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What is Openness Theology?

by Alan Gomes and Alan Hultberg

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HOLDING FIRM THE FAITHFUL WORD

What is OPENNESS Theology

BY DRS. ALAN GOMES AND ALAN HULTBERG

CERTAIN EVANGELICALS *have been reassessing the doctrine of God in recent decades, and as a result have produced a new theological model of increasing prominence.*

Known variously as “freewill” or “open theism,” it asserts that creaturely freewill is fundamentally valued by God, and that the future is “open” or yet to be determined, and as such is unknowable, even by God. Open theists argue that the God of classical theism is not biblical but a creation of Greek philosophy. The classical God, they say, is static, impassive, and unresponsive, whereas the open God is dynamic, emotional, and interactive. He is, open theists assert, the God of the Bible.



Open theism begins with the assertion that God's essential attribute is love. The rest of their model is inferred from this basic proposition. To love, open theists argue, is to be interactive, so a loving God is an interactive God, and thus temporal. Furthermore, to love is to value another's freewill above all else, and therefore the openness God is not coercive but persuasive and, responsive. Again, since God generally does not violate free will, he does not predetermine the future but waits to determine His actions in response to His creatures. The future is therefore open; it is unknown and unknowable to God. This basic argument is supported by open theists with biblical and philosophical evidence.

FITTING OPENNESS THEOLOGY INTO THE LARGER HISTORICAL PICTURE

We have noted that sometimes open theism is called "free will theism." However, this label is profoundly misleading, because it implies that open theists affirm "free will" while their opponents do not. Historically, both Calvinists and Arminians have affirmed "free will," even though they may disagree on its nature and implications. Furthermore, Calvinists and Arminians have been united in their belief that God foreknows the free actions of his creatures. Therefore, we reject the suggestion of some that the debate over open theism is just another round in the age-old disagreement between Calvinism and Arminianism, with open theism being but a flavor of Arminianism. Open theism is not Arminianism. Even though Arminian theology places a great premium on human freedom, God's exhaustive foreknowledge plays a pivotal and essential role. For example, Arminianism holds that God predestines people to salvation based on his foreknowledge of whether they will receive Christ when presented with the gospel.

In fact, throughout history evangelicals of all stripes have always affirmed God's exhaustive foreknowledge. Only heterodox sects have advanced anything like what one finds in open theism. This is especially true in the case of 16th and 17th century Socinianism.¹ This sect denied not only God's foreknowledge but also most of the doctrines held by modern evangelicals, including the substitutionary atonement, the deity of Christ and the Trinity, and justification by faith alone.

Thus, while the main tenets of open theism are not new, the attempt to place this teaching within the pale of evangelicalism is.

THE FLAWED METHODOLOGY OF THE OPEN THEISM

Why is it that evangelicals across the theological spectrum have always held to God's exhaustive foreknowledge? And why have open theists rejected this historic evangelical teaching?

Calvinists and Arminians have always affirmed God's

foreknowledge because the Bible clearly teaches it. Whatever their differences in interpretation, they both take the Bible as their starting point and then develop their theological system from there. In contrast, the open theists begin with certain flawed assumptions about the nature of freedom and God's love, and then spin their system out of these. A rationalizing tendency permeates the system, in which they decide ahead of time what Scripture can and cannot teach based on what seems "reasonable" to them. Then, having more or less reached their conclusions ahead of time, Scripture is interpreted to fit.

As in Socinianism, the rationalizing method of the open theists affects other doctrines as well. From the assumption that "God is love incorporates all there is to say about God"² flows a radical retooling of the doctrines of the atonement and eternal punishment, as some open theists have already acknowledged. As Richard Rice states, the atonement is no longer "something God inflicts on Jesus (instead of on other human beings)"³ but instead is a revelation of God's suffering love to us. Again, from their defective notion of God's love follows a rejection of the biblical doctrine of eternal, conscious punishment, typically in favor of annihilationism. No doubt open theists find it difficult to reconcile the biblical teaching that God is love with other biblical doctrines. But this does not warrant their rejection of those doctrines for that reason.

Of course, open theists object that their position is scriptural and offer discussions of biblical texts in support. Nevertheless, they make their strongest (though still flawed) case, when they argue its broad outlines based on their controlling assumptions. The position is far less convincing when one examines the specific biblical texts they use to defend it. Indeed, open theism looks especially weak in light of the clear biblical evidence that God foreknows the free decisions of human beings, and in the face of the relatively straightforward answers to the biblical passages they bring forth in defense of their view that he does not.

