

An Introduction to the Open Theism Controversy

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this session, which is entitled “Introduction to the Open Theism Controversy.” This session is designed to introduce the open theism controversy to those with little or no knowledge of the subject. The central question raised by open theists is “what does God know and when does he know it?” Why should Christian leaders devote attention to learning about this controversy? The answer to this question is that open theism has been embraced by some members of the influential Evangelical Theological Society¹ and is consequently beginning to find its way into mainstream evangelicalism. Thus, as a pastor, you are bound to run into it at some point and therefore it is best to familiarize yourself with the issue ahead of time.

When dealing with the openness controversy we are involved in the battle over how to define God. This battle is nothing new for the church. There have always been numerous ideas that rival the traditional understanding of God.² Such ideas include the following: *deism*, which advocates God’s lack of involvement with His creation, *pantheism*, which confuses God with His creation, *finite godism*, which ascribes limitations to God, *polytheism* or the notion of many gods, and *atheism*, which denies God’s existence.³

¹ Open theism’s leading proponents include Gregory Boyd, Clark Pinnock, and John Sanders.

² By the “traditional view of God” I am referring to the view that sees no limitations upon God’s knowledge, power, or presence. The traditional or “classical view of God” understands God as possessing omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

³ Norman Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 8-9.

What is open theism? Open theism impacts how one understands several of God's attributes.⁴ However, in this session, our focus will be limited to God's omniscience or more specifically His foreknowledge. We seek to highlight this aspect of the debate not only for the sake of time but also because it is this facet of the debate that has created the most controversy and publicity.⁵ The question that open theists are proposing is not how God knows the future⁶ but if he knows it. Open theists maintain that God does not know what a given human being will do until he acts. They refer to such human actions as human contingencies. Because God remains unaware of human contingencies, the future remains unsettled in His mind. Open theists are careful to note that God does have an exhaustive knowledge of the past and present. He also has an exhaustive knowledge of things that He will bring to pass unilaterally independent of human choices.⁷ He is also aware of all the potential choices a person may make.⁸ However, regarding specific human choices, God must adopt a "wait and see approach" before He knows what people will do.

What is the motivation behind the creation of open theism? Although openness proponents claim that their theology is driven by the text of Scripture, they are also quite candid in their admission of the philosophical problems resolved by their theology. One such philosophical dilemma is the tension between human freedom and divine foreknowledge. According to Pinnock, "Philosophically speaking, if choices are real and freedom significant,

⁴ Open theism affects one's understanding of God's omniscience, eternity, immutability, simplicity, impassibility, relatability to the world, and sovereignty.

⁵ For a work exploring how open theism affects all of God's attributes, I recommend Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*.

⁶ The church has always had differences of opinion regarding how God knows the future. The competing theories used to debate this issue include the simple foreknowledge, middle foreknowledge, and Calvinist positions. For a clear definition of each, see Millard Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 12-13.

⁷ Such unilateral activity could include the ultimate defeat of evil, the creation of the eternal state, or the existence of the tree of life in the New Jerusalem.

⁸ Boyd uses the example of a chess player to illustrate this concept. The "chess master does not foreknow exactly what moves her opponent *will* make, but she perfectly anticipates all the moves her opponent *might* make." Gregory Boyd, "The Open-Theism View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2001), 45.

future decisions cannot be exhaustively foreknown.”⁹ Thus, because openness theologians appear unwilling to live with the tension between human freedom and divine foreknowledge, an openness theology that challenges God’s foreknowledge appears to be a convenient alleviation of this tension. Openness advocates incorporate a *kenosis* concept into their theology. They maintain that because God created people as free moral agents, deciding to lay aside His knowledge of what choices people would make was one of the consequences associated with His decision to create humanity.¹⁰

Another philosophical hurdle resolved by open theism is the problem of evil. Boyd explains that the openness view helped him in counseling Christians who had experienced tragedies. Openness theology allowed him to explain to the victims that God did not foreknow their tragic circumstances. Thus, they could not blame God for knowing of a coming tragedy and doing nothing to prevent it.¹¹ In sum, open theism appears to provide a convenient escape from the problem of evil as well as from the tension between divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

In this session we will critique open theism from a classical perspective. The criticisms of openness theology that I will share did not originate with me but rather are charges that have been leveled against the openness view from various prominent classical theists such as Geisler, House,¹² Erickson,¹³ Ware,¹⁴ and Thomas.¹⁵ In order to provide an overview of the

⁹ Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1994), 123.

