under attack. One such assault on God’s perfections calls itself “open theism,” a movement within evangelicalism which denies that God knows the future choices of His creatures. God, according to open theism, has exhaustive knowledge of the past and of the present, but He does not know with certainty what will happen in the future. The future is “open” because history is not, as has traditionally been understood, the outworking in time of what God has decreed in eternity, but a historical “project” in which *God and men decide together* what the future will be. God has determined the general parameters of history, but He has left much of the future open to allow men to exercise their free will. Because men often choose in ways which disappoint, frustrate, sadden, thwart or even surprise God, He is forced to deviate from what He previously planned to do; but God is flexible and resourceful, and despite many setbacks, we are told, He will accomplish His final goal. Open theism is a radical denial of God’s sovereignty in favour of man’s so-called “libertarian free will.”

Open theism is not on the lunatic fringe in Christendom. *Leading evangelicals* espouse this heresy. Its main proponents are Gregory Boyd, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, whose books we will critique in these articles. A. B. Caneday laments the way in which the open theism movement has spread: “Open theism quietly crossed evangelicalism’s threshold in 1986, took up residence, and now sues for squatter’s rights.”¹

¹ A. B. Caneday in John Piper, Justin Taylor and Paul Kjoss Helseth (eds.), *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books,

We shall see that open theism is a fundamental denial of the omniscience, the sovereignty and the immutability of God, and therefore a denial of the God of Scripture and the worship of a strange god who has been created in man's image. As such it must be condemned as idolatry.

Omniscience Versus Predictability

The traditional definition of omniscience is that God knows *everything*. Open theism claims to believe in God's omniscience by redefining it as God's knowledge of *everything that it is possible to know*. The argument is subtle. Since we define God's omnipotence, not as God's ability to do everything (such as to sin or to make square circles or to create rocks heavier than He can lift, etc.), but His ability to do everything which it is possible to do, so, the open theists argue, it is legitimate to redefine omniscience in a similar way. Boyd writes,

Though open theists are often accused of denying God's omniscience because they deny the classical view of foreknowledge, this criticism is unfounded. Open theists affirm God's omniscience as emphatically as anybody does. The issue is not whether God's knowledge is perfect. It is. The issue is about the reality that God perfectly knows. More specifically, what is the content of the reality of the future? Whatever it is, we all agree that God perfectly knows it ... If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It's because there is, in this view, *nothing definite there for God to know!*²

John Sanders agrees: "Omniscience may be defined as knowing all there is to know such that God's knowledge is co-extensive with reality."³

Open theist, Clark Pinnock states,

2003), p. 150.

² Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), pp. 15-16; italics Boyd's.

³ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), p. 194.

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God knows all there is to be known and the fact that some things cannot be known does not diminish the perfection of his knowledge. God knows the past, which is unalterable, the entire present, which is accessible, and a great deal about the future, so far as it can be foreseen.⁴

Paul Helm, a traditional theist, illustrates it this way:

[An omniscient being would know] what the state of any remote forest, physically inaccessible to human interference, will be tomorrow. What he will not know today is anything whatever about tomorrow which depends upon non-physically necessitated choices, particularly human decisions. Thus, if I have not yet made up my mind whether or not, by a free action, to chop down my cherry tree tomorrow, then God cannot yet know what the state of that tree will be tomorrow. He would of course otherwise know what its state tomorrow will be, since its state tomorrow (freely decided-upon interference apart) is physically necessitated by its state today.⁵

Norman Geisler, another traditional theist, albeit an Arminian, rightly complains about the dishonesty of this approach:

If they [i.e., open theists] want to speak of God as infinite, or as omniscient, but infinite in His knowledge of *only certain portions of the future*, then they are fudging the meaning of “omniscient.”⁶

Open theists are dissatisfied with the traditional Arminian understanding of foreknowledge. The Arminian argues that God knows exactly what shall happen in the future, not because He has foreordained every detail of history, but simply because He foresees what will happen. It is as if God has a video

⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), p. 101.

