

# OPEN THEISM

## INTRODUCTION

With the exception of Faustus Socinus, his followers and a few others, it could have been said throughout most of church history, “Everyone who believes in God at all believes that He knows what you and I are going to do tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup> However, such a claim can no longer be made. Over the past couple decades a minority of highly respected, evangelical, Arminian theologians and their followers, have become convinced that “some aspects of the tradition [re: the Christian faith] need reforming, particularly when it comes to what is called ‘Classical Theism.’”<sup>2</sup> They have embraced an “open-ended view of God” thinking that the “view of God as knowing and controlling the whole future from the beginning [as in Classical Theism] is ... more the product of Aristotelian philosophy than it is the Bible.”<sup>3</sup> For this reason they have been making diligent efforts to change the traditional way in which they and other orthodox theologians have understood God’s attributes and His relationship with His creatures. They have called their new theology “Open Theism.”<sup>4</sup>

Open Theism’s Pentecostal-Charismatic connection is no doubt significant. “Open Theism is not a Pentecostal theology, though Dr. Clark Pinnock, who is a Pentecostal, is often thought of as fathering the movement .... Open Theism is quite cross-denominational. Yet, it seems worthy to note that Openness is being received well in Pentecostal circles.”<sup>5</sup> In more recent days Open Theism has been vigorously debated by many evangelical groups affected by it.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1952), 148. Besides denying the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity and vicarious atonement of Christ et cetera, the Socinians taught that “God is an individual; He is neither omnipresent...nor is He omniscient, for his foreknowledge is limited to the necessary and does not apply to the possible. If He foreknew the free acts of men, there would be no human freedom.” Klotsche & Mueller, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, (Burlington, IO: Lutheran Literary Board, 1945), 225. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989, orig. 1871-1873), 400-401.

<sup>2</sup> John Sanders, “*What is Open Theism?*” [www.opentheism.org](http://www.opentheism.org)

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Boyd & Edward K. Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994). 33-34. The words are Greg’s, not Edward’s. [Boyd is professor of theology at Bethel College and senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church of St. Paul, Minnesota. Both the college and the church are associated with the Baptist General Conference].

<sup>4</sup> Other names used include Free-will Theism, Open Theology, Openness of God Theology, Relational Theism, Creative-love Theism, Divine-risk Theology, Neo-Arminianism, and Neo/New Theism. The last one is possibly the most accurate.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Holt, Web Master. From Holt’s introduction to article by Dr. Pinnock, “God as Most Moved Mover, How the Pentecostal Theology of Experience is Changing Our Understanding of God,” *Worship Leader Magazine*, Nov-Dec. 2001. Pinnock is a philosopher-theologian who serves as professor of theology at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario.

<sup>6</sup> After about eight years of debate on Open Theism, the Evangelical Theological Society, meeting in Nashville, TN on 11/16/01, voted on this resolution: “We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate, and infallible knowledge of all events past, present, and future including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents.” Fortunately, “The resolution passed 253 to 66, with 41 members abstaining.” But the Open Theism debate was scheduled for discussion at the 2002 annual meeting to determine if it is within the bounds of evangelicalism. At the 11/22/02 annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting, members voted “to challenge the legitimacy of the membership of Clark Pinnock and John Sanders for violating the inerrancy clause of the Evangelical Theological Society constitution.” The vote carried 171 to 131 against Pinnock and 166 to 143 against Sanders.

this paper is to briefly 1) examine Open Theism as it affects some of the attributes of God, and 2) consider some of the Scriptures used by Open Theism to support its position. This paper will also give some reasons for rejecting both Open Theism teaching and its interpretation of certain Scriptures.

