

LOOKING FOR TRUTH IN THE “OPEN THEISM” CONTROVERSY

by
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Open Theism,¹ the teaching that God knows the future only in part and cannot foreknow what people are going to do, has been growing in the last few years. In 1999, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which represents by far the largest group of Baptists in the United States, overwhelmingly endorsed a resolution referring to the proliferation of openness theology in the larger evangelical community and strongly reaffirming classical theism in their denomination.

At the annual meeting of the Baptist General Conference in the same year, however, a long debate ensued over a proposed amendment to the Conference Affirmation of Faith that would have clearly declared God’s exhaustive foreknowledge of all things including future actions of free moral agents such as humans, angels and demons. The proposed amendment was narrowly defeated.

Near the end of the debate, Dick Varberg, long-time missionary to the Philippines, made an appeal for delegates to vote against the proposed amendment. He argued that if we have room in our fellowship for a strong Calvinist such as Dr. John Piper we should also have room for an open theist such as Dr. Greg Boyd. (Dr. Piper is pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis; Dr. Boyd has been a professor in theology at Bethel College for a number of years.) Many resonated with that idea. In fact, that theme has been advanced since by certain individuals with the proposal that the Conference – for the sake of peace and the “irenic spirit” tradition – should pass a kind of “unity resolution” which would endorse a Baptist General Conference which includes both Dr. John Piper and Dr. Greg Boyd. In other words, they want the BGC to accept Open Theism as a valid doctrinal view.

A serious problem is connected with this approach.



Making this issue a part of the Calvinist vs. Arminian dispute is a false notion. To decide the issue on this basis is to decide it on a lie! Those who persist in framing it in this fashion are guilty of distorting the real situation and obscuring the actual nature of Open Theism.

The question of God’s foreknowledge is a much larger concern. It is a view of God contrary to what historic Christian groups have consistently held – even groups not relating to the Calvinist-Arminian debate.

Attacks on the doctrine of God’s all-inclusive foreknowledge were spearheaded by Richard Rice and Clark Pinnock. These are the men who launched the so-called “Open Theism” movement of our times. They referred to the view they were rejecting as “traditional theism”² or “classical theism”³ and readily acknowledged that this had been the theism of Roman Catholicism (whether Augustinian, Thomistic, or Molinist), Eastern

**To treat
Open Theism
as a part of the
Calvinist-Arminian
debate
is to
mistreat it!**

¹ This term, chosen by advocates of the view, is commonly used, and so I use it, though it creates a false impression about the classic view of God being “Closed Theism.” I would prefer to call it the Lesser God View. For further information on this and other related matters see my paper, *Do We Really Want What We Are Doing?* available from FLAME MINISTRIES, PO Box 3333, Everett, WA, 98203-8333. (425) 347-3216. E-mail: FlameMin@compuserve.com

² Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 51. Also Richard Rice, *God’s Foreknowledge & Man’s Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 10, presented his position as “an alternative to the traditional Christian understanding of God’s relation to the world.”

³ Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God*, 107.

Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and, yes, Arminianism.⁴

To treat this as a Calvinism vs. Arminianism issue is to operate with a false premise . . . and false premises . . . no matter how much evidence is amassed, or how often arguments are repeated, or how strongly emotionalized appeals are made . . . lead to false conclusions!

So I invite you to follow along as I endeavor to start with basics which need to be considered if the Conference and other Christian groups are going to handle this issue in the proper context.

ASSESSING THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Suppose you were going to build a house, and you started with the foundation. In the foundation, you think you are using solid cement blocks. However, in reality they were only gravel and mud and easily crumble. If that is the case the rest of the house will have no firm support.

When we examine the claims of open theism as to Scripture proof, we find something analogous to that. Actually the situation is even worse. Passages open theists use to show God does not know the future do not actually say that! In fact, one pastor took the references Dr. Greg Boyd had listed on the sheet, *God and the Future: A Brief Outline of the Open View*,⁵ and studied them one by one and said afterward, “They don’t really say God did not know what was going to happen!”



Let’s take a few examples of texts used by open theists.⁶

Start with **Genesis 6:6**: “*And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.*”⁷ The passage does not say that God did not know what people would do. That is an assumption placed on what is said.

Take **1 Samuel 15:11**: “*I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me. . .*” and **verse 35**: “. . . and the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.” The passage does not say God did not know what Saul would do. That is an assumption placed on what is said.

Boyd uses **Numbers 14:11** where the LORD says to Moses, “*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?*” and **Hosea 8:5** and **1 Kings 22:20** where God is represented as asking questions to say that God is expressing uncertainty about what is going to happen. But these passages do not say God does not know what will happen. That is an assumption placed on what is said.

On his sheet, *God and the Future*, Boyd makes the statement, “In several passages the Lord explicitly tells us that he *did not know* that humans would behave the way they did,” and in support he lists *only three* references: Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35. **Jeremiah 7:31** reads this way: “*And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart.*” The New International Version says: “*nor did it enter my mind.*” **Jeremiah 19:5** and **32:35** are very similar in content and construction as one will see if one reads them. As you study the construction you will see that the most logical meaning is that it never entered the mind of God *to command the people to do such a thing*. To say that these verses teach that it did not enter God’s mind that the people would ever *do* such a thing is to impose an unnatural interpretation. In spite of Boyd’s claim, these verses do not say God did not know what would happen. That is an assumption placed on what is said.

I could go on listing other passages used, but a person who is seriously interested can simply research the various references used by open theists to see how this is the pattern.

⁴ Pinnock, in “Systematic Theology,” 104, understands why “some critics may speak. . . as if we were advocating a God other than the God of historic Christianity.”

⁵ January 1999

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of various texts in this regard, see my paper, *Does God Know. . . ?* available from FLAME MINISTRIES.

⁷ New King James Version. Scripture quotations in this paper are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

Greg Boyd, in his book, *The God of the Possible*, uses text after text like this to support his idea that God does not fully know the future, that God cannot tell ahead of time what people are going to do. An individual reading through his material without discerning this fact, can be impressed by the verses referred to and easily adopt Boyd’s conclusions. What such a reader does not realize is that none of these Bible texts specifically and actually says that God does not know what is going to happen. Everything is built on assumptions, based on a presupposition that Boyd has adopted.

Open theism lacks true Biblical foundation.

On the other hand, the Bible has clear declarations and examples in regard to God’s foreknowledge (e.g.: Isaiah 46:9-10; Acts 2:23; 1 Samuel 23:9-12; Genesis 15:12-16; Luke 22:34—and numerous prophecies!)

A KEY PASSAGE

A very important passage that is used by open theists to seek to establish their case is **Jeremiah 3:6-7** in the NIV version where concerning Israel’s sin and unrepentant ways, God says, “*I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not. . .*” They also use **verses 19-20**: “*I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me, but . . .*” Boyd claims this is an instance of God encountering the unexpected. That obviously God had thought one thing but another thing had happened.

Boyd says some have tried to avoid this conclusion by saying that the Hebrew word amar can be translated as “said” but claims this is no help to the classical view of divine foreknowledge in that it “only transfers the problem of God *thinking* something was going to happen, to him *saying* he expected something to happen that he knew would not happen.”⁸

Boyd’s claim in this regard is very misleading as you will discover if you consult another version such as the NKJV. There verse 7 says, “*And I said, after she had done all these things, ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. . .*” And verse 20 reads, “*And I said: ‘You shall call Me, ‘My Father,’/And not turn away from Me.’*” The whole meaning has been transformed from expressions of expectation to commands and the passage doesn’t fit what the open theists are saying at all!

But for the sake of making an important point, let’s leave it as the NIV has it – even though I don’t think that version renders the Hebrew well here. Let’s say that God expressed surprise. This, in itself, is proof for anthropomorphic interpretation – which open theists disavow.

Why is this?

An important fact. Back in **Deuteronomy 31:16-21**, God had forecast, long before Jeremiah ever lived, that the people of Israel would be unfaithful to Him and break His covenant, that He knew how they would behave “*even before I have brought them to the land of which I swore to give them.*” In fact, the next chapter, **Deuteronomy 32**, known as “The Song of Moses,” was given to be a witness to the people over the generations how God had foreknown their unfaithfulness.

The biblical record clearly indicates that God knew beforehand how Israel was going to act. Therefore, when He expresses Himself as saying, “*I thought. . . she would. . . but she did not. . .*” it makes little sense to take it literally and say God is speaking falsely; it makes a great deal of sense to understand it anthropomorphically and say God was speaking in terms that vividly made clear the unreasonableness and horror of the people’s behavior.