⁵ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), p. 45.

⁶ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), p. 195; italics mine.

recording of history in advance and, therefore, knows the plot of history. But having the video recording does not mean that He *causes* the events in the video to occur. He simply knows what man by free will will choose to do. The open theist sees the inadequacy of this. Let us say that God foresees that next week an airplane will crash killing one hundred people. He knows that this event will occur. The Arminian believes that, since God has the advantage of advance knowledge of this event, He can prevent it from happening. He has not foreordained the crash. He simply knows about it beforehand. The open theists point out that such a position is untenable. If God knows that the crash will occur, it *must* occur. Otherwise God could conceivably be mistaken about what He “knows” will happen, which is impossible if God has perfect foreknowledge.

This objection by the open theist to the traditional free will theism position is valid. If God accurately and infallibly knows the future, *He must have determined it*. Open theism, the denial that God knows the future, is the logical development of the Arminian denial that God foreordains the future.

Open theism tries to present God’s lack of omniscience as something positive. We let Sanders explain:

Given the depth and breadth of God’s knowledge of the present situation, God forecasts what he thinks will happen. In this regard God is the consummate social scientist predicting what will happen. God’s ability to predict the future in this way is far more accurate than any human forecaster’s, however, since God has exhaustive access to all past and present knowledge.⁷

Boyd agrees:

It should not be difficult to understand how God could pre-destine the crucifixion without predestining or foreknowing who, specifically, would carry it out. To put the matter crudely, God would simply have to possess a perfect version of what insurance and advertising agencies possess. He would have to know that a certain percentage of people (and perhaps

⁷ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 131.

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fallen angels, see Luke 22:3; John 13:27; I Cor. 2:8) in authoritative positions would act in certain ways under certain circumstances.⁸

God can make astute guesses based on His knowledge of someone's character. Boyd writes,

Sometimes we may understand the Lord's foreknowledge of a person's behavior simply by supposing that the person's character, combined with the Lord's perfect knowledge of all future variables, makes a person's future behavior certain.⁹

This is how Boyd explains Christ's prediction that Peter will deny Him¹⁰ and Judas will betray Him.¹¹

This predictability of character applies even to Satan:

[The open theism position] simply assumes that God knows the character of Satan well enough to predict *some of his strategy* at the end of the age when he releases his fury one final time.¹²

The problem of this position, as John Frame rightly explains, is this: "If God has really left the future completely open, he has left open the possibility of Satan's victory."¹³

Notwithstanding the astuteness of God's predicting powers, He sometimes fails in His prognostications. In reference to King Saul, Boyd writes,

God made a wise decision because it had the greatest possibility of yielding the best results. God's decision was not the only variable in this matter, however; there was also the variable of Saul's will.¹⁴

⁸ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 46.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 35-37.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 37-39.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 49; italics mine.

¹³ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), p. 8.

¹⁴ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 57.

In this case, God's skills in predicting Saul's behaviour, based on His knowledge of his present character, failed.

Richard Rice writes that God's foreknowledge is not infallible: "The fact that God foreknows or predestines something does not guarantee that it will happen."¹⁵

Pinnock even goes so far as to assert that God is "cognitively dependent" on the world. Nevertheless, Pinnock urges us to embrace this "attractive" picture of God for it offers to us and to God great advantages:

It is time to reconsider the alternative which is very attractive. Imagine the delight of genuine interactions and loving relationships and the elements of novelty and surprise that a world with an open future would offer God! Why not think of God as cognitively dependent on the world and his knowledge changing as history changes? True, there would be a degree of uncertainty as God faces a partly unsettled future because genuinely free decisions cannot be entirely predicted prior to being taken, but what a beautiful context. Instead of a future that is totally fixed and foreknown, there is one that stretches before us. It is a future that is full of opportunity and promise as we go forward with God.¹⁶

In fact, open theism mocks the truth that God exhaustively knows the future. Pinnock expresses it this way:

We do not limit God by saying that he can be surprised by what his creatures do. It would be a serious limitation if God could not experience surprise and delight. The world would be a boring place without anything unexpected ever happening.¹⁷

He adds,

¹⁵ Richard Rice in Richard Rice, John Sanders, Clark Pinnock, William Hasker and David Basinger (eds.), *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), pp. 55-56.