### ***OPEN THEISM AND IT'S TEACHING ON GOD'S ATTRIBUTES***

The Sovereignty of God in relation to man's free will and God's "Relationality:" Because of historical events, and in reaction to the Calvinistic view of a Divine sovereignty in which God foreordains everything that has happened or will happen, Open Theism has come up with a new and "open view of God's sovereignty." One "who pioneered openness theology,"<sup>7</sup> has written, "Given our experience of such evils as the Holocaust and Cambodia, how can one say that God rules over and controls history? What divine purpose can be detected in death camps and killing fields? History itself seems to call the sovereignty of God into question and to require us to re-think it .... Another way to look at sovereignty is to think of it as open and flexible .... By delegating power to the creature, God chooses to become vulnerable .... God took the risk that freedom might be abused, and that the creature might decide to work against God's purposes. In such a universe, God's plans can be adversely affected by perversity and disobedience. God accepts the risks that accompany genuine relationship .... God chooses to become "weak" by the decision to create a significant world God would not control .... [W]hat is required is a style of sovereignty that is open to the world and can respond to the unexpected .... God (in a sense) accepts defeat at the hands of creatures not wholly under divine control ...."<sup>8</sup> Open Theism claims that "Sovereignty does not mean that God controls everything, since God gives power to other agents. It means that God is omniscient in relation to any circumstance that arises [including those unknown to Him] and is unable to be defeated in any ultimate sense. God delights in an open creation precisely because God does not completely control it .... We are not used to thinking of God as responding flexibly to situations and taking risks .... If divine sovereignty is to be recovered as a meaningful category, we need to think of it as open and flexible .... God limits divine power and chooses not to control history or even (I would add) to foreknow every outcome that depends on creaturely choices."<sup>9</sup>

Closely linked to God's sovereignty and man's free will is what Open Theism refers to as "**Relational Theology**" or the "*Relationality* of God." In Open Theism this has to do with the openness of God in His personal relationships with humanity, as created with free will. Open Theism is often referred to as "Free-Will Theism." It is stated, "God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and He enters into dynamic, give and take relationships with us .... We respond to God's gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses."<sup>10</sup> Open Theism is sometimes referred to as a "Divine-risk Theology." God is viewed as one who, not knowing all the future, responds flexibly to situations and "takes

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[www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/145/54.0.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/145/54.0.html). Open Theism has also caused a stir within the Baptist General Conference as well.

<sup>7</sup> "God vs. God," *Christianity Today*, 2/07/02 Vol. 44, No. 2, 34. [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/002/30.34.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/002/30.34.html)

<sup>8</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," *Theology Today*, (Princeton, April 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> John Sanders in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* ..., [www.opentheism.org](http://www.opentheism.org)

risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet He is endlessly resourceful and competent [i.e. *omni-competent*] in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting His own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, He is open to receiving input from His creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with Him to bring the future into being.”<sup>11</sup>

It is in this relational area that the **Pentecostal-Charismatic** connection plays a big part in Open Theism. “Renewed believers [charismatics] experience real give-and-take and genuine partnership with God where they have a voice in genuine dialogue. We experience God .... When we meet to praise and worship him, we expect God to show up and, when we cry out, we expect God to respond .... Pentecostals are making this contribution because they are strongly relational in their interaction with God .... Relationality is the key issue and it surfaces in other aspects of renewal spirituality as well .... Though unheard of in classical theism, God actually allows us to condition Him. Prayer can change things because everything has not been decided. If things have been decided, why pray? This commonsense attitude which the Bible displays, and which is so noticeable in charismatic spirituality underlies the holy boldness which is so evidently a feature of the Pentecostal renewal .... Passive faith — the faith that just says ‘Thy will be done’ is not enough for people in renewal .... God loves a faith that takes authority, a faith that demands the gifts that we already know God wants to have operating among us. God wants us in worship to expect Him to move and manifest Himself, to call down the fire and the blessing .... The Pentecostal pattern of thinking strongly supports a relational model of God. They do not see God as all-determining or totally immutable .... This arrangement involves risks for God. ...”<sup>12</sup>