Similar explanations could be given for certain other passages cited in this connection by open theists, such as **Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5 and 32:35**.

AN UNSOUND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC

Proponents of so-called “Open Theism” take passages in Scripture where God is represented as saying that He repents or is sorry for doing something, or because of people’s response does something other than what He announced He was going to do, as representing God changing His mind. They say these Scriptures indicate God does not know in advance what people are going to do. They claim they are biblical in their position because they interpret what these Scripture texts say as literal.

⁸ Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 60.

For example, passages such as **1 Samuel 15:10-26** – where God says “*I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king*” and rejects him as leader (v.23) – **Exodus 32:7-14** – where God says He will destroy the Israelites for their sin and Moses intercedes for them and “*the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people*” – **Isaiah 38:1-5** – where Hezekiah is told he will die and then prays and God says He has heard the prayer and will add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life – are used to demonstrate that God cannot know ahead of time what people are going to do, and that He changes His mind and plans in accordance with what He learns as time goes on.

Greg Boyd and others of this persuasion say they take these non-poetic passages at face value while classical Christian theologians have anthropomorphized them – that is, explained them as God revealing Himself in human terms so people can understand.

The crucial question is: Is literal interpretation⁹ a proper method of interpretation for these passages? Is this a valid hermeneutic?

Two significant things need to be said in response.

First, this method of interpretation is inadequate for producing an understanding compatible with the totality of the Scriptural revelation about God. There are Bible passages where God is declared as knowing all things and being unchanging (e.g. Isaiah 46:9-10; Acts 2:23; Acts 15:18; 1 Samuel 15:29; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). It has been observed that the open theists talk much about those passages which could be seen as representing God as changing, but do not deal adequately with those passages which represent Him as unchanging.

Second, this method of interpretation applied consistently to revelations from God would destroy other truths about His being. For example, if we say that when God says He “repents” (changes His mind) that must be taken literally because there is no reason not to, then it would logically follow that we should use the same method in **Genesis 11:5-7** – a non-poetic passage – in regard to the tower of Babel: “*But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, ‘Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language. . .’*” Since God had to “go down” and said, “let Us go down,” He obviously was not there! So God is not omnipresent (present everywhere). The same would be true of **Genesis 18:20-21**: “*And the LORD said, ‘Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’*” Here again we find God saying, “I will go down now,” which would mean that He was not present there – indeed that He was not even sure what was going on there! So using this hermeneutic we can conclude that God is neither all-present nor all-knowing (even of past and present events)!

By this method vital aspects of God’s nature can be denied. This is not some hypothetical discussion. The implications are profound. For example, we cannot be sure that God hears our prayers. Maybe He is not present when we pray so our prayers are not heard. Or maybe we would have to conclude that some other being has to take our prayer requests to Him.

Other examples could be cited. In **Genesis 9:12-17**, God gives the rainbow as the sign of the covenant, and says, “*It shall be . . . that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant. . .*” and “*I will look upon it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature. . .*” By this method of literal interpretation, we deduce that God’s memory needs reminders. As one man wrote me: “I hope this doesn’t mean He is a forgetful God who needs to tie a string around His finger to remember important things!”

In **Genesis 3**, God asked four questions of Adam and Eve after they had sinned. Let’s see what we learn about God from each of these questions using the literal hermeneutic of open theists. “*Where are you?*” (v.9) – God did not know where they were. “*Who told you that you were naked?*” (v.11a) – God did not know where they got the idea. “*Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you that you should not eat?*” (v. 11b) – God did not know what had happened. God said to Eve, “*What is this you have done?*” – After all that God still hadn’t figured out what was going on. So God not only does not know some things that are going to happen in the future, He doesn’t even know some things which have happened in the past and the present!

⁹ By “literal interpretation” here I mean explaining these expressions as literal and not figurative. I am not referring to the larger question of literal interpretation of the Bible, which includes understanding figurative statements as figurative, as a valid method of interpretation.

I am not saying that Greg Boyd, or other Open Theists, say this. I am simply making the point that when the hermeneutic they use in regard to their selected Scriptures is carried out consistently and logically it utterly destroys the concept of God Jews and Christians have believed in.

THE TESTIMONY OF HISTORY

It is for this reason, that interpreting these passages literally rather than anthropomorphically is an unsound hermeneutic, all Christian theologians of significant stature throughout the history of the church have rejected the notion that God knows only some of the future, that He is surprised by what people do, and that He changes His mind.

This is important to understand. Opposition to so-called Open Theism is not based on some sort of slavish adherence to human theological authorities. To think that is to miss the point. Opposition to so-called Open Theism is based on the truth that it misinterprets Scripture. Reference to theologians is only to show that they concurred with this position. The lineage of the faith is not something to be set aside lightly.

Among those who believed in God’s foreknowledge of all things – according to their writings – can be listed: Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Arminius, Cranmer (Calvinist), John Wesley (Arminian), Charles Hodge (Calvinist), Donald Bloesch (Calvinist), Louis Berkhof (Calvinist), Stephen Charnock (Calvinist), Karl Barth (Neo-orthodox), Emil Brunner (Neo-orthodox), Thomas C. Oden (Arminian), and Millard Erickson (Calvinist).

The basic reason for rejecting Open Theism is the axiom that Scripture is our authority for faith and practice. In spite of the use of numerous Bible texts to supposedly support its thesis, the so-called “openness of God” view is incompatible with the teaching of Scripture when taken as a whole and carefully read with proper exegesis!

ANTHROPOMORPHISMS CAN BE MEANINGFUL . . . AND BEAUTIFUL

Anthropomorphisms in Scripture – expressions attributing to God human forms, parts, passions and activities – properly understood are not really a problem. Instead they convey tremendous truth in a special way. They show how the infinite, transcendent God relates to us as humans personally in terms meaningful for us. It is part of His condescension to interface with us in our finite human condition, and I believe anthropomorphisms do it in a way that could not otherwise be done. To force such statements to literalism destroys their intended meaning!



An example of this can be found in **Genesis 22** where God tested Abraham by telling the patriarch to sacrifice his son. The Angel of the LORD intervened just as Abraham was taking the knife to slay Isaac who lay bound on the altar. “*And He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me’*” (v. 12).

Open theists I have read argue something like this, “If God knew beforehand what Abraham would do, why did He say after Abraham’s action, ‘Now I know?’ Obviously, God must not have been sure what Abraham was going to do and He had to test him to find out. When classical theologians say the testing was for Abraham’s sake and that this statement is to be understood anthropomorphically, what God said doesn’t make any sense.”

Let’s ponder this. I believe definite reasons exist for the way things are put in Scripture. A simplistic literal explanation out of sync with doctrine, such as God’s foreknowledge, taught in the rest of the Bible, misses the real intent.

Why did God say to Abraham, “*Now I know that you fear God . . . ?*”

One time I asked my wife: “If you love God passionately, what is more important to you: what you think of yourself, or what God thinks of you?”

She said, “What God thinks of me, of course!”

Put yourself in the patriarch’s place. He has gone through many testings and trials. Now the LORD tells him to offer up his son, Isaac. All his dreams for his posterity and name were wrapped up in that son of the promise. God is asking, ‘Are you willing to give up that – the most precious thing in your earthly life – for my sake?’ It is not easy, but the old man makes the journey, against all normal human feelings and aspirations, yet in faith putting God first and obeying Him, and proceeds to the very point where he is to execute his son – and he is stopped.

At such a moment, what would you want to hear from the Lord? Would you want to hear a statement like this: “Now, you have proved yourself and you know that you fear me and have met the test?” I doubt that, unless you are simply a self-sufficient feeling egoist. Would you want to hear, “Oh, I knew all along you would be faithful, I just wanted you to find it out for yourself?” I doubt that too.

Note the relationship of lovingkindness in the way God responds. Here is a man who has gone to the very limit for Him, and God says, “. . . now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” He was saying the one thing Abraham wanted to hear most! ‘Abraham, here is My opinion of you: you do put me first!’

(How wonderful when “*the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God!*”!)

It had to be after Abraham had gone through the experience. It would have been really inhuman for God to say to Abraham beforehand, “Oh, I know all things and I know you will fear Me and not withhold your son from Me,” even though that was true. We humans live in our finite situation and must learn through our experiences. Rarely does God reveal His foreknowledge ahead of time to us for that would be to deny us our existence as creatures of the day.