It is to this evidence we now turn.

ASSESSING OPEN THEISM BIBLICALLY

A full-fledged discussion of the biblical arguments advanced for and against open theism simply is not possible in the limited space available here.⁴ In this section we shall thus focus only on the watershed question: "Does the Bible teach that God does not know the future?"

We begin by noting texts in which God is said to have determined the future in some sense. Consider, for example, Acts 2:23, "this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." This Scripture alone seems to belie openness claims. More significantly, in Isaiah 40-48, God stakes his very deity on his ability to determine future events.⁵ So

in Isa 41:23, God taunts the idols to “declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods,” and then professes in Isa. 46:9-10, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’” Or again we note the astoundingly accurate prophecies of the Bible, such as that of the coming of Cyrus (Isa. 44:8; 45:1) or the prediction by Christ of Peter’s denial (Matt. 26:4, pars.).

How, in light of such obvious evidence, do open theists deny God’s foreknowledge? Individual proponents deal differently with individual texts, but Rice can be advanced as representative. He suggests that God’s foreknowledge is partial, and that only in cases where his will and actions are solely involved or where conditions are such that the consequences are inevitable can God certainly predict the future. Otherwise prophecies are conditional on free human choices.⁶

Can this explanation deal with the specificity of such a prophecy as Peter’s denial? In Rice’s account, this prediction proves true either because only God’s will was involved — but certainly Peter’s will is as well — or because conditions are such that the outcome is inevitable — but what conditions cause Peter to deny Jesus exactly three times, and that before the cock crows? — or because the prophecy is conditional — you will deny me three times before the cock crows, unless you don’t deny me or do so fewer or greater than three times or do so after the cock crows or unless the cock doesn’t crow! It is much simpler to understand that Jesus knew precisely what Peter would freely do before he did it.

But open theists offer “straightforward” texts of their own. These are of two types. First, they note passages in which someone’s prayer changes God’s resolved course of action (Exod. 32; Gen. 18; 2 Kings 20) or where someone’s actions cause God to “regret” a prior decision (Gen. 6; Exod. 32; 1 Sam. 13; 15), implying that the future is not fixed and that God does not know it. But do these texts in fact imply this? Consider 2 Kings 20:1-6, where Hezekiah prays to forestall God’s determination that he die. There is nothing in this text to show that God did not know that Hezekiah would offer such a prayer, and that God did not take this prayer into account when he made the pronouncement. Indeed, could it not be that God made the pronouncement to Hezekiah precisely because he knew that Hezekiah would offer up such a prayer in response, and because this is just what he wanted Hezekiah to do? It could well be that God wished to demonstrate the ultimate ungratefulness of Hezekiah’s heart⁷ by granting this request (2 Chron. 32:24-25), so as to make clear both to Hezekiah and to others what God knew was true of Hezekiah all along.⁸

But even if some of his future actions occur in actual response to

temporal situations, does this imply that God cannot know them in advance? Deut. 31:16-17 is instructive. Here God predicts both Israel’s future apostasy and his own future anger at it! In other words, God’s response to this temporal situation is not at odds with his foreknowledge. Though his experience may be temporal, we see that His awareness is eternal.

But open theists also cite passages that seem to deny foreknowledge outright. These include texts where God ruminates about the possible future (Jer. 26:3; Ezek. 12:3) or where he laments that his suppositions proved incorrect (Jer. 3:6-7) or where he tests an individual to discover his or her heart (Gen. 22:12; Deut 13:3). But in this last set of texts open theists prove too much. For if we infer from, say, God’s test of Abraham that God did not have exhaustive knowledge of the future, we must further infer that his present knowledge is equally limited. That is, if we take Gen. 22:12 at face value, God apparently does not know the state of Abraham’s heart at any present moment prior to the completion of the test.⁹ And on the openness reading, he cannot know that Abraham fears him to the extent the text implies (really and permanently) even after the test! At any moment Abraham can surprise God and apostatize. Whatever else it does, Genesis 22 cannot intend to teach that God grows in knowledge. This sort of language is either anthropomorphic or language of God’s experience, not his essential knowledge.

So we can grant that biblical language of divine action and divine emotion shows that the biblical God does reveal himself as dynamic and responsive. Openness theologians are right to emphasize this aspect of God. But the Bible also clearly teaches that God knows the future actions of free creatures, and thus that the future is not open to him. The God of open theism is therefore not the biblical God.