Scripture declares that the triune God created all things (including time, space, matter-energy) *ex nihilo*, out of nothing (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-5). Therefore He is Eternal, *before* all things, independent *of* all things, transcendent *above* all things, incomparable *to* all things and supremely sovereign *over* all things. As creator and sustainer of all things, visible and invisible (Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:3), God must be supremely sovereign. As the Almighty, Most High God, King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords, He is exalted as head over all, and the ruler of all things (1 Chron. 29:11-12). This is why He does whatever He is pleased to do (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Dan. 4:35). God’s Sovereignty does mean that He alone ultimately and completely rules over and controls everything — including all of history, even though, for His sovereign purposes, God gives limited and temporal power to other free agents — satanic, angelic, and human. God has not chosen “to become vulnerable” nor did He “take the risk that freedom might be abused.” He knew freedom would be abused. God never has to “respond to the unexpected.” Nothing takes Him by surprise.

God does not (in any sense) ever have to accept “defeat at the hands of creatures not wholly under divine control.” That sort of language belittles and humanizes God’s sovereignty and greatness because “the ultimate goal of history is for God to glorify Himself by demonstrating the fact that He alone is the sovereign God.”<sup>13</sup> One purpose of history, with all its horrors, is meant to show His free agents that no matter how He dispenses His rule over them, as demonstrated in the various

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<sup>11</sup> Pinnock, “God’s Sovereignty in Today’s World.”

<sup>12</sup> Pinnock, “God as Most Moved Mover...”

<sup>13</sup> Renald Showers, *There Really is a Difference* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990) 50-51

dispensations, they fail miserably to submit to His rule and then suffer the consequences for it. There is no need for this new Open Theism definition for God’s sovereignty to defend what He allows free agents to do. The tragic events such as the Holocaust and all the terrorism associated with the Middle East conflict are vivid examples that ought to at least tell the world that God means what He says. History is moving in the direction prophesied by God. He is utterly faithful to keep every promise. He takes sin seriously and judges it. And He is glorified in history, both by His love and by His wrath and judgment.

Biblical history, the incarnate Christ, and personal experience all make it very clear that God is “relational.” He is the one and only triune God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to each other enjoying an eternal, perfect, harmonious fellowship as one God. But God also wanted a personal relationship/fellowship with foreknown humans, not as robots or puppets, but as free moral agents who could make choices in response to His marvelous revelation. In a limited way He created us in His own image, with intellect, free will, emotion, communication faculties and many “communicable attributes” such as wisdom, justice, grace, love, and joy. As God reveals Himself and His will to mankind, mainly through His Word, mankind can respond negatively or positively. God delights in righteousness and grieves over sin — as only a Holy God can do. Our responses through prayer, obedience and worshipful praise are a delight to Him. He desires such dialogue, relationship, fellowship, intimacy, and cooperation. The Biblical record makes this very clear.

However, Open Theism takes this “relationality of God” to an extreme. Prayer is an expression of our dependence upon God, an activity believers should exercise daily, in fact “always” (Lk. 18:1; Eph. 6:18), but never as the exercise of “a faith that takes authority,” or “a faith that demands” anything of God Almighty. God uses our prayers to change things in accordance with **His** will, not ours. Prayer does change things — including us, but not God. He always remains “totally immutable.” God, Who is omnipotent and omniscient, cannot be viewed as being in a “give-and-take relationship,” one in which He must “take risks” because He cannot know the future actions of His creatures endowed with free wills. Everything that happens *does* have purpose because it fits in with God’s overall purposes (Eph. 1:11b; Rom. 8: 28). Job expressed this truth in his inspired prayer, “*I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted*” (Job 42:2 NIV). Scripture does *not* support the belief that “God limits divine power and chooses not to control history or even ... to foreknow every outcome that depends on creaturely choices.” That gets us to the main issue, the Open Theism view of God’s omniscience.