No, God knew what Abraham was going to do before he did it. As you read the account you find He had a ram all prepared for the sacrifice. You see, it was all part of a plan – a plan to provide an earthly picture of how God, Himself, would sacrifice His Son, for the sake of us sinful, wayward humans. In that experience, I believe Abraham was divinely given a glimpse of what God was going to do, which gives meaning to Jesus’ statement in John 8:56: “. . . Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”

So think about how God comes to His man who has just been strung to the extreme. Here is “*the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy*” – with Abraham – “*with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones*” – and He relates, not as the vast All-knowing Infinite One that He truly is, but as the God who relates to His people in terms they can understand in their human need and condition: ‘Abraham, Abraham . . . now I know that you fear God . . . It’s all right. I do care!’

Properly understood, this anthropomorphism conveys something no simple literal statement could.

Oh, how I like swimming and diving in the ocean of God’s immensity! In deep places I discover things of beauty and wonder. Of course, there are depths too profound for me. No matter what insights and devices modern man thinks he has, he can never plumb the depths of God’s wisdom, love and knowledge. Just because there are depths into which we cannot go, however, is no reason to settle for the shallowness of Open Theism and its mistaken and superficial treatment of Scripture.

Baptist theologians holding to the view that God has exhaustive foreknowledge include such individuals as John Gill (English), John Alexis Edgren (Swedish), Augustus H. Strong (American), James P. Boyce (SBC), E.Y. Mullins (SBC), and Hershel Hobbs (SBC).

Greg Boyd, in *God of the Possible*, tries to come up with some names of people in Church history who have held ideas similar to his and mentions Calcidius, a fifth-century theologian (as a possibility), Lorenzo McCabe, former chancellor of Ohio Wesleyan University, and Billy Hibbard, a circuit preacher in the United States. He also names as those who “in one form or another” (note that) espoused such views the theologians G.T.Fechner, Otto Pfeiderer, and Jules Lequier (though he documents little evidence for this) and the Bible commentator Adam Clarke. And he also suggests it is a position commonly assumed in the African-American Christian tradition.¹⁰

What Boyd doesn’t say is that the leading advocate for this notion was the anti-trinitarian heretic, Socinus (1539-1604).

Sometimes those favoring acceptance of Open Theism say, “Oh, we don’t know what other people in Christian history might actually have held this view.”

That reminds me of the story about the enterprising proprietor who put Meramec Caverns, in Missouri, on the map. He advertised that the outlaw Jesse James had used the caves as a hideout. When people would say, “You have no proof that he did,” he would respond by saying, “You have no proof that he didn’t!”

The bottom line isn’t who thought what, but what is truly biblical.

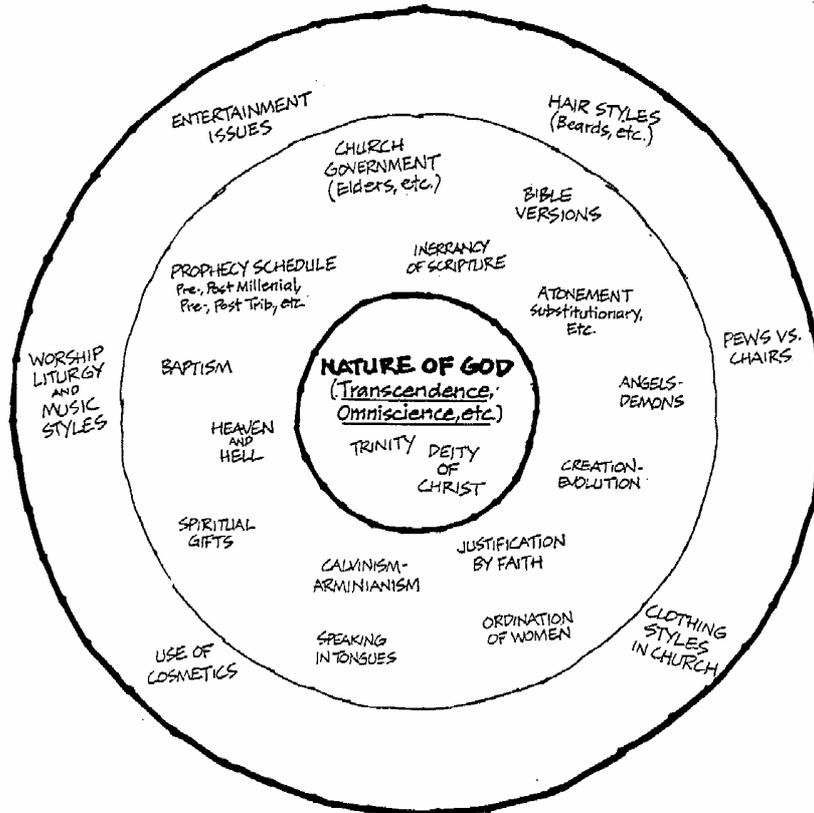
THE CENTRALITY OF THIS ISSUE

Some who believe we should have room for Open Theism, have said this is a matter of minor importance. They would claim it is a peripheral concern and does not involve a central and essential doctrine. One individual said it was of no more consequence than someone putting a car in a parking space backward.

But is this really true?

¹⁰ *God of the Possible*, 115.

To help put things in perspective, I suggest thinking in terms of a target with a bull's-eye. On this



target (*see illustration*), I have positioned various doctrines and ideas that can be the subject of controversy in churches. The further from the center, the less important the issue; the closer to the center, the more important. There may be a certain arbitrariness in my assignment of some of these, and if I were to do it again I might position a few of them a bit differently. However, no matter what I would do with the other questions, I would not remove the issues of the *nature of God*, the doctrine of the *trinity*, and the truth of the *deity of Christ*, from the center.

The purpose of this illustration is simple. It is not to get people arguing over the relative importance of different doctrines and practices. (I know this is chancy because some have a tendency to latch on to a minor feature and miss the main point!) For someone to dispute where some item such as *speaking in tongues* (*glossolalia*), or *Bible versions*, or *prophecy schedule* (*eschatology*) is placed, will only distract. I am not saying these issues are not important: many of them are *very* important to me. **The point is that the nature of God (involving His transcendence, His omnipotence, His omnipresence, His omniscience, etc.) is central among the doctrines of the Christian faith!**

This is no peripheral matter.

One man said to me, "Don't you think you should put *justification by faith* in the bull's-eye? Isn't that central?"

I replied, "That's a very important doctrine, but I don't think it goes in the center. For example, if we were to show the difference between Hinduism and Christianity, what would you start with? *Justification by faith?*"

"No," he said, "I guess I would start with God and what He is like."

"Precisely," I responded. "An idea like *justification by faith*, vital as it is, grows out of and is related to our concept of God. That is why I say our understanding of the nature of God is central."

Even an open theist like Clark Pinnock recognizes that "no doctrine is more central than the nature of God. It deeply affects our understanding of the incarnation, grace, creation, election, sovereignty and salvation."¹¹

¹¹ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," 8.

Just as the Almighty, Eternal One is presented to us as seated on the throne of heaven encircled by a glorious rainbow (Rev. 4:2-3), so He is central to *everything*. It is an axiom of spiritual existence that how we think about God will affect, in some way, our thinking about everything else. To have a wrong conception of God will ultimately lead to wrong conceptions of other things.

SLOGAN THINKING DOESN’T HELP

Some of the arguments for not making Open Theism an issue have simply been appeals to slogans. One that has been used is the line: **“In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.”** That may be a good line but to simply throw it out as a debate-stopper is to miss the point. The issue of the nature of God is an essential to the faith. So we must strive for unity – which we do not have. It is no solution to allocate it to a non-essential status and say we should just agree to disagree and have charity. That distorts the magnitude of this problem.

The Bible indicates clearly that there are times when God’s people must contend for the faith. To do so is not wrong nor unloving.

Another slogan that has been tossed into the discussion is: **“All truth is God’s truth.”** I am not sure how that has any logical, direct bearing on the question at hand, but it sounds impressive, and some people will rally to it. The slogan, by itself, does have some merit in that it affirms there is such a thing as “truth” and that from whatever source we may find it, it comes from God. However, a corresponding statement needs to clarify this pronouncement: **“Not all that claims to be truth is truth.”** Simply because someone puts forth some idea as truth does not mean it comes from God!

Considerations must be based on something other than slogans.

A DIFFERENT GOD

The God of the Open Theists is a different God from that of classical Christianity. (I use the term “Classical” as referring to the core beliefs about God which have consistently been held in the major churches in Christendom for almost 2000 years of history. The word “orthodox” is a good word, but a number of people misunderstand it today: some think it refers solely to such groups as the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox; others associate it with the adjective “dead”—dead orthodoxy.)