¹⁶ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 101.

¹⁷ Pinnock in *Openness*, p. 123.

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Total foreknowledge would jeopardize the genuineness of the divine-human relationship. What kind of dialogue is it where one party already knows what the other will say or do? I would not call this a personal relationship.¹⁸

Boyd writes,

Consider that in the classical view of foreknowledge God never experiences novelty, adventure, spontaneity or creativity. He exists in an eternally static state of unchanging facts ... What is admirable about this portrait? Why would this eternally static view of divine knowledge be greater than a view of God enjoying novelty, adventure, spontaneity, creativity and moment-by-moment personal relationships?¹⁹

God's Omnipotence Defended

The orthodox have always confessed God's omniscience and have included in their confession His infallible and exhaustive foreknowledge of all future events. Herman Bavinck is representative:

Scripture nowhere even hints that anything could be unknown to him [i.e., God]. True, the manner in which he obtains knowledge is sometimes stated in striking anthropomorphic language ... but he nevertheless knows everything. The notion that something should be unknown to him is dismissed as absurd ... God's knowledge both of himself and the universe is so decisively and clearly taught in Scripture that it has at all times been recognized within the Christian church.²⁰

Robert L. Dabney writes,

... if He [i.e., God] could not foreknow and control it [i.e., the world], He would be one of the most baffled, confused, and harassed of all beings; and His government one of perpetual

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 122.

¹⁹ Boyd, *Possible*, pp. 128-129.

²⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), p. 192.

uncertainties, failures, and partial expedients ... the impiety of early Socinians in denying God even a universal *scientia media* is to be utterly repudiated.²¹

If God simply makes astute predictions concerning likely future scenarios, writes Robert L. Reymond, “this ranks God with idols and makes him no better than a fortuneteller or a soothsayer, and his prophecies, at best, wishful thinking.”²²

William Shedd contrasts the perfect omniscience of the Creator with the vacillating knowledge of the creature:

A creature increases in knowledge in certain directions and loses knowledge in others. He acquires information and he forgets. The Creator has infinite knowledge at every instant and neither learns nor forgets.²³

Norman Geisler rejects the guessing god of open theism:

Without infallible foreknowledge he [i.e., God] is at best only making good guesses and no one can be right all the time when he is guessing most of the time. Only predictions coming from an omniscient mind will always come to pass.²⁴

Richard Muller demonstrates that Reformed orthodoxy is unanimous in defending God’s omniscience against all heretics, especially the Socinians:

Against Socinianism, therefore, the Reformed maintain the absolute omniscience of God, presenting a battery of scriptural proofs and several arguments based on Scripture—God in Scripture predicts contingent events in the future: therefore he knows them and knows them infallibly, for otherwise he could not predict them certainly. As, for example, the prediction of

²¹ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, repr. 1972), pp. 156-157.

²² Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 190.

²³ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Classic reprint edition, 1888), p. 347.

²⁴ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, p. 183.

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King Ahab's death "by an arrow shot at random," an event by all standards contingent (I Kings 22:17-18, 34); or the bondage and deliverance of Israel foretold four hundred years previously, or the divine prediction to Moses of Pharaoh's obstinacy (Gen. 25:13-14; Exod. 3:19-20).²⁵

With this every orthodox Christian must agree. A god who does not know the future is not the God of Scripture, but the figment of the imagination of vain men. God throws down the gauntlet to all pretended deities:

Produce your cause, saith the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth, and shew us what shall happen: let them show the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come. Shew the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods: yea, do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed, and behold it together. Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought: an abomination is he that chooseth you (Isa. 41:21-24).