**The Omniscience and Foreknowledge of God** — Open Theism presents an “open view of God’s relationship to the future.”<sup>14</sup> The Open Theism claim is made that “God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we [free agents] will utilize our freedom, although He may very well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make.”<sup>15</sup> In Open Theism “The future is *partly* open and [only] *partly* settled,”<sup>16</sup> “The future is settled to

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<sup>14</sup> Boyd, “God and the Future ...”

<sup>15</sup> C. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000, 32. Cited in Rick Wade, “God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God.” [www.probe.org/docs/openview.html](http://www.probe.org/docs/openview.html)

whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it,”<sup>17</sup> “Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them.”<sup>18</sup> The Open Theism claim is made that “Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose.”<sup>19</sup> “Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential — yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict [but not foreknow *with certainty*] a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom .... God too faces possibilities in the future, and not only certainties. God too moves into a future not wholly known ....”<sup>20</sup> In answer to the question, “What is open view theism?” this statement is made, “Open view theists believe that the future exists partly as *actualities* (future events which God sovereignly determines to bring about) and partly as *possibilities* (aspects of the future which God sovereignly allows His creatures to bring about).” And the latter involves choices which free moral agents make — choices unknown to God until they are made and thus become “actualities.”

In Open Theism it is clearly stated: “God IS Omniscient ... God knows everything about the deeds, the thoughts, even the innermost intentions of all people.”<sup>21</sup> But in Open Theism this only has reference to the past and present “reality,” which is “knowable,” not to all the future actions of free agents. The philosophical rationale for Open Theism’s new definition of God’s omniscience and foreknowledge are possibly best expressed in these words: “In the Christian view God knows all reality — everything there is to know. But to assume He knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person’s free activity is already there to know — even before He freely does it! But it’s not. If we have been given freedom, we create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don’t exist. Thus ... there simply isn’t anything to know until we make it there to know. So God can’t foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions ... So the future isn’t nearly as wide open to God as it is to us, but is open to some extent. There are risks in creation, even for God.”<sup>22</sup> “The issue is not about God’s knowledge at all .... Everyone agrees He knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows.”<sup>23</sup>

God is omniscient, with perfect knowledge of all things (Heb. 4:13; 1 John 3:20; Ps. 139:1-6) whether temporal (past, present, and future) or eternal. God’s omniscience includes His foreknowledge of all the future including the future decisions and actions of free agents. “Great is our Lord and of great power; His understanding is infinite [or without limit]” (Ps. 147:5). He clearly glorified Himself as the uniquely Holy One without equal by His Creation of all things,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>20</sup> Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in: *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. by Clark Pinnock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990], 25-26. Cited in booklet, “God, Foreknowledge and the Baptist General Conference, Explanation and Rationale for the Proposed Amendment to the Affirmation of Faith of the Baptist General Conference” 6/22-25/99 St. Petersburg, FL.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, “God and the Future, A Brief Outline of the Open View,” Jan. 1999. [www.opentheism.org](http://www.opentheism.org)

<sup>22</sup> Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic* 30, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Boyd, Cited in Rick Wade, “God and the Future ...” [www.probe.org/docs/openview.html](http://www.probe.org/docs/openview.html)

by His complete knowledge of Israel (Isa. 40:25-28) and by His foreknowledge of future events through His prophetic Word (Isa. 41:22-23; 42:8-9; 46:9-10). Jesus, as God Himself, knowing who would betray Him (John 13:11) deliberately foretold or prophesied of this event (John 13:18, 21-27). He explained His reason for doing so with these words, “From now *on* I tell you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe that I AM” (John 13:19 lit.). Jesus was even more specific about details of His foreknowledge of Peter’s denial (John 13:38) and His own death, burial, and resurrection (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; John 18:4). Biblical prophecies for all of history<sup>24</sup> would involve an incredible number of foreknown actions by free moral agents. No wonder the Apostle Paul wrote these inspired words, “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out*” (Rom. 11:33)!