¹⁰ Clark Pinnock, “There is Room for Us: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 214.

¹¹ Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 106.

¹² Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*.

¹³ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*.

¹⁴ Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000).

¹⁵ Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 473-505.

subject, we will look at open theism from the following four angles: hermeneutical, biblical, historical, and practical.

HERMENEUTICS¹⁶

Both classical and open theists make certain interpretive choices when they approach the text of Scripture. Understanding how the hermeneutics of open theism differs from the hermeneutics of classical theism helps us understand both views better. Open theists employ six hermeneutical methods. *First*, open theists take Old Testament language, which has traditionally been understood figuratively or anthropomorphically, and they interpret such language literally. An anthropomorphism is of figure of speech that involves ascribing to God a human feature. Such a figure of speech is necessary in order for finite man to relate to and understand an infinite God. By interpreting literally numerous passages that have traditionally been understood anthropomorphically, open theists are able to conclude that God's foreknowledge is limited. A key battle ground text in this ongoing debate is Gen 22:12 where God tells Abraham that now He knows that Abraham fears God as Abraham was on the verge of offering Isaac. Open theists use this text to teach that God was not aware of what Abraham would do in such a situation until God actually observed Abraham's choice. Open theists contend that only this explanation satisfies the language of the text, which says, "for now I know that you fear God." Boyd rejects an anthropomorphic understanding of texts of this nature when he notes, "We simply do not see anything in narratives that describe God as thinking about the future in terms of what may or may not happen (e.g. Exod 4:1-9; 13:17; Jer 26:3; Ezek 12:2) or changing his mind (e.g. 32:10-

¹⁶ Hermeneutics refers to the science and art of biblical interpretation. It addresses the issue of how Scripture is to be interpreted.

14; Jer 18:7-10; Jonah 3:10) or expecting something to happen that does not come to pass (Jer 3:6-7; 19-20; Isa 5:1-10) that suggest they are anthropomorphisms.”¹⁷

However, classical theists have pointed out that Boyd’s hermeneutic, which treats such texts literally rather than anthropomorphically, is problematic. If it is applied consistently then the end result is a God that is far more limited than what open theists would be comfortable with.¹⁸ For example, using Boyd’s literal hermeneutic in interpreting Gen 3:9, where God says to Adam “where are you?” would limit God’s present knowledge. Furthermore, interpreting literally God’s question in Gen 3:11, “have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded that you should not eat?” would limit God’s past knowledge. Moreover, interpreting literally the phrase “God walking in the garden” (Gen 3:8) would imply that God has a body.¹⁹ In addition, interpreting literally God’s decision to go down to see what the inhabitants of Sodom were doing (Gen 18:20-21) would place restrictions on God’s past and present knowledge.²⁰ Also, interpreting literally God’s statement that he will remember his covenant with Noah when he sees the rainbow (Gen 9:13-16) would imply that God has a faulty memory.²¹

Second, open theists erect interpretive centers or controlling metaphors. An interpretive center is the establishment of one portion of Scripture as a basis for interpreting other sections of Scripture.²² In other words, one key verse or concept is used as a filter for

¹⁷ Gregory Boyd, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 240.

¹⁸ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 62-69.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Pinnock seems to suggest that God does have a body elsewhere in his writings. See Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 33-34.

²⁰ Interpreting Gen 18:20-21 literally would also limit God’s omnipresence due to the fact that He has to move from one locale to the next just to see what is going on.

²¹ Geisler and House offer a helpful suggestion in discerning when such language is to be understood literally and when it is to be understood figuratively. Because God is immaterial and infinite, any term applied to God whose meaning cannot be separated from what is material or finite (such as a rock, an arm, or an eye) must be taken non-literally or figuratively. Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 274.

²² Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 482-85.

viewing and understanding the rest of biblical data.²³ The interpretive center used by open theists in building their doctrine of God is 1 John 4:8, which says, “God is love.” Open theist Richard Rice explains the significance of this interpretive center when he says, “From a Christian perspective love is the first and the last word in the biblical portrait of God... The statement God is love is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of divine reality.”²⁴ He continues, “Consequently, when we enumerate God’s qualities, we must not only include love; to be faithful to the Bible, we must put love at the head of the list.”²⁵ He concludes, “A doctrine of God that is faithful to the Bible must show that all of God’s characteristics derive from love.”²⁶ Because open theists see the concept of divine foreknowledge as inconsistent with the concept of divine love as expressed in human freedom, they use divine love as an interpretive center for viewing biblical data related to divine foreknowledge. This hermeneutical method allows them to limit divine foreknowledge.

Classical theists find this approach objectionable. To begin with, it is debatable that love is the dominant attribute of God. While love is certainly one of His features, theologians remain divided concerning whether love is His dominant attribute. After all, the angelic beings continually surrounding the throne of God are continuously drawing attention to God’s holiness (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8) rather than His love.²⁷ Thus, God’s dominant attribute may be holiness rather than love. For that matter, using open theist logic, it could be argued that spirit is God’s dominant attribute since an identical grammatical structure is used to describe God as spirit in John 4:24 that is used to describe God as love in 1 John 4:8.²⁸ Moreover, interpretive centers

²³ Evangelical feminist's use the same hermeneutical method when they interpret New Testament gender role distinctions through the lens of Gal 3:28.

²⁴ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: 1994), 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 215.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

should not be used in constructing a doctrine of God. When building any doctrine, all texts on a given subject should be included and each text should be allowed to have its distinctive input. One group of texts should not be used for the purpose of redefining another set of texts.²⁹

Third, in building their doctrine of God, open theists give greater priority to the narrative sections of Scripture than they do to the didactic portions of Scripture. In other words, those passages that depict what God does are given greater weight in the equation than those passages that depict what God is like.³⁰ When building their doctrine of limited divine foreknowledge, open theists will gravitate toward a narrative passage like Gen 22:12 at the expense of a didactic passage like Ps 147:5, which teaches that God's understanding is without limit. Classical theists object to this approach.³¹ It is best to build an understanding of God based upon passages that have as their primary objective teaching truths about God. Narrative is not the ideal type of literature for reaching such doctrinal conclusions.³²

Fourth, in building their doctrine of God, open theists have a tendency to attach greater weight to those themes that are less recurrent in Scripture than those themes that are more frequent in Scripture.³³ Steven Roy has done extensive research in compiling the biblical texts that bear upon the question of the extent of God's omniscience and foreknowledge. Of the 4800 texts compiled, only 105 or 2% directly contend for the openness view.³⁴ Unfortunately, open theists want to build their doctrine of God upon a minor theme in the Bible while classical theists

²⁹ Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 485.

³⁰ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 73-76.

³¹ Another example of emphasizing narrative at the expense of didactic can be found through the open theist use of 1 Sam 15. Open theists emphasize the narrative portions involving God repenting or regretting that He had made Saul king (1 Sam 15:11, 35) while simultaneously marginalizing the didactic portion that emphasizes that God is not like a man that He should repent (1 Sam 15:29). See *Ibid*.

³² Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 488.

³³ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 80-82.

³⁴ Cited in Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, 100, n. 2.

suggest that the inverse should be true. Those themes that are more predominant should shed light on the less predominant themes rather than the other way around.