Some of the ways in which the God of open theists is different from the God of classical Christianity are depicted in the chart below:

GOD OF CLASSICAL CHRISTIANITY	GOD OF OPEN THEISM
Transcends Time (“Inhabits eternity”)	Subject to Time
Ever Immediate Knowledge	Sequential Learning
Infinite (Unlimited)	Finite (Limited)
Immutable (Unchanging)	Mutable (Changing)
Perfect in Knowledge	Capable of Mistakes

Those familiar with what open theists have written and said know that this chart represents a true picture of their concept of God.

Some may argue that open theists believe in an infinite God. To do so will be to misuse and play with words in the same way that some have said that they believe in God’s “omniscience” or “exhaustive foreknowledge” – namely that they have redefined or misrepresented the terms. When Greg Boyd wrote that he believed in “omniscience” and that his difference had to do with “creation,” what he did not want people to realize is that by believing God has created things so that He could not know what “free agents” would do, and claiming such future actions were unknowable, he was in actuality redefining what “omniscience” means. To claim that he believed in “omniscience” as others have was really misleading. So open theists, to claim that they believe God is infinite, have to redefine “infinity.”

Because infinity is a key concept in this question, a bit more needs to be said about it here. Sometimes infinity has been confused with totality: the notion that infinity means “all.” Some think that to say God is infinite is to say God is everything. That, of course, is Pantheism. Infinity, as applied to God, simply means that no limits can be set on His attributes. To say that God is infinite in immensity and omnipresence – which relate to space – is to say that He is present everywhere with all His creatures and creation, at all times and all places. That is not to say no other beings are present. The uniqueness of God is that He is present everywhere – there are no limits to His presence.

The infinitude of God relative to duration is His eternity. Just as He is beyond all limitations of space, He is beyond all limitations of time. He is not limited to a particular duration of time. Past, present and future are all always present to Him. His existence is an eternal now. As humans we can comprehend how this can be but not what it is like – for we are finite and bound to time.

This relates to God’s knowledge, of course, because God does not look toward the future as we do, but sees it as now. His relationship to time is totally different from that of humans.¹² A number of Scripture passages relate to this. A couple of examples are Psalm 90:4, which reads:

*For a thousand years in Your sight
Are like yesterday when it is past,
And like a watch in the night,*

and 2 Peter 3:8 says “*that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*”

Since infinity means unlimited it also means incapable of increase. To say God is infinite in knowledge and wisdom is to say His knowledge and wisdom are so complete they cannot be increased. This is crucial to understand. If God doesn’t know what a person is going to do, as open theists claim, and then “learns” after the person has done it, there is an increase in His knowledge. In other words, His knowledge is not infinite.

Against this an open theist would probably argue that God is not infinite.

So no matter what protests may be raised, we are talking about two different “Gods.”

The God of the open theist is incomplete and subject to surprises, failures, and mistakes. In contrast, classical Christianity professes, “*As for [our] God, His way is perfect.*”¹³

WRONGLY BLAMING THE GREEKS

The response by open theists to the idea of God’s transcendence over time is that it is based not on the Bible but on Greek thought, especially that of Plato. Greg Boyd states this plainly though in terms shaped by his perception of classical theology saying it “owes more to Plato than it does the Bible.”¹⁴ No doubt, he subscribes to the notion that Augustine altered Christian thinking by mixing it with Platonic thought and that this has affected classical theology ever since. There isn’t time here to explore the pitfalls in this theory, but it needs to be said that notions of God’s infinity and timelessness are not *derived* from Plato’s writings or other

¹² In this regard Boyd in *God of the Possible* engages in some double-talk. On one hand he says God is “above time,” but denies that “He experiences all of time in a single, changeless, eternal moment.” Instead, he says the Bible pictures a God who experiences, thinks and responds to things *sequentially* (131). On the other hand, in answering a question about Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, he writes: “This means that for God—but for no one else—there *can* be an all-embracing ‘now’ in which all the relative ‘nows’ experienced by finite observers coincide” (133). By such semantic gymnastics he can appear to believe in a God who transcends time while denying the logical implications of that concept by claiming it is Platonic.

¹³ 2 Samuel 22:31

¹⁴ *God of the Possible*, 109.

pagan philosophy, but from indications in Scripture. Simply because some correspondence of ideas could be found in the thought of Plato does not mean that is where the notions came from.

As a young person, I myself, from the study of Scriptures had formulated the ideas of God’s transcendence of time and His comprehension of past, present, and future at once, before I had even heard of Plato or read any serious theological treatise. And I understood how this was a natural corollary of the concept of infinity.

In this regard, an interesting paper, *The Semitic View of Divine Foreknowledge in the Hebrew Bible*, written by Dr. Oliver R. Blosser makes some critical errors. The author’s thesis, expressed at the very beginning, “The foreknowledge debate in the Baptist General Conference is at this point just a Calvinist/Arminian theological dispute over extreme rationalistic viewpoints of divine foreknowledge,” shows he adopted a wrong premise. Remember, if your premise is false your conclusion will be false, no matter how many reasons you advance – and Dr. Blosser does make some good biblical points. The central idea he argues is that both Calvinism and Arminianism “are theological statements based on an explanation of the foreknowledge of God and which are rooted in the foundation of Greek philosophy (rationalism) rather than the Hebrew faith thought-patterns of the Holy Bible.”¹⁵ He argues that these systems for understanding God” are “based on reason rather than faith, saturated in Greek philosophy rather than Semitic revelation.” The author claims what we need is not reason but faith alone – which he claims is the Semitic view of God in the Bible.¹⁶

This notion that the Semitic or Hebrew mind is different from the Greek mind has always fascinated me. I have heard it argued that Greeks thought philosophically and systematically and Hebrews thought concretely. This was an old argument between so-called “systematic theologians” and “biblical theologians.” It was claimed this was based on the nature of the Hebrew language compared to the Greek language. Over the years I have come to seriously question the validity of this distinction. My experience with people from a number of different cultures has led me to conclude that in every people group some individuals are capable of reasoning systematically and others have a degree of difficulty doing so.

Furthermore, concepts such as infinity are not simply dependent upon language. In higher educational tests a distinction has been made between verbal ability and conceptual ability. I learned from working with Vietnamese immigrants to the United States that they usually obtained jobs connected with science and mathematics because of the difficulty of changing from their language to English. Conceptually they transferred easily. Concepts of God’s infinity and timelessness belong more in the realm of conceptions and are not dependent upon linguistic considerations.

In fact, I understand James Barr (no friend of evangelicals) in his book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, so effectively dismissed the notion of a special Semitic, or Hebraic, mind-set, that in many academic circles arguments based on such a distinction are no longer acceptable.¹⁷

Isaiah, the prophet, was certainly a Hebrew who could express profound truths. A little thought will show that Isaiah 55:8-9 depicts infinity:

In response to an unsigned editorial in *Christianity Today* which apparently was intended to spread awareness of Open Theism and create an atmosphere more conducive to having allowance for it, **Roger Nicole**, one of the well-known theologians of the American evangelical movement, wrote the following letter which was printed in the April 3, 2000 issue of the magazine.

As a corresponding editor of *CT* I am constrained to express strong dissent to your editorial “God vs. God” [Feb. 7]. While it contains certain good arguments in favor of the quasi-universal Judeo-Christian endorsement of God’s immutability, it appears to attempt to leave a door ajar for the propriety of the “openness of God” position.

Surely the doctrine of God’s unchangeableness is not a provincial approach developed by Turretin, the Princeton theologians and Louis Berkhof! Athanasius, Augustine, the council of Chalcedon, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer, the Synod of Dort, the Westminster Assembly, John and Charles Wesley, to name but a few, would object just as strongly as Turretin and company to a changeable God!

This very notion undermines the validity of God’s prophecies, promises, and commandments. It cancels out the effectiveness of prayer, since even if God had been persuaded by my petition, he could shift again before the fulfillment; and it borders on process theology, denying the fixity of the one being who is unmovable in the vast flux of created existence. Nothing good along this line can be expected for evangelicalism. It is unfortunate if the holders of the heretical view of the “openness of God” could now boast about the “openness of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.”

--Printed by permission of Dr. Roger Nicole

¹⁵ Oliver R. Blosser, *The Semitic View of Divine Foreknowledge in the Hebrew Bible* (Unpublished manuscript), 7.

¹⁶ Blosser, *The Semitic View of Divine Foreknowledge in the Hebrew Bible*, 9.

¹⁷ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (SCM Press LTD, 1961, 1983).