The Open Theism view of God’s omniscience and God’s foreknowledge belittles God. To define “reality” as that which is “knowable” in terms of only the past and present actions is fine for people on planet earth. But God is God, not a man. How can we possibly limit God’s view of “reality” only to that of a man’s view? As far as God is concerned all of the future is “reality” to Him, and is “knowable” to Him, because He has always known all about it. That’s what God meant when He declared, “*To whom would you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me that we should be alike? ... For 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*” (Isa. 46:5, 9-10 NASB).

**The Immutability of God** — Open Theism promoters claim that classical theism relative to God’s immutability developed early in church history through the influence of the “Greek philosophers who held that divine perfection would have to understand God as never changing .... Aristotle thought that God must be independent of everything and dependent on nothing .... God must be incapable of being affected by any other being because that would involve a kind of changing .... The Greek philosophers held to what we could call the dogma of God’s absolute unchangeableness .... [The Open Theism claim is made that] St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas ... took the pagan legacy of utter unchangeability in God and merged it with the biblical teaching. It ... introduced distortions into the definitions of many of the attributes of God ... It left us with the lifeless picture of an immutable and unchangeable, timeless and completely actualized God and saddled us with numerous self-contradictions ... God nevertheless is flexible and changing in His dealings with us and in His experiences of history. God changes in the way He feels and acts in response to our input and is free to alter His plans in relation to what we decide.”<sup>25</sup>

God’s eternal pre-existence prior to His creation of everything out of nothing indicates that God “must be independent of everything and dependent on nothing.” This is true not because Aristotle said it, but because of who God is. All of creation changes<sup>26</sup> but God never changes (Mal. 3:6;

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<sup>24</sup> “The late Professor Barton Payne, in his comprehensive catalogue of prophecies, lists 1,817 predictions in the Bible (1,239 in the OT and 578 in the NT) ... See J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), 674-75; 665-70.” Cited in Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Pinnock, “God as Most Moved Mover ...”

<sup>26</sup> This is partly demonstrated through the second law of thermodynamics. See Romans 8:19-23.

Heb. 1:10-12). There “*is no variableness, neither shadow of turning with Him*” (James 1:17). God the Son is “*the same yesterday, and today, and forever*” (Heb. 13:8). God is “unchangeable in every aspect of being.” His nature never changes. God’s immutability as taught in the Scriptures and in classical theism, is true and not because of Greek philosophy. God Almighty, the self-existent, eternal, infinite I AM, cannot change and still be God. God answers prayer according to His will. The various dispensations clearly indicate that God changes the manner in which He administers His rule over humanity. But He does so to enable mankind to recognize that regardless of what ruling factors He implements to govern man’s behavior, man cannot possibly meet God’s righteous standard of perfection. Such administrative changes in God’s economies indicate neither change in God Himself nor His lack of foreknowledge of man’s inability and failure. God does not “learn” anything by the choices of free moral agents. But it is His purpose that free moral agents “learn” by the choices they make.

### ***OPEN THEISM AND ITS INTERPRETATION OF GOD’S WORD***

In a brief outline of “the Open view of God’s relationship to the future,”<sup>27</sup> one author (typical of other Open Theism teachers) has given us “the scriptural grounds on which it is based.” Open Theism acknowledges “that there are many passages of Scripture which depict God as foreknowing and/or predestining certain things about the future.” Such passages refer to that part of the future which is closed/settled in God’s mind. Open Theism is based on the “many passages of Scripture which suggest that some of the future is open (not settled) and is known by God as such.” Promoters are “compelled to take both sets of passages as literal and thus to draw the conclusion that the future which God faces is partly open and partly settled.”<sup>28</sup> Some passages suggesting that “the future is open” are listed in different categories as follows:

1. Open Theism’s claim: “The Lord frequently *changes his mind* in the light of changing circumstances or in the light of prayer (Ex. 32:14; 2 Kings 20:1-7; 1 Chron. 21:15; Jer. 26:19; Ezek. 20:5-22; Amos 7:1-6; John 1:2; 3:2, 4-10). Other times He explicitly tells us He will change His mind if circumstances change (Jer. 18:7-11; 26:2-3; Ezek. 33:13-15). This willingness to change is portrayed as one of God’s attributes of greatness (Joel 2:13-14; John 4:2).”<sup>29</sup>

A Biblical response: It is true that Scripture speaks of God *changing His mind*. However, that in no way implies that God does not know what will take place in the future. Scripture also says that God does not change His mind. To complicate matters, verses that depict God as both changing His mind and not changing His mind use the same Hebrew verb. Does God change His mind? The best answer is that it all depends upon the context. Sound principles of hermeneutics demand that context is king. David Lamb explains, “An examination of the relevant passages has thus revealed a pattern. The text portrays God as unchangeable or changeable in certain specific contexts. Context is therefore crucial to understand the apparent biblical paradox.... In contexts where there could be uncertainty as to whether or not he will be faithful, the text declares that God does not waver from his commitments. In contexts of imminent judgment from God, when people repent or intercede he

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<sup>27</sup> Boyd, “God and the Future, A Brief Outline of the Open View,” Jan. 1999. [www.opentheism.org](http://www.opentheism.org)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

changes his mind and shows mercy.... The fact that God does not change his commitments but remains faithful to his promises is great news, but the fact that he does change when people repent is even greater news.”<sup>30</sup>

It is true that God changes His mind in certain contexts as He deals mercifully with mankind. However, that fact says absolutely nothing about His omniscience. This claim by Open Theists is simply a fallacious argument known as a non sequitur—a flaw in logic in which the conclusion does not follow from the premises or the evidence presented.

2. Open Theism’s claim: “A number of times He expresses *regret* and *disappointment* over how things have turned out — even over previous decisions He has made which went [awry] because of human free will (Gen. 6:5-6; 1 Sam 15:10,35; Ezek. 22:29-31).”<sup>31</sup> “[I]f we simply accept the plain meaning of Scripture, we learn that God sometimes regrets how decisions He’s made turn out.”<sup>32</sup> Genesis 6:5-6 serves as an example: Because of God’s “regret and disappointment, shock and grief” at the time of the flood He decides to make some changes for the future. And the claim is made, “Whatever God decides, He will never be the same again. God now knows what it is to experience grief .... [After the flood] the sign of the rainbow that God gives is a reminder to Himself that He will never again tread this path. It may be the case that although human evil caused God great pain, the destruction of what He had made caused Him even greater suffering. Although His judgment was righteous, God decides to try different courses of action in the future.”<sup>33</sup>

A Biblical response: God, with foreknowledge of man’s sin and rebellion, provided a Savior who, from God’s eternal perspective, was slain before man was even created (Rev. 13:9). If He had no foreknowledge of man’s sin, why would a provision be made for the Savior? In fact He “*has saved us [believers], and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity [or before time began]*” (2 Tim. 1:9 NASB). Because of God’s holy, loving nature, He can and does genuinely *grieve* in a divine manner because of sin and its consequences. But it is inconceivable that an infinitely perfect, omniscient, immutable God can suffer the terrible agony of “regret and disappointment, shock and grief” over His own bad, faulty decision which had such terrible, unforeseen consequences — so much so that He creates a beautiful rainbow to remind Himself never to do that again. One would think He had a better memory than that! “He will never be the same again” does not sound like the One who is “*the same yesterday, and today and forever*” (Heb. 13:8). If “God now knows ...” by experience something that, through His own ignorance, He did not know before, then God must be “learning” new things all throughout history. The Scripture does not teach this new Open Theism concept of our God being ignorant of anything. God is omniscient! How can God’s judgment be “righteous” when it was so bad that God, like an experimenting chemist, “decides to try different courses of action in the future?” The basis for

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<sup>30</sup> David T. Lamb, “The Immutable Mutability Of YHWH,” *Southeastern Theological Review*, STR 2:1 (Summer 2011)

<sup>31</sup> Boyd, “God and the Future.”