Fifth, in building their doctrine of God, open theists have a tendency to attach greater weight to Old Testament passages than they do to New Testament passages. Erickson's observation is that the bulk of Scripture citations that open theists employ to buttress their position comes from the pages of the Old Testament.³⁵ Classical theists consider this distribution of evidence to be problematic on account of the doctrine of progressive revelation. This doctrine maintains that concepts that are unclear in the Old Testament become increasingly clear as the reader moves out the Old Testament and into the New Testament. The doctrine of progressive revelation is especially germane to the doctrine of God. Take for example the doctrine of the trinity. While there are certain hints of a triune God in the pages of the Old Testament, a person would have a difficult time defending trinitarianism from the Old Testament alone. The doctrine of the trinity is not made clear until the New Testament. Because the doctrine of progressive revelation is especially pertinent to the doctrine of God, it is problematic that the open theist position draws from the Old Testament for its primary base of exegetical support.³⁶

Sixth, open theism has a propensity for using Scripture selectively. Open theists draw from verses like Gen 22:12 in the patriarchal narratives in order to bolster their scriptural case while simultaneously ignoring other verses from this same block of material that seemingly contradict the openness position. Such passages include Gen 18:14 ("Is anything too difficult for the Lord?") which teaches God's omnipotence and Gen 50:20 ("and as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve

³⁵ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-83. Erickson goes on to observe that it should not be surprising to find more anthropomorphic language in the Old Testament in comparison to the New Testament because the Hebrew language is a more concrete and consequently utilizes fewer adjectives. Thus, Erickson's observation serves as a further warning against taking cues primarily from the Old Testament when constructing a theology.

many people alive”) which teaches divine sovereignty. Employing such a selective method allows the interpreter the freedom to build practically any doctrine he desires. For example, it is possible to assemble various pieces from the Abraham narratives in order to argue that Abraham was a wicked man. Abraham encouraged his wife to lie to save his own life (Gen 12:11-13), he lied twice (Gen 12:18-19; 20:1-2), he rationalized to justify his lie (Gen 20:12), he committed adultery and refused to care for the woman whom he committed adultery with and the child that she bore him (Gen 16:3-6; 21:14-15), he disparaged God’s promise (Gen 17:15-17), and he tried to kill his son (Gen 22:10). The obvious problem with this ad hoc approach is that it does not represent the overall argument of the Abraham narratives, which communicates that Abraham’s faith was vacillating yet maturing.³⁷

THE BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS

Both classical and open theists have Scripture that they appeal to. First we will look at some of the key texts that open theists gravitate toward and then we will look at some of the key areas of Scripture favoring the classical view.

Passages Favoring the Open Theist Position

Open theists appeal to a variety of passages that at first glance appear to limit God’s foreknowledge. These passages can be grouped into the following five categories: God’s repentance, God’s testing of Israel, failed prophecies, God’s questions, and God’s admission that some ideas never entered His mind.³⁸ While this list is by no means exhaustive of all scriptural citations employed by open theists, it at least furnishes a fair representation of how open theists use the Bible. What I seek to show in this section is that competent commentators have chosen to read these passages in a way that is different than how open theists suggest these passages should

³⁷ Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 487-88.

³⁸ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 17-38.

be read. Thus, there is no reason to automatically rush to the conclusion that God's foreknowledge is limited on the basis of these passages.

The *first* group of passages involves God expressing repentance or remorse. For example God expresses remorse that he created humanity in Gen 6:6-7 and that He made Saul King in 1 Sam 15:11, 35.³⁹ Open theists contend that these passages teach God's limited foreknowledge because how could God feel sorrow for something if He knew in advance what was going to happen?⁴⁰ However, these two points are not necessarily connected. It is possible to know something in advance and yet still feel remorse when that event transpires. For example, we all know that one day our parents will die and yet we still experience remorse when that sad day arrives.⁴¹

The *second* group of passages involves God testing Israel (Deut 8:2; 13:3; Judg 3:4). Open theists contend that it was necessary for God to test the nation so that He could learn what they would do under certain circumstances.⁴² However, reputed commentators Keil and Delitzsch have instead opted to read these passages in a different way. They maintain that the test was actually for the purpose of Israel's humbling rather than God's learning. In other words, God was testing His people for the purpose of publicly revealing the genuine condition of their hearts. Regarding Deut 8:2, they argue:

To this end they were to remember the forty years' guidance through the wilderness (ch. 1:31; 2:7), by which God desired to humble them, and to prove the state of their heart and their obedience. Humiliation was the way to prove their attitude towards God. הָנַחַם, to *humble*, i.e., to bring them by means of distress and privations to feel their need of help and dependence upon God. הָרַחֵם, to *prove* by placing them in such

³⁹ Parunak concludes that "to suffer emotional pain" is the meaning of the verb in these passages. See H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semitic Survey of NHM," *Biblica* 56, no. 4 (1975): 519.