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Psalm 147:5 says: “*His understanding is infinite.*” And what more picturesque way is there to describe God’s transcendence over time than that in Isaiah 57:13 where God is described as “*the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity.*”

For many of us, the basis for believing in God’s transcendence over time and His foreknowledge involving comprehension of past, present and future at once, arose directly from our careful consideration of the teachings of Scripture and an effort to have a reasonable understanding of what was meant.

FASHIONING A FALSE GOD

Not only is the “God” of open theism different from the God of classical Christianity, it is a false God.

Why do I say this? It is an anthropomorphized God: a God who has been made in the image of man.

While open theists claim they take literally passages which historic Christianity has explained anthropomorphically, by doing so they actually make out God to be a man-like being – enlarged and vastly more brilliant, maybe, but nevertheless a man-like being. God “changes His mind” like a man. God is “sorry” like a man. God is “frustrated” like a man. God is subject to time like a man. God is “surprised” by what happens like a man. God “doesn’t know what people are going to do” like a man.

One time one of my daughters was talking with an individual who had inclinations toward the ideas of Open Theism. This man said, “I like surprises. Don’t you like surprises? Maybe God is like that and doesn’t want to know everything but likes to be surprised.”

My daughter’s response was: “First, I only like surprises when they are good surprises. And second, you’re reasoning from man to God. You think God must be like we are, and that’s backwards.”

Whether they realize it or not, this is the basic method of open theists. Greg Boyd, for example, employs this kind of reasoning many different ways. To give but one example, after referring to his perception of the classical view of foreknowledge, he says this in *God of the Possible*: “. . . we have to ask: 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? If we, who are made in God’s image, enjoy these things in some measure, why think that God is great to the extent that his experience is *devoid* of such things? Conversely, if we would experience an eternity utterly devoid of risk and creativity as mundane and perhaps even torturous (I, for one, would), why should we be inclined to think that this is heaven to God?”¹⁸

Can you see the problem with this kind of thinking?

How can a finite being possibly know what it is like to be an infinite being? We *can* understand *that* a being is infinite, but we *cannot* understand *what it is like* to be infinite! The Trinity may have reasons for joy and excitement we know nothing about. We are dependent creatures relying on experiences and perceptions to give us fulfillment and satisfaction. When we talk about God we are talking about the One who is totally independent in His existence. He doesn’t have needs as we have them. When the psalmist says that in God’s presence is “fullness of joy” and at His right hand are “pleasures forevermore,”¹⁹ we must not imagine this Fountain of Joy as requiring what we require to experience fulfillment.

When we, because we cannot imagine what it is like for God in His glorious immensity, bring God down and recast Him in human terms, we have committed a fundamental error.

This is one of the worst kinds of idolatry. More terrible because people do not perceive it as idolatry. **It is the presumptuous sin of inverting the motif of human creation: instead of man being made in the image of God, God is made in the image of man!**

When one rejects the idea of anthropomorphic explanations of expressions of God in Scripture and says such things must be understood literally, this is the inevitable result. With anthropomorphism, we can perceive how God is transcendent, far beyond us in His make-up, knowledge, and existence, while at the same time relating to us in the only way we could possibly understand: in terms of human feelings, attitudes and

¹⁸ *God of the Possible*, 128-129.

¹⁹ Psalm 16:11.

ideas. Such is the loving condescension of the Creator to His special creatures. Open Theism with its insistence on literal understanding of these expressions actually *reduces* God to human terms.

Such thinking calls to mind the arrogant error of which the Lord accused the wicked long ago: “*You thought that I was altogether like you.*”²⁰

Any spiritually-minded person familiar with Old Testament history knows how infuriating idolatry is to God. He brought His people under terrible judgments because of their false gods. They exchanged the glory of God for a lie. Especially wicked were the times when they identified some man-made god with Him. By that His name and glory were perverted. While men made false gods with their hands, the greater evil is that they made false gods with their minds. To distort the notion of God revealed in Scripture and reduce Him to something like we are, however enlarged, is wicked. Those who tolerate such thinking and say it is within the bounds of true Christianity are guilty of sanctioning a false god.

A NEW CULT

For a decade at least, Clark Pinnock and his fellow travelers on the so-called Open Theism route have endeavored to be viewed as “evangelicals.” They want to be considered within the camp of orthodox Christians. (This is one of the things that has muddied the American evangelical movement which arose in the second half of the twentieth century and which, as a theological force, has pretty much dissipated and become a thing of the past.)

What we actually have with this group of thinkers is the emergence of a new cult.

I would have more respect for open theists if they would frankly admit they have a different concept of God from that which Christians have historically had and would form their own group. Those who want to adhere to their views could join them.

I would even support their right to do such a thing – for I believe in religious liberty.

One of the emotionalized responses heard by those who want to include open theists in the Baptist General Conference is that those of us who do not believe they should be are to be identified with those who inflicted “stake burnings and river drownings” on the Anabaptists. They accuse us of not allowing people to have freedom of conscience. Such reasoning is a real distortion of the historic concept of religious freedom. If we say that Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are not to be considered within acceptable Baptist doctrine, does that mean we are to be equated with inquisitors? I would defend the right of a Mormon or Jehovah’s Witness to worship as he chooses. I do not believe in persecuting people for their religious beliefs. To twist the historic belief in religious liberty to say that we cannot draw lines by which we identify Christians or Baptists because to do so is intolerant is not so much a reflection of Baptist beliefs as it is of contemporary redefinition of tolerance and diversity.

Probably these people will not form their own group. The inclination of those who have heterodox ideas often seems to be to want to live parasitically off a Christian group with the support and advantages that go with it.

What this new cult would want to call itself, I am not sure, but I think it could properly be identified as “the cult of the lesser God.”

AN OLD HERESY

On one hand, adherents of Open Theism, and their sympathizers, want their doctrine of God to sound very new. They take pains to make it appear modern, spicing their arguments with references to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in physics, and to “insights” of process philosophy. Some would try to make it look like this concept could only develop in our times with our advanced understanding of science and philosophy.

On the other hand, they try to claim they are “recovering” something historic Christianity has missed.

In actuality, Open Theism is just part of the old Socinian heresy rejected by the church centuries ago. Of course, Socinianism denied the deity of Christ and the need for a substitutionary atonement for justification. Open theists would respond that they do not deny Christ’s deity. Some of them, however,

²⁰ Psalm 50:21.

minimize the substitutionary atonement of Christ.²¹ One of the major features of Socinianism was its belief that God does not know what “free agents” will do. The oft-repeated argument by Rice, Pinnock, Boyd, etc., that they do believe in God’s omniscience in that they believe God knows all that is knowable, but that the decisions of humans and other free creatures (along with the consequences of those decisions) are not knowable, directly echoes a Socinian argument.²² They will cite Richard Swinburne²³ for support, but nowhere in contemporary writings of those with the “open view” of God do we find them referring to the Socinian roots of their doctrine.

When Clark Pinnock wrote about his theological pilgrimage “From Augustine to Arminius,”²⁴ he made no acknowledgment that his doctrine of God had gone “beyond” Arminius to Socinus. He clearly has rejected the Arminian view of God’s eternal foreknowledge as well as the standard explanation of election based on foreknowledge, Wesley’s view of total depravity, and the need for universal prevenient grace. Yet Pinnock continues to present his thinking as “Arminian thinking.”

In observing this, Robert B. Strimple has asked the question: “Why?” Why does Pinnock continue “to speak of his thinking as ‘Arminian thinking,’ never as ‘Socinian thinking’”? He follows up with the remark that one must wonder if the reason is because the “Arminian” label is less objectionable to evangelicals.²⁵

Let me suggest another reason. Being the astute man that he is, Pinnock could have deliberately positioned his Open Theism as Arminianism so as to drive a wedge between Calvinists and Arminians. By setting Calvinists and Arminians at each other, he can more readily gain acceptance for his heterodox view.

It would seem that if this were his purpose, his strategy is succeeding. The way the Bethel

“Committee on Theological Clarification and Assessment” (CTCA) handled the examination of Greg Boyd’s Open Theism view, played into the hands of this strategy, as has the way some of the leaders of the BGC have handled the controversy. By allowing it to be framed as a Calvinist-Arminian conflict, and continuing to present it that way – in spite of strong appeals that this is not the case -- the real heresy of Open Theism has been obscured.

**To say the Open Theism issue
is simply a part of the
Calvinist-Arminian debate
is a false premise
and --
false premises . . .
no matter how much evidence is amassed,
or how often arguments are repeated,
or how strongly emotionalized appeals are
made . . .
lead to false conclusions!**

It can be argued that Open Theism is the logical outcome of Arminian ideas of human freedom. I know Calvinists who reason that way. Open theists, of course, do. However a multitude of faithful preachers of the gospel of Arminian persuasion have not gone there – including not only Arminius himself, but also such men as John Wesley, John

Fletcher, Thomas Coke, W.E. Sangster, and Paul S. Rees. They were not willing to sacrifice the biblical idea of a transcendent, infinite God, to solve the problem. Arminians who become Open Theists go over the “great divide.”