<sup>32</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, 49-50. Cited in Stephen N. Williams, “What God Doesn’t Know, *Were the biblical prophecies mere probabilities?*” [www.christianitytoday.com/bc/9b6/9b6016.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/9b6/9b6016.html)



such Open Theism claims is its failure to recognize analogous literary form and its assumption of God's ignorance of free agents' future decisions.

3. Open Theism's claim: "Other times He tells us He's *surprised* at how things turned out, for He *expected* a different outcome (Isa.5:3-7; Jer. 3:6-7; 19-20)."<sup>34</sup> When God says, "I thought Israel would return to Me but she has not" (Jer. 3:6-7), not only is He "explicitly depicted as not knowing the specific future," but also "God himself says that He was mistaken about what was going to happen."<sup>35</sup> "Since God is omniscient, He always knew that it was remotely possible for His people to be this stubborn .... But He genuinely did not expect them to actualize this remote possibility .... God wasn't caught off guard (for He knew this stubbornness was possible), but He was genuinely disappointed (for He knew the possibility was improbable and hoped it wouldn't come to pass)."<sup>36</sup>

A Biblical response: How many mistakes is God allowed to make and still remain perfect? How can God, who is perfect and holy, separated from all creation by the uniqueness of His infinite perfections/attributes make mistakes and remain perfect? God makes no mistakes because He is infinitely perfect. And He is never shocked by anything that happens. He can never be "*surprised* [as we humans are] at how things turned out" or *disappointed* by unfulfilled expectations. That's what separates Him from man.

Concerning Jer. 3:6-7; 19-20, it is evident that Israel's terrible backsliding, idolatry and rebellion is prophesied by God in numerous places in Scripture — prior to Jeremiah's time and afterwards. Moses wrote all about it, along with the terrible consequences Israel would suffer, even before Israel was ever a national entity established in Canaan (Deut. 4:25-31; 28:15-29; 31:16-30). The Lord said to Moses that after his death "*this people [Israel] will rise up, and play the harlot after the strange gods of the land, to which they go to be among them, and will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them. Then my anger shall be kindled against them ... and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them ....*" (Deut. 31:16-17 NIV). In light of all His many prophesies, how could God have possibly been *surprised*, *mistaken* and *disappointed* by Israel's failure to meet His expectations? Obviously, in God's mind, Israel's continuing rebellion was certainly no "remote possibility," it was absolutely certain! And God knew all there was to know about it before it ever happened.

4. Open Theism's claim: "In several passages the Lord explicitly tells us that He *did not know* that humans would behave the way they did (Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35)."<sup>37</sup>

A Biblical response: Concerning Jer. 7:31 and 19:5, How could God be so ignorant of the fact "that humans would behave the way they did" when about a hundred years earlier under Kings Ahaz (2 Ki. 16:3) and Manasseh (2 Ki. 21:6) Israel had already sacrificed some of their children? God was possibly affirming the fact that He had certainly never even thought of commanding Israel to do such horrible things.

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<sup>34</sup> Boyd, "God and the Future."

<sup>35</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Boyd, "God and the Future."