⁴⁰ Boyd, "The Open-Theism View," 26.

⁴¹ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 22.

⁴² Boyd, "The Open-Theism View," 32.

positions in life as would drive them to reveal what was in their heart, viz., whether they believed in the omnipotence, love, and righteousness of God, or not.⁴³

The *third* group of passages involves allegedly failed prophecies. Open theists argue that there are various predictions found throughout the Bible that were never fulfilled exactly as predicted. They claim that this lack of an exact fulfillment is evidence that God did not know the future exhaustively. One such passage is Gen 37:9-11, which is a prediction that Joseph's parents would bow down to Joseph. Open theists contend that this prophecy was not fulfilled in exact detail because Joseph's parents never end up bowing down to him.⁴⁴ A similar prediction is found in Acts 21:11 where Agabus predicts that the Jews would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles. Sanders argues that this passage was not fulfilled in specific detail because it was actually the Romans rather than the Jews that bound Paul (Acts 21:33).⁴⁵ Another supposedly failed prophecy is found in Matthew 24:2 where Christ predicts that not one stone would be left on another when the temple is destroyed. Pinnock claims that the prophecy failed to be fulfilled precisely because some stones were left upon the others when the temple was destroyed.⁴⁶ A final failed prophecy is found in Jonah 3:4 where God predicted the destruction on Nineveh and yet the prophecy failed because the Ninevehites repented.⁴⁷

However, classical theists have insisted that these passages can be read in alternative ways that do not jeopardize God's foreknowledge. Regarding Gen 37:9-11 and Acts 21:11, it is interesting to observe that the Bible never says that these prophecies were not fulfilled exactly as predicted. Scripture simply remains silent regarding how and when an exact fulfillment took place. Thus, open theists are forced to argue from silence. It should be observed that there is a vast difference between saying that the Bible does not say *how* the prophecy was fulfilled versus

⁴³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, *The Pentateuch* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 889.

⁴⁴ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998), 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, 51.

⁴⁷ John Sanders, "Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 224.

saying that the Bible says that the prophecies were *not* fulfilled.⁴⁸ Regarding Matthew 24:2, other solutions exist besides rushing to the conclusion that Christ made a false prediction.⁴⁹ For example, Christ could have been speaking hyperbolically in Matthew 24:2. He may have also been speaking of a future temple whose destruction awaits a future fulfillment. Moreover, His prophecy may pertain to the actual temple building itself which actually was taken apart stone by stone rather than the temple foundation which was not taken apart stone by stone. Regarding Jonah 3:4, it is possible to take the prediction as a conditional prophecy whose ultimate result depends upon the repentance of the Ninevehites. Such a condition is common in prophetic literature whether it is specifically stated (Jer 18:7-10) or implied.

The *fourth* group of passages involves situations where God asks a question (Num 14:11; Hos 8:5, 1 Kings 22:20). For example in Numbers 14:11, He asks, “How long will these people reject me? And how long will they not believe me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?” Boyd contends that God asked questions of this nature in order to express his uncertainty regarding the future.⁵⁰ However, it is possible to interpret these passages as God asking a question in order to elicit some type of response rather than seek to satiate a lack of knowledge on His part. For example, when God said to Adam, “Where are you?” this question was not an admission of ignorance as to spatial distance but rather was a question designed to stimulate repentance. By way of analogy, when my wife notices that I left the door open and she