Open Theism is not genuine Arminianism but an aberration of Arminianism.

Extreme Calvinists still do not reject the infinite God of Hebrew-Christian revelation.

This is why to contrast an open theist with a strong Calvinist and say we should have room for both is a false comparison. It creates an untrue contrast in people’s minds.

Perhaps, because of the dogged persistence to keep presenting this in the context of a determination-free will argument, the end result may be division between Calvinists and Arminians. Intelligent open theists realize no Calvinist in his right mind would ever accept Open Theism. (I happen to think that no Arminian in his right mind would ever accept Open Theism either). The danger of this division will grow if Bethel and certain leaders of the Baptist General Conference persist in pursuing the course they initially set out on. Such a division I think would be sad indeed. While some may not agree, I have always viewed the Calvinist vs. Arminian controversy as a dispute between brothers. Open Theism is something entirely different.

²¹ As an example see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 105-107.

²² See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 1:208. He noted: “They openly withdraw from him the knowledge of future contingencies as not being in the class of knowable things . . .”

²³ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 175.

²⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed.

Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 16-18.

²⁵ Robert B. Strimple, “What Does God Know?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, Ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 141.

What people need to realize is that this allegedly “new” doctrine of God is not new at all. Theologians in the Reformation era were presented with arguments similar to those advanced by Rice, Pinnock and Boyd, in the form of Socinian teaching and clearly rejected them. Lelio Socinus pestered Melanchthon and Calvin with letter after letter in which he argued such views and the Reformers rejected those concepts as incompatible with the biblical witness.²⁶

CARICATURE THE GOD WHO IS

One of the saddest things about Greg Boyd’s book, *The God of the Possible*, is that it spreads a distorted notion of the classical view of God. People who read it will receive a false impression of what it means to believe in the infinite, all-knowing God revealed in the Bible.

When talking about the classical Christian view of God, what Boyd presents – and this is consistent with presentations other open theists make – is the idea of a static God, who created a “mechanistic” world with “preprogrammed automatons.”

This is a caricature. It says more about Boyd’s mind than about the minds of classical theologians. A few individuals might be found who hold such a view, but overwhelmingly those who believe in an infinite, omniscient God believe that God is really and actively involved in the dynamic of life. They believe the Bible when it tells of God manifesting Himself to Hagar, Abraham’s concubine, and helping her when she thought her son was going to die, while at the same time knowing that Ishmael’s descendents would become a great nation.²⁷ They believe that God actually interacted with Moses in the wilderness, and involved Himself in public displays of supernatural power against Egypt and its gods, and led the people out from Egypt, miraculously dividing the sea so they could pass through and then destroying the Egyptian army in it.²⁸ They believe in what the Bible says about a God who works with people, strives with people, punishes people for their sin, calls people, and regenerates people. They believe people are responsible for their choices. They believe God calls upon us to take the initiative in obeying Him and that this is a genuine act on our part. They believe we can obey God or disobey God. They believe our human existence is real and that we are not some sort of pre-programmed robotic creatures acting out a plan forced on us.

Not only is Open Theism associated with a distorted reading of Scripture, it fosters a distorted reading of Scripture.

One man I was talking with said to me, “I can’t understand how God can exist beyond time, so that past, present, and future are all known to Him, and still operate in time with us in any real way. That does not make sense to me.”

I said to him, “Your problem is that you think you can fully understand an infinite God with your finite mind. You can’t. Because God is infinite – unlimited – He can exist both in time and beyond time. We don’t have to figure out *how* He can do that to believe it is true. And we don’t have to figure out *how* God foreknows all things to believe it is true.”

We must beware of making the mistake theologian Charles Hodge warned about, namely, confounding immutability with immobility. When we say God cannot change, we must not see that as God not acting. No human can understand God perfectly. On the one hand we believe God is unchanging in His being, perfections and purposes. On the other hand we know from Scripture that He is perpetually active. Therefore activity and immutability must be compatible – even if we don’t fully understand.²⁹

Open theists like to say, “If God foreknows what we are going to do, then we are not free because we must do what He foreknew we were going to do.”

Open theists are driven by antipathy for anything that smacks of determinism. In fact, the concept of human freedom is the central, organizing principle of their approach to Scripture and theology.

The determinist-free will controversy can be a philosophical quagmire.³⁰ It has been argued for

²⁶ Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation* (New York: Scribner’s, 1938), 2:470-471.

²⁷ See Genesis 16:6-13; 21:14-21.

²⁸ Exodus 3-14.

²⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1:391.

³⁰ The Bible sees no contradiction between divine foreordination or divine foreknowledge and human responsibility with the freedom to decide and act. This is a man-made philosophical problem.

centuries. More than this paper would be required to adequately deal with it. The point that needs to be made here is that the open theist solution to it is false – because Open Theism is false. To argue with its adherents on this issue is to give credence to their position when it lacks a genuine biblical base.

In fact, in Open Theism we see humanism, as applied to theology, in full bloom. It is the fruit of the passion for human autonomy. Humanism says that man is the measure of all things. So man has come to measure God by his own understanding. To use the issue of human free-will as the deciding factor for what God can know is but another indication how open theists reason from man to God.

The capacity of the human mind to understand God and His relation to His creatures varies. Some minds can stretch to cover more than others. Perhaps the mind of Jonathan Edwards, with its brilliance, stretched much further than most others – but it still came far short of covering all. And perhaps other minds stretch to cover aspects Jonathan Edwards could not. Who knows? No human mind can come anywhere near covering it all. God’s foreknowledge is another of those things “broader than the measure of man’s mind.”

It is not wrong to reason and think after God in these things. Those who say, “Oh, we should abandon any reasoned approach and just accept it all by faith,” lead us ultimately into absurdity. What are we to accept by faith? No answer can be given except by reason.

I remember, as a student at Bethel Seminary – in another era – hearing Dr. Carl Lundquist speak on how we should love God with all our minds (Matthew 22:37). What can that mean if we don’t use our minds to think after the ways of the Lord and seek to understand life in terms of that? But as the debate about God’s sovereignty and human freedom continues – and it will – we must always remember that some aspects will remain beyond our measure. But to opt for the open theist solution is erroneous.

One other thought needs to be added. In classic Christianity the problem concerning human “free will” was a theological (*ethical*) one, and not a philosophical (*metaphysical*) one. The focus was not on the idea that God somehow limits humans by His sovereignty and foreknowledge, but that sin limits them. [John 8:34: “*Jesus answered them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.’*” Romans 8:7: “*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.*” 1 Corinthians 2:14: “*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*”] You will find precious little about this aspect of human limitation in the writings of open theists, perhaps because, as some of them have evidenced, they have a less than biblical idea of sin also.³¹

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Open theists like to exaggerate how much the classical view of God owes to Greek philosophy, but they seem reticent about admitting that their view, as it has been expressed in the last couple of decades, has far stronger ties to modern philosophy. The philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), as furthered and modified in certain respects by Charles Hartshorne, has been formative. Whitehead was a philosopher and anything but a biblical theologian. For example, he did not believe in creation out of nothingness but rather in the eternity of matter. However, out of the Whitehead-Hartshorne stream of ideas developed what has been called “Process Philosophy” and “Process Theology.” Whitehead suggested God is in the process of becoming, much as humans are.

Open theists are indebted to the arguments of this philosophy. Thus the old heresy of Socinianism is dressed up in modern intellectual garb. However, they usually say they do not believe in Process Theology, probably because they don’t want to be associated with the thought of certain radical process theologians.

But it can logically be argued that Open Theism is an attempt to use Process Philosophy to do evangelical theology. If God does not know what people and angelic beings are going to do, when they do act

Some pastors and leaders have kept people from knowing about this controversy thinking it is of no consequence and reasoning “what people don’t know won’t hurt them.” Such an approach leaves God’s people ill-equipped for facing what is the major theological error invading the Church at the beginning of the 21st Century.

³¹ See Pinnock’s view in “From Augustine to Arminius,” 21-22; see also Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 238-251.

God then learns something new. According to this view, every day and every year God is learning new things. That means His knowledge is much greater today than it was a year ago, and a year ago His knowledge was greater than it was 500 years ago, and His knowledge 500 years ago was greater than it was 2000 years ago. If that is so, He does not think about things the same way He did long ago. Is not this a developing God, a God who is in the process of becoming?