Indeed, open theism looks especially weak in light of the clear biblical evidence that God foreknows the free decisions of human beings, and in the face of the relatively straightforward answers to the biblical passages they bring forth in defense of their view that he does not.

THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OPEN THEISM

Open theists believe that the practical implications of their system make it superior to classical theism. They urge that classical theism renders prayer meaningless while their view revitalizes it. This is because, they say, our prayers can actually change God's mind and affect the future. In reality, open theism has disastrous consequences for prayer. For example, why pray for divine guidance to a God who is himself in the dark about what the future may hold? While God's educated guesses may prove better than ours much of the time, in the end when the free will of people are involved they are but conjectures and do not always pan out as he predicts. This means that in some situations it might actually have turned out better to have ignored the open God's counsel and followed our own. Additionally, merely removing God's foreknowledge cannot provide a rationale for prayer, since in his present knowledge he already knows our needs and desires before we ask him. He gains nothing from us in prayer necessary to his decisions, even under open theism.

Open theists also believe that their view presents advantages in handling the problem of evil and human suffering, but really the opposite is so. In open theism evil takes God as much by surprise as it does us. They claim this to be a comfort in suffering. But is it really so? If God does not know what evils the future may bring—evils that may affect us in unforeseen ways—we cannot be certain that he shall work all things together for our good, contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture (Rom. 8:28). Nor can we know for certain that God will complete the good work that he has begun in us (Phil. 1:6; Rom. 8:28-30), since unanticipated disasters, including our own sinful choices, may sabotage the attainment of that goal.

No doubt man is the crowning glory of God's creation, and our moral freedom is one of the brightest jewels in that crown. Yet, however much we value our creaturely freedom, we must never, as Stephen Charnock cautions, "fasten ignorance upon God, and accuse him of blindness, to maintain our liberty."¹⁰ We must resist the temptation of man-centered reason to live as though the chief end of God is to glorify man and enjoy him forever. It is only when we grasp God's place in his universe that we shall flourish in our own.

Notes

¹Socinianism is named after its most famous advocate Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), the leader of the Unitarian party in Poland.

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³*The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock, et al (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 21. This is stated by Rice in approval of a view that he says "many Christians" hold.

⁴*Openness*, 45. Again, Rice cites this approvingly as the view of "many Christian scholars."

⁵For a biblical defense of open theism see, Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *Openness*, 11-58. For a biblical defense of "classical" theism see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000). A complete critique of the system involves logical, philosophical, and hermeneutical, as well biblical evaluation. It must be asked for example whether the basic argument of open theism presented above holds at each point. Is it self-evident that love is never coercive? Must an indeterminate future be unknowable and thus unknown to God? With regard to hermeneutics, we need to determine when a text is to be understood anthropomorphically, and, more broadly, which texts should be considered central to our formulation of a doctrine of God. Is 1 John 4:8 the most basic statement of God's character, or might Deut. 32:1-4, which centralizes God's justice and righteousness, be taken as more basic? Or for that matter, is it even correct to conceive of any one attribute of God as more basic than another?

⁶Isa. 41:21-29; 42:8-9; 43:8-13; 44:6-8, 24-28; 45:20-23; 48:3-8, 14-16.

⁷Rice, "Biblical Support," 51-52.

⁸I.e., in spite of his initial thankfulness at having his life spared.

⁹Note as well that in order to make the Assyrians leave Jerusalem inviolate, as well as to insure precisely fifteen years to Hezekiah, numerous "free" actions would need to be assured. Thus human freedom is not so highly valued by God as might first appear. Examples like this could be multiplied. In 2 Kings, the sin of Manasseh sealed the fate of Judah, even though both he and Josiah repented (2 Kings 22:14-20; 23:24-27; 24:1-4).

¹⁰This is, of course, contradicted by other Scripture (e.g., Psalm 139), as even open theists would agree.

¹¹Charnock, *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:450.

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A Seventeenth-Century Puritan Addresses a Twenty-First Century Error

"But what if the foreknowledge of God, and the liberty of the will, cannot be fully reconciled by man? Shall we therefore deny a perfection in God to support a liberty in ourselves? Shall we rather fasten ignorance upon God, and accuse him of blindness to maintain our liberty? That God doth foreknow everything and yet that there is liberty in the rational creature, are both certain; but how fully to reconcile them, may surmount the understanding of man."

From Stephen Charnock, *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:450.