⁴⁸ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 28. Thomas Edgar addresses this same argument in his dialogue with charismatic theologians who claim that it is possible for New Testament prophets to make mistakes. Edgar also notes that Luke never says that Agabus’ prophecy was not fulfilled. Moreover, Edgar observes that Paul may have been referring to the prophecy’s fulfillment in Acts 28:17. Edgar notes that Paul even used the same verb (*paradidomi*, “deliver”) in Acts 28:17 that Agabus used in Acts 21:11. See Thomas Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit: Affirming the Fullness of God’s Provision for Spiritual Living* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 81-82.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, Geisler and House point out that the standard in order to qualify as a prophet of God is perfect prophetic accuracy (Deut 18:22). Thus, an openness theology, which insists that God’s predictions were not fulfilled in exact detail, suddenly transforms God into a false prophet on the basis of His own standard. Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 258.

⁵⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 58-59.

asks, “Did you leave the door open?”, her question is not designed to satisfy a lack of information but rather is designed to elicit a response from me that involves closing the door.⁵¹

The *fifth* group of passages involves God seeing Israel’s idolatry and noting that it never entered His mind that Israel would behave in this manner. For example, Jer 7:31 says, “They have built high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.” Boyd uses this passage to argue that Israel’s idolatry took God off guard because of His inability to know what would happen in the future.⁵² However, the fact of the matter is that it had entered God’s mind that Israel would degenerate to this level of idolatry once they entered the land. This is why in the Law of Moses God repeatedly warned Israel to abstain from such behavior after entering the land (Lev 18:21; Deut 12:31; 18:9-12; 19:5; 32:5). Then what are we to make of the expression “nor did it enter my mind” in Jer 7:31? This phrase is simply an expression of rebuke rather than a declarative statement. In essence, God is saying that it is “unthinkable” that His people would behave in this manner. According to Erickson, “In fact, an unthinkable action is usually understood, not as literally impossible to think, but as something that is so outrageous or scandalous that one would not seriously consider doing it.”⁵³

Passages Favoring the Classical Theist Position

In comparison to the few passages favoring the openness position that are capable of being read in alternative ways, there are many more straightforward passages favoring the classical position that open theists have a difficult time answering. One such passage is Psalm 139, which demonstrates God’s exhaustive knowledge of the Psalmist. In verse 4, the Psalmist declares that God knows his speech even before there is a word on his tongue. Thus, God is

⁵¹ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 30-31.

⁵² Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 61-62.

⁵³ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 31-32.

aware of the human contingency of the spoken word even before the human decision to speak transpires. In verse 16 the Psalmist similarly declares that God was aware of all of his days before one of them came to be.⁵⁴

Another passage is Isaiah 41-48. Here, the contrast is made between the true God and idols. The basis of the distinction is the fact that God, unlike the idols, has the capacity to predict future events. Boyd instead opts for interpreting the passage not in terms of God's capacity to predict human contingencies but rather in terms of God's own intentions for the future.⁵⁵

However, this analysis breaks down in Isaiah 44:28-45:1 where God predicts nearly two hundred years in advance that a specific man named Cyrus would lead Israel out of the exile and back to the land. This prediction obviously involves God's awareness of a plethora of future human contingencies such as the birth of Cyrus, the decision of his parents to marry, their decision to have children, etc...

Another passage favoring the classical position is Daniel 11. In this fascinating chapter, Daniel, back in the sixth century, makes specific predictions about kings, kingdoms, and geopolitical movements that were fulfilled in minute detail mostly throughout the intertestamental period.⁵⁶ Regarding the first four verses of the chapter, Bruce Ware observes, "The number of future free choices and actions predicted—either explicitly or implicitly—from just these four verses boggles the mind!"⁵⁷ Interestingly, although Pinnock, Sanders, and Boyd all wrote responses to Ware's article in the same issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, none of them responded to his use of this particular passage.⁵⁸ Yet another passage favoring the classical view is 1 Kings 13:1-3 where a prophet predicts that a man named Josiah

⁵⁴ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, 123.

⁵⁵ Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 30.

⁵⁶ Walter Price, *In The Final Days* (Chicago: Moody, 1977).