This cannot be the God who is described in Psalm 102:25-27:

*Of old You laid the foundation of the earth,
And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
They will perish, but You will endure;
Yes, they will all grow old like a garment;
Like a cloak You will change them,
And they will be changed.
But You are the same,
And Your years will have no end.*

With such an approach we can no longer count on our Savior being “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”³²

NO SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

To engage in disputing various aspects of open theistic thinking, would probably serve to obscure the truth that the whole notion is without sound biblical basis. The concept of “a partially open future,” for example, is philosophical speculation based on false presuppositions. It is an attempt to try to fit in Bible texts that definitely say God knows things about the future with the idea God does not know other things about the future. When Boyd says those who reject this notion do so because of all “one way or the other” thinking,³³ he oversimplifies. While those of us who reject it do so primarily because it is unbiblical, we also do so philosophically because to our minds the future is made up of so many interwoven contingent factors, most of them based on human decisions and acts, that to speak of God knowing some things that are going to happen but not other things is simplistic and illogical. But it must be emphasized that the greater reason we reject it is because it is without any basis in Scripture analyzed with proper exegesis.

One aspect of this false God approach, however, needs to be addressed. Basic to this whole controversy is the fundamental question that has haunted Christianity through the centuries: how can a good God allow evil to happen? Classical theologians, who call this problem *theodicy*, have recognized that in the final analysis certain aspects elude the human mind.

Open theists think they have the solution. The problem, according to them, is really our view of God. We have credited Him with too much. If we reduce our concept of Him so that He is contained in time, as we humans are, and He can only see the future as it exists now, the problem is solved. God can’t know ahead of time what people are going to do. So God allows evil to happen because God did not know it was going to happen! So with one stroke of the sword these open theists have cut the Gordian knot that has plagued great theologians, thinkers and novelists over the centuries.

Those familiar with Greg Boyd’s writings know this is a key concept in his thinking. His answer to his agnostic father in *Letters from a Skeptic* shows this clearly. His father had asked why God would allow an Adolf Hitler to be born if he foreknew that this individual would massacre millions of Jews. Boyd’s answer is that this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler.³⁴

People may applaud Boyd’s motives in that he was seeking to help his father become a believer,³⁵ and some may say that his approach provides a “creative” answer to the problem of the Holocaust. The truth, however, is that the solution proposed is false, it does not solve the problem of evil, and it is not true to the biblical revelation.

Even if we say God did not know when Adolf Hitler was born that he would massacre millions of Jews, the fact still remains that when Hitler’s atrocities began God had sufficient time to realize what was

³² Hebrews 13:8.

³³ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 144.

³⁴ See Gregory A. Boyd & Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* (Victor Books, 1994), 25-31; and *God of the Possible*, 98.

³⁵ In this respect a comment by John A. Frame in *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 28, is noteworthy: “It is remarkable how many heresies are traceable to apologetic motives.”

going to happen and He still did not stop Hitler. The problem of God allowing evil has not been solved by this approach.

Classical Christian theologians through the centuries have refused this solution because their study of the Scriptures would not let them reduce God in this way. They would say such a view of God represents less than the God of revelation.

A couple of Bible examples could be cited. In 2 Kings 8:10-13, Elisha the prophet wept and told Hazael the reason why: “*Because I know the evil you will do to the children of Israel: Their strong holds you will set on fire, and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child.*” He informed Hazael that God has revealed that he would become king over Syria. Here is a Bible example of God foreknowing the evil this man would do. Daniel 11:33 contains a prophecy of how under the dominance of a “vile person” who would arise in the future people “*shall fall by sword and flame, by captivity and plundering.*” Here is another case of God foreknowing – and telling – about an individual who would do great evil.

God has His own purposes and reasons, beyond our understanding, for tragedy, suffering and other evils that occur. To ascribe limits to God’s knowledge to solve the problem is not the way to go; to admit limits to our own understanding is.

LESSONS FROM THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

Centuries ago a controversy raged in Christendom concerning another central doctrine: whether Jesus was truly God. A knowledge of what happened can be instructive for us today.

When a dispute arose between Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, and his presbyter, Arius, over Arius’ idea that the Son of God was Himself created and therefore not truly divine like the Father, the emperor first tried to solve the problem by describing the dispute as “very trifling and indeed unworthy to be the cause of such a conflict.” When he discovered the dispute was not going to be settled so easily, Constantine called a council of the whole church, the first ‘ecumenical’ (general) council at Nicaea in AD 325. The council decided for the position that the Son is uncreated and *of the same essence* as the Father, which was advocated by the party under the leadership of Athanasius (about AD 296-373). The statement of doctrine produced at Nicaea, with certain later modifications, became one of the great creeds of Western Christianity.

This was by no means the end of the controversy. Not only did Arius and his followers persist in their ideas, but a third faction, the Semi-Arian or Eusebian party, attempted to be a mediation between Arianism and Athanasianism, and actually amplified the conflict. The controversy raged on widespread, at times violent,

Arius was an interesting individual. We are told he was “a man of pure and ascetical life.” He and his teaching had a profound impact on many individuals. At the same time, whether or not it was true of him, evidence suggests an element of deceitfulness in some of his followers

One of the things about the Arians was their great use of Scripture texts to prove that Christ had a beginning and was to be considered different from the Father. They believed they were biblical.

Martin R. DeHaan has told of a farmer friend who helped him set traps to catch rats, which had invaded a chicken coop. The farmer said: “No rat will touch an exposed trap. You must disguise it with food. Fill a pan with meal and place the trap in it. Cover it well with meal so it is completely hidden.”

It worked. The next morning they had caught a big fat rat.

DeHaan reflected that Satan carefully disguises his trap with truth. The numerous false cults and religions in the world all set their traps of error in a pan of meal. Many quote the Bible.

This is why we must “*Test all things. . .*” (1 Thes. 5:21).

and prolonged, lasting in all almost a century. Whole sections of Christendom were rent asunder. Political favor shifted from side to side, depending on who the emperor was. The champion for the orthodox view of the Trinity, Athanasius, was exiled five times. His unswerving persistence ultimately, under God, won the day, and now he is regarded as one of the spiritual giants in the history of Christianity.

Arianism, however, lived on. Its religious descendants are found in the Unitarians and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

It might be wise to realize that major controversies such as that concerning Arianism and Open Theism are not easily

solved. Simple denominational politics will not do it. Those who want a mediating, compromising position may for a while exert influence and try to hold things together, but ultimately some clear resolution must come – for the two different positions are fundamentally incompatible. And even some ecclesiastical decision will not immediately end the conflict.

INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNITY

This whole controversy in our era is being complicated by the influence of what has been called “postmodern thought.”

At one time in the western world, people generally believed truth existed in an objective sense (out there) and most believed in logic, moral principles, and revelation from God. This could be termed *premodern*. In the 18th century, with the influence of the Enlightenment and its ideas of progress, came the shrinking of objective truth to what could be ascertained by the scientific method – this type of thinking has been termed *modern*. *Postmodernity* has abandoned belief in objective truth (out there) and accepts only a subjective understanding. “Truth” is what an individual or culture make it out to be. The common saying in educational circles is: **“Truth exists only in the construct.”**

**It is wrong to judge
the acceptability of a doctrine
according to the
personal popularity of its proponents
rather than
according to
what Scripture truly teaches.**

Many people unknowingly evaluate and operate in patterns associated with this way of thinking.

This postmodern thinking has invaded evangelical circles in a number of instances. Several “evangelical” theologians have forsaken any claim to objective truth. To cite but one example, J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh of Toronto’s Institute for Christian Study, in their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, reject any such notion outright: “Since all worldviews in a postmodern reading are merely human inventions, decisively conditioned by the social context in which they occur, and certainly not given to

us by either nature or revelation, any ‘truth’ we claim for our cherished positions must be kept strictly in quotation marks.”³⁶ Some go so far as to say that any evangelical concern for truth is wrongheaded and irrelevant.³⁷

Some have said, “Why lump Dr. Greg Boyd in with Pinnock, Sanders, etc.? He does not believe everything they believe.”

The issue is not simply about Boyd but about Open Theism. The arguments Boyd uses are not particularly original: they can be found in the writings of other open theists and process theologians. Furthermore, Boyd’s report, posted on the Open Theism website on the internet, regarding the action taken at the BGC Annual Meeting in 1999, was revealing in that it made it quite clear he views himself as a champion for Open Theism.