It is striking that God Himself names the test for determining deity: foreknowledge. God possesses foreknowledge and the idols do not. God abominates any god who does not know the future and abominates anyone who worships such a god. Let the open theists beware! The whole section of Isaiah 40-48 contains many striking references to God's foreknowledge based on His counsel to bring events about. Boyd, who does not deal with Isaiah 41, makes a lame attempt (in reference to Isaiah 46:11-12) to circumvent this argument:

The Lord is not appealing to information about the future he happens to possess; instead he is appealing to *his own intentions* about the future. He foreknows that certain things are going to take place because he knows *his own purpose and intention* to bring these events about. As sovereign Lord of history, he has decided to settle *this much* about the future.²⁶

²⁵ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), p. 426.

²⁶ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 30; italics Boyd's.

Remember that the open theists' contention is that man is free and, therefore, God cannot know man's future free choices. Here Boyd wants to have it both ways. God sometimes determines to bring about events and to this extent man supposedly is no longer free. For this reason, Boyd is forced to concede that God restricted the freedom of Cyrus' parents: "This decree obviously set strict parameters around the freedom of the parents in naming these individuals."²⁷

As Bruce Ware points out in his excellent refutation of open theism, Boyd's solution simply will not work:

Consider the vast array of attending circumstances God must know about in advance for this prediction to be given. At the time Isaiah prophesies this, God must already know about the fall of Assyria, the rise and fall of Babylon, the rise of Medo-Persia, the fall of Israel, the fall of Judah, the birth and naming of Cyrus, the life and growth of this particular king, his ongoing life into adulthood, his selection as king, his willingness to consider helping the Israelites, his decision to assist in rebuilding Jerusalem, and on and on. This list hits a very few of the most significant items. Within each of these items is hidden a multitude of free will choices that would affect everything about the outcome for that particular piece of human history. It simply is incredible that God can say through Isaiah such a long time prior to Cyrus's reign, "It is I who says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd! And he will perform all my desire"²⁸

It simply will not do for the open theists to claim that God tweaks man's free will occasionally to accomplish specific purposes. The example of Cyrus (Isa. 44:28) alone shows that open theism's entire thesis collapses like a house of cards.

If God does not know what will happen in the future, there are serious consequences for the church of Jesus Christ. In that case, the central event of

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 34.

²⁸ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: the Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), p. 110.

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world history, the crucifixion of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, was neither pre-planned nor foreknown by God. First of all, the fall of man into sin was unexpected or, to use Sanders' word, "implausible."²⁹ Then God's project with Israel failed, forcing Him down a different avenue: "The whole nation of Israel failed in its covenant relationship with God according to the prophets. This required a new initiative on God's part and led to the unique role of Jesus."³⁰

According to Sanders, not even the cross was settled beforehand. He appeals to Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane:

The Son is not following a script but is living in dynamic relationship with the Father. *Together they determine* what the will of God is for this historical situation. Although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. The path of the cross comes about only through God's interaction with humans in history. *Until this moment in history other routes were, perhaps, open.*³¹

This is astounding. Christ's incarnation was determined but not the cross? Sanders admits that Revelation 13:8 is "a bit more problematic" for his position and offers the following tenuous exegesis:

Perhaps God knew the possible outcomes (what might happen if sin came about or did not come about) and planned a different course of action in each case. Each one included the incarnation but it took on a different rationale depending on which case came about. Hence it could be said that God planned from before the foundation of the world that the Son would become incarnate. But God did not know which of the rationales for the incarnation would be actualized until after sin came on the scene. In any event it is not necessary to conclude that God was caught off guard.³²

²⁹ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 46.

³⁰ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 37.

³¹ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 100; italics mine.

³² *Ibid*, p. 102.