⁵⁷ Bruce Ware, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 202.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 242.

will be born who will lead the nation out of apostasy. Thus, by God foretelling what will be done by a person yet to be born and by even naming the individual, God once again shows his exhaustive knowledge over numerous human contingencies.⁵⁹

Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75 represents a New Testament passage favoring the classical view. In this passage, Jesus predicts Peter's future denial. Open theists explain the passage in terms of Christ predicting what Peter would do on the basis of His present knowledge of his character. According to this explanation, Christ used His exhaustive present knowledge of Peter's character to make an educated guess as to what Peter would do in the future.⁶⁰ However, this explanation strains credulity. How could present knowledge of someone's character lead to a specific prediction of a threefold denial? How could Christ without an exhaustive knowledge of human contingencies have known that Peter would deny Him not fewer than or more than three times but exactly three times?⁶¹ We find a similar prediction in John 13:26 where Christ predicts that Judas would betray Him. Although an open theist might maintain that Christ again made this prediction on the basis of His present knowledge of Judas' character, this explanation is again unsatisfactory. John 6:64, 70-71 states that the divine knowledge that Judas would betray Christ was foreknown from all eternity.⁶²

HISTORY

Has classical theism or open theism been more prevalent throughout church history? The fact of the matter is that there has been a virtual unanimous voice throughout the history of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁰ Boyd, "The Open-Theism View," 20.

⁶¹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, 128.

⁶² Boyd argues that ἐξ ἀρχῆς in John 6:64 should be understood as meaning "early on" which is how the phrase is understood in Phil 4:15. See Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 37. While it is true that this phrase can have this meaning elsewhere in John's Gospel (John 6:64; 8:25; 15:27; 16:4), it is also true that the phrase can mean "from all eternity" in John's Gospel (John 1:1-2; 8:44). Thus, the meaning of the phrase must be determined by its context. The eternal meaning works best in the immediate context because John 6:65 mentions election. In other words, the reason Jesus had knowledge of who would believe on him and who would betray Him is because of God's eternal election. See Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 53.

the church advocating God's exhaustive foreknowledge.⁶³ On the other hand, there have been a few voices appearing intermittently throughout church history advocating the openness understanding of foreknowledge. However, after carefully examining these voices, Erickson, Geisler, and House conclude that they are either 1. outside the mainstream of Christianity, 2. not Christians at all, 3. heretics, 4. not theologians but rather philosophers, psychologists or scientists, 5. obscure or unnoticed theologians, or 6. individuals who appear late in church history.⁶⁴

How do open theists justify their view against this historical backdrop? They advance two arguments. *First*, they claim that an open view of divine foreknowledge is orthodox because no ecumenical creed has ever condemned it or issued an article on it.⁶⁵ However, the reason that no ecumenical creed ever issued an article of faith on divine foreknowledge is because there was no need. The issue was never vigorously challenged. The near unanimous voice of church history supports the classical view. As an example of this point, there were several statements of faith drawn up to address doctrinal controversies at the close of the twentieth century. These statements made no mention of Christ's humanity. The reason for this absence is not because the framers of those statements did not believe in that specific doctrine but rather because that particular doctrine was not being challenged at the time.⁶⁶

Second, open theists maintain that it should not be surprising to find sparse support for the openness view in church history because the church has been misreading Scripture for the last two thousand years. Because the church has approached Scripture through the lens or

⁶³ Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 87-109.

⁶⁴ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 111-31, 248; Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 64.

⁶⁵ Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 116.

⁶⁶ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 249. This creedal argument is shallow in other respects as well. Some creeds and confessions do indirectly address the openness debate by referring to God's omniscience. See Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 304-05. Furthermore, it is incorrect to argue that only what the creeds say can be used as a test for orthodoxy. Although most would include the divine authority of the Scripture as one of the essential orthodox doctrines, the creeds do not address this issue. Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 167.

preunderstanding of Greek philosophy that looks for that which is stable and reliable, it has failed to understand God's true nature by treating anthropomorphically what should be understood literally. Because the church fathers were under the spell of Greek philosophy when they constructed their theological systems, the church's doctrine of God has reflected more of a philosophical understanding rather than a biblical one.⁶⁷ Thus, open theists see themselves as leaders of a new reformation similar to the protestant reformation led by Luther and Calvin. In other words, open theists see themselves as leading the church away from its philosophical presuppositions and back to the literal word of God.