Attempts to distinguish Dr. Boyd from the rest of the open theists are misleading. He may argue he does not necessarily believe everything others in the movement do, but he is in agreement with them on the essentials regarding their view of God. And he wants open theists to be accepted into the evangelical camp.

Since truth, according to postmodernity, exists only in the construct and each individual has his own construction, it is apparent different people’s constructs will be logically incompatible. That is seen as O.K. Logic is not considered a valid device for determining truth. In such thinking, because everyone’s beliefs are seen as having equal validity, attempts to persuade are seen as acts of aggression to be disparaged. In society the idea is, “You don’t have any right to impose your beliefs on anyone else.”

Concomitant with these ideas growing in society, a sort of “evangelical political correctness” philosophy has developed many places in evangelical denominations, and especially in the Baptist General Conference. For example, it is considered unacceptable to refer to an idea as “heresy” or to a person as a “heretic.” The term is said to have bad

connotations and to arouse emotional reactions so we are not to use it. In fact, to call a person a heretic is viewed as worse than a person actually being a heretic! By the same token, a person who says an individual is deceptive and misuses words, even when it is manifestly true, is viewed as worse than the person who is deceptive. To point out the errors, inconsistencies, and falsehoods in a theological argument is construed as “mean spirited.” The words “civil,” “civility” and “Pietism” are set-up like roadblocks to prevent any form of judgment or conclusions.

³⁶ J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 4-5.

³⁷ An example of this is Philip D. Kenneson in a chapter whose title is telling, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Philipps and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 155-70.

Such “evangelical political correctness” creates ideal conditions for the growth of doctrinal error.

One of the notions of postmodernity is the idea words are fluid and can be redefined any way we want to suit our purposes. Since the meaning of words is not fixed but a function of “interpretation” an individual can construct his own meaning. (An example of this was displayed when it was claimed by Bethel Administration that Greg Boyd believes in God’s “exhaustive foreknowledge without qualification.”)

What postmodern theorists will do is inundate the evangelical reader or listener with convoluted and distorted reasoning, which can make it very difficult to sort out what is truth – supposing there are still a few of us who believe in truth (out there).

An example of such convoluted reasoning is when Boyd in *God of the Possible* twists ideas around to make it look like his lesser God, who he claims “grants an appropriate degree of freedom to humans (and angels) to determine their own futures,” is more glorious and sovereign than the God of classical theology, who he wrongly assumes does not grant any degree of freedom to humans (and angels). By such means he would portray a God who doesn’t completely know the future as greater than a God who does. It takes a really astute reader to sort through such subtle and deceptive reasoning.³⁸

Another aspect of postmodern technique is constant shifting to justify one’s self or one’s position. This ability to change one’s story is seen as a function of the ability to “reinvent oneself.” When a certain idea is disproved, the individual simply acts like he never had that idea and instead advances a different idea to support his claim.

Postmodernity believes “image” is everything. What matters is not substance, but projecting a positive image. This reinforces the fallacy that simply because an individual is popular and attractive his ideas must be acceptable.

All these factors are playing into this present-day controversy regarding God’s omniscience.

One more aspect of postmodernity must be mentioned. Since people hold different constructs of truth, and these are logically incompatible, what do we do? The postmodern answer is that we must keep the conversation going. We must not reach any judgments, nor say anyone or anything is right or wrong; we must simply keep the topic open for consideration as acceptable. When Bethel Administration has said, “We want open discussion and debate on Open Theism,” one gets the definite impression this is what they mean. They would say that continuing debate is all right as long as no conclusions are reached, no judgments declared, and no action taken contrary to Greg Boyd.

Meanwhile class after class of Bethel College students have been conditioned to have a “soft” attitude toward Open Theism.

The influence and implications of postmodernity will trouble true Bible-believing Christians for years to come – if the Lord tarries – and there is a good chance certain new “divisions” and alignments may result as a consequence. The storm clouds of this controversy are just being seen on the horizon. Many pastors and people in evangelical churches have been sleeping and are still sleeping in regard to what has been developing in the decade of the 1990s. American evangelicalism which emerged in the last half of the twentieth century, has been seriously undermined and is rapidly waning as a genuine theological and spiritual force and we are entering another era, perhaps comparable in some ways

Exercising the degree of doctrinal exclusiveness called for in Scriptural Christianity is not always comfortable. Many of us want to be “nice” guys who would avoid a fight if we could. It is much easier to go along with an inclusive attitude that would allow almost any belief as long as an individual exhibits other admirable traits, abilities, and ideas. We could use the humanistic idea of “academic freedom” to justify our latitude and compliment ourselves on how intellectually sophisticated, humble, broadminded, and loving we are.

In obeying the Scriptures that call us to take a stand and teach clearly about sin and falsehood, we run the risk of being called “narrow,” “fundamentalist,” “unloving,” and even “divisive” – though the true cause of the divisiveness should be traced to those who introduce and promote alien and unscriptural doctrine. Many will fail to understand our love for God, for people, and for truth. Nor will they understand our concern that false theology ultimately hurts people.

**A major issue before us
is
whether we will have the courage
to practice
a healthy biblical
intolerance
of false doctrine
or
whether we will succumb
to contemporary, worldly,
spiritually unhealthy
notions of
tolerance.**

(See Jude 3; 2 Tim. 4:2-4; Rom. 16:17; Eph. 4:14-15)

³⁸ This can be found on p. 68 in *God of the Possible*.

to the former fundamentalist—modernist contest.

Scripture warns us of those who are "*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.*"³⁹

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

Among the things I think I have learned is the truth that God is more concerned about *sin* than about *suffering*. A related idea is that He is more concerned about *major error* than about *controversy*. I know many would not agree with that, but think about it.

I believe it would be sinful to raise a controversy over some things. I also believe it would be sinful not to raise a controversy over an issue of the magnitude of Open Theism.

Institutionalism has become one of the main problems in dealing with serious doctrinal error. Leaders in denominations and schools seek to subvert controversy. Their view of Christianity is *primarily* institutional. Their emphasis is on raising money and advancing plans and any conflict is seen as counter-productive. **Thus they are more interested in preventing controversy than in countering error.**

This is one reason for the drift into liberalism so apparent in several main-line denominations.

The approach is usually to set up social machinery to subdue and silence disputes.

Think how different this is from what occurred in New Testament times. In the early church a powerful storm of ideas and passions arose over the question whether Gentile converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised and brought under regulations of the Mosaic Law. To deal with the problem a great council of church leaders was held. In wide open discussion and "much dispute" they set about hammering out what was right. They came to a clear decision. The position of the Judaizers was rejected.⁴⁰

The idea of setting up a committee to handle the problem seems not yet to have been conceived. Frankly, such an approach comes more from the corporate halls of the American business world than from Scripture.

Seriously difficult days are ahead for those who believe in truth and who are committed to clear Scriptural positions.

But so be it!

As the Apostle Paul so succinctly put it: "*Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar.*"⁴¹

GAMALIEL

A Patron Saint for Postmodernists and Religious Pragmatists

In the 5th chapter of Acts, we have an account of how Peter and the other apostles were brought before the Jewish council. The fury of the council was subdued by the advice of Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who told them:

"... let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it."

Some, in times of controversy, say they are taking a position similar to that of Gamaliel.

Well, I think two things about Gamaliel should be pointed out. **One, he was not a Christian believer!** He was a man who spoke the wisdom of the world, not the wisdom of God.

Two, he was wrong! Things can succeed without being from God. Unless you are prepared to acknowledge that Scientology, the Mormon Church, Jehovah's witnesses, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are all of God – because they have experienced great success at different times – you better not buy into Gamaliel's false criterion.

That quaint and effective preacher, Vance Havner, had a sermon entitled, *Gamaliel, the Appeaser*. In it he told how he had once been much impressed with this individual as a sane and sound, level-headed, reasonable man. But he had come to have a radical change of mind about Gamaliel. He was an appeaser who compromised. Because he was unwilling to straightforwardly deal with the truth, he missed the truth.

The attitude of appeasement has infected the professing church said Havner. "It straddles the fence with Gamaliel." One of the successors to this Jewish teacher was Erasmus, "attempting always to shade down his Yes till it is almost a No, and to burnish up his No until it might almost pass for a Yes."

If it had been up to Erasmus we would never have had a Reformation. The true heart of Christianity beat with Luther, the man of truth, convictions, and passion -- not Erasmus.

Someone has observed that the real weakness of Evangelicalism in America has been that it has had far too many Erasmuses and not enough Luthers!



³⁹ 2 Timothy 3:7.

⁴⁰ Acts 15:5-21.

⁴¹ Romans 3:4.