Sanders misses the point that the only reason why the Son became incarnate was to save the church. If there had been no fall, there would have been no need for the incarnation. And if the cross was not settled until Gethsemane why did Jesus repeatedly prophesy His death and even the means whereby He would die (Matt. 16:21; 20:18-19; John 3:14; 6:51; 10:11; 12:32-33; etc.) and what are we to make of passages such as Isaiah 53 which the New Testament insist were fulfilled at Calvary? God knew exactly, because He had planned exactly, how His Son would lay down His life for His elect (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

In addition, open theism makes nonsense of the atonement. A universal atonement which does not save everyone is not a true substitutionary atonement. That is the blasphemy of Arminianism, which brings again out of hell the Pelagian error (*Canons II:R:3*). Open theism goes a step farther. The Christ of open theism *did not know for whom he was dying* or for what sins he was suffering God's wrath. The deity of open theism did not even know two thousand years ago *who would exist*, since our existence depends on myriads of free will choices of which a god who has no definite foreknowledge must be ignorant. For example, two thousand years ago the open theist god did not know whether the country in which I was born would exist, who my parents and grandparents would be, or anything else that has happened in my life up to this point. God could not know which sins I would commit either. So, when Christ hung on the cross, He could not say, "I know my sheep" (John 10:14). He could possibly say that He knew *some of His sheep*, such as Peter, John, Philip and others who were alive at that time, but He certainly could not say that He knew any believer alive today. The implications of this are monstrous. Ware spells them out:

Not only would it be impossible for God to know whether and who would come to exist in the future (so that he could not actually substitute for them in his death), in addition, God would also be clueless regarding what sin(s) would be committed in the future. Therefore there could be no actual imputation of our sin to Christ ... In fact, Christ would have had reason to wonder, as he hung on that cross, whether for any, or for how many, and for what sins, he was now giving his life. The sin paid for could only be sin in principle, and

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not sin by imputation, and the people died for was a blurry, impersonal, faceless, nameless, and numberless potential grouping.³³

Consider, too, the plight of the Old Testament saints. If God did not know the future, there was no guarantee that the Christ would even come and if He did, in fact, come, that He would accomplish salvation for sin. Ware explains the implications with devastating effect:

Since God cannot have known whether his Son would freely offer himself as the once-for-all atonement for sin, God's institution of the sacrificial system was, strictly speaking, a legal fiction ... What massive gospel harm is done in the Old Testament period when it is denied of God that he can know the future free choices and actions of moral beings! Neither those free choices and actions of Abraham, Sarah, Abraham's line over 2,000 years, nor of Christ himself, could be known; and hence, no promise of salvation or any saving activity itself could be grounded and secured.³⁴

Boyd, while he does not agree with Sanders that the cross was unplanned, agrees in his rejection of unconditional election that *the members of the church were unknown to God*:

In Romans 8:29 Paul is saying that the church as a corporate whole was in God's heart long before the church was birthed. But this doesn't imply that he knew who would and would not be in this church ahead of time. He predestined that all who choose to receive Christ would grow to be in the image of his Son. But whether particular individuals receive Christ and thus acquire this predestined image depends on their free will.³⁵

In addition, a god who cannot predict the future cannot give us an infallible Bible, especially one filled with prophecies of future events. Stephen Wellum

³³ Ware in *Beyond the Bounds*, p. 333.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

³⁵ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 48.

writes, “If God is ignorant of vast stretches of forthcoming history, then how can any of the predictive prophecies in Scripture be anything more than mere probabilities?”³⁶

Francis Turretin states it none too strongly:

The examples of prediction occur everywhere in the Scriptures. What do our adversaries reply here? That those predictions are probabilities only, as they impiously speak. But who can stand the blasphemous expression that the infallible knowledge of God is merely conjectural?³⁷

Finally, in this connection, Pinnock asks, “What kind of dialogue is it where one party already knows what the other will say or do?” He needs to consider David, who enjoyed close covenantal communion with the Most High, and yet could confess, “For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether,” and then he exclaims, as no open theist, who reduces God to the consummate social scientist, can, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (Ps. 139:4, 6). Such must be the response of every child of God: awe and wonder at His unsearchable knowledge. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom. 11:33)!

to be continued (DV)

³⁶ Stephen J. Wellum in *Beyond the Bounds*, p. 267.

³⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), p. 209.