However, classical theists find dubious the idea that the church has been held hostage by Greek philosophy. The church fathers stressed biblical support for their theology rather than mere philosophical argumentation. Observing the frequency that the church fathers quoted the Bible in their writings evidences this fact. According to Geisler and Nix, the church fathers quoted the New Testament alone more than thirty-six thousand times. Their writings only omit eleven verses.⁶⁸ The fathers also expressly rejected the following Greek philosophical ideas: prebirth life of the soul, eternity of the universe, denial of the resurrection, polytheism, and reincarnation.⁶⁹ Ironically, it is actually the open theists who have incorporated vast amounts of philosophical ideas into their theology.⁷⁰ They demonstrate a kind of "chronological snobbery" in that they reject earlier philosophical notions while embracing later ones.⁷¹ Open theist Hasker admits as much when he says, "It is apparent from the historical survey that philosophy bears

⁶⁷ John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1994), 59-60; Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," 117; Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 115.

⁶⁸ Norman Geisler and William Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 431.

⁶⁹ Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 90.

⁷⁰ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 147-161. Some of open theism's philosophical components have already been demonstrated throughout this paper. Open theism's emphasis upon libertine freedom, the problem of evil, and interpretive centers all represent philosophical concepts that open theist's have incorporated into their "exegetical" process.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 253; Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 165.

part of the blame for obscuring the biblical conception of God, so it is fitting that philosophy should also have a part in the work of restoration.”⁷²

PRACTICAL RAMIFICATIONS

What are the practical ramifications of openness theology? Is its impact on daily Christian life positive or negative? I believe openness theology damages the daily walk of the believer in at least four ways. *First*, openness theology negatively impacts prayer. If open theism is correct, then believers will lose confidence in God’s ability to wisely answer prayer since He does not know the future. The irony of this point is that an improved prayer life appears to be one of the motivations behind open theism because of its emphasis on the capacity to change God’s mind through prayer. However, the other side of the coin is the chilling effect that openness theology will have on daily prayer if believers lose confidence in God’s ability to wisely answer prayer because of limitations on His foreknowledge.⁷³

Second, if open theism is correct then believers will also lose confidence in God’s guidance. One of the ways God guides us is to prepare us for what the future holds. The events taking place in our lives today prepare us for tomorrow’s ministry opportunities and trials. Yet this guidance concept is abrogated to the extent that our futures are unsettled in the mind of God. How can God bring events into my life today to prepare me for what tomorrow holds if God really does not know what tomorrow holds.⁷⁴

Third, open theism undermines Christian worship. Jesus said that we are to worship the Lord in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Worshipping the Lord in truth means worshipping God as He is and how He has revealed Himself rather than how we want Him to be. When one of

⁷² William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1994), 126.

⁷³ Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, 204-12.

⁷⁴ Perhaps an open theist would respond to the charges that openness theology undermines the believers confidence in answered prayer and divine guidance by noting that God’s exhaustive knowledge of the present as well as His omnipresence are sufficient for God to adequately answer prayer and guide believers.

God's attributes that we find more attractive is magnified and another attribute that we find less desirable is suppressed, then we are not worshipping God as He is and how He has revealed Himself. Rather, we are worshipping a god of our own making. In essence, we have created our own golden calf. This is exactly what openness theology does with its insistence on interpretive centers and controlling metaphors, which have the net effect of magnifying God's love at the expense of His foreknowledge. A warped view of God has a deleterious effect on Christian worship because it inhibits our capacity to worship in truth.

Fourth, open theism undermines our confidence in Scripture. If God's prophecies contain mistakes and are fulfilled in a less than perfect manner, then perhaps there are other mistakes or errors in Scripture. If God's prophetic word is sometimes wrong, then perhaps other items that He has spoken about in His word are erroneous as well. Thus, open theism, with its emphasis upon failed prophecies, plays a role in undermining the believer's confidence in God's written word.

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