5. Open Theism's claim: "The Lord frequently tests His people *to find out* whether or not they'll remain faithful to Him (Gen. 22:12; Ex. 16:4; Deut. 8:2; 13:1-3; Judg. 2:20-3:5; 2 Chron. 32:31).<sup>38</sup>

A Biblical response: Any divine "test ... to know" (such as Deut. 8:2, 13:3) is an anthropomorphism and/or a use of "know" in the sense of "experience" rather than prognosis, intuition, or intellect. When God said, "now I know ..." perhaps He means, "Now I *know* by observation and experience what I *knew* or *foreknew* by prognosis."<sup>39</sup> Gen. 22:1-14 gives the account of God testing Abraham's faith to make it stronger. God wanted Abraham to be convinced that He, Jehovah-Jireh, was his provider, faithful to His promise — even in the face of impossibilities. The test was for Abraham's learning, not God's learning. God doesn't have to send trials/testings "*to find out*" anything that He doesn't already know. "Now I know that thou fearest God" is simply God's acknowledging that Abraham had passed the test as He foreknew he would. God's tests are for man's learning not for God's (Eccl. 3:18-19).

### CONCLUSION

Open Theism<sup>40</sup> is a dangerous departure from the traditional views of classical theism 1) as revealed in the Word of God taken as a whole, and 2) as taught by orthodox theologians throughout 2000 years of Church history.

Open Theism is rooted in faulty hermeneutics. They claim that the "Lord explicitly tells us that He *did not know* that humans would behave the way they did."<sup>41</sup> As evidence they cite Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; and 32:35 as support. However, these texts do not even imply what they claim. In each case, we are told that God did not command Israel to commit acts of abomination and it did not even come into His mind or heart for them to do such horrendous deeds. Yet the Open Theists reinterpret those words to say that God did not know that Israel would commit these abominable acts. Only by reading their preconceived theology into these texts of Scripture could they arrive at such an interpretation. This is certainly a clear case of eisegesis rather than following sound principles of hermeneutics.

Open Theism also minimizes Divine sovereignty and maximizes human free will to extreme proportions. And in turn, this has resulted in 1) humanizing God by imposing unwarranted limitations on many of His perfect, infinite attributes and 2) distorting the relationship God has with free moral agents.

Joseph had the correct view when he said to his brothers, "*But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive*" (Gen. 50:20). Our omniscient Creator-God, the Holy One of Israel, challenged His opponents to prove **their** divinity by their foreknowledge of future events. He said, "*Let them [your idols] bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place ... or to announce to us what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are*

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> J. Piper, "Answering Greg Boyd's Openness of God Texts,"

<sup>40</sup> However, it may not be as bleak as Mohler puts it: "Evangelical theology faces a crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The denial and redefinition of God's perfections will lead evangelical theology into disintegration and doctrinal catastrophe." R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>41</sup> Boyd, "God and the Future."

gods.” (Isa. 41:22-23, NASB). Then, by contrast, He proved His own unique divinity and worth of praise by declaring His own unique foreknowledge of future events with these words: “*I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images, Behold, the former things have come to pass, Now I declare new things; Before they spring forth I proclaim them to you*” (Isa. 42:8-9, NASB). God Himself is zealous for His own glory as revealed in His detailed foreknowledge of future events involving billions times billions of choices and actions of His own free moral agents. God is delighted when we, too, exalt Him for such incomprehensible, infinite, unique knowledge. To Him alone belongs Glory.

It is vital that the believer be aware of Open Theism and discerning in evaluating what is read and recommended to others — even though the material may be written by popular, evangelical spokesmen.

### ***SUPPLEMENTARY READING***<sup>42</sup>

#### **BOOKS:**

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- Ed. Douglas Wilson, *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism*. (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001).
- Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism*, (Kregel, 2001).
- Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen But Free, A Balanced View of Divine Election*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 103-114 [For a much shorter treatment].
- Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997).

#### **ARTICLES:**

- B. Caneday, “Putting God at Risk: A Critique Of John Sanders’s View Of Providence,” *Trinity Journal*, 20:2, (Fall 1999) 131-163.
- Bruce A. Ware, Book review re: David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment*, (InterVarsity, 1996). *JETS*, Vol. 43:1 (Mar 2000) 165-168.
- Bruce A. Ware, Book review re: John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* *JETS*, 43:2 (June 2000) 339-342.
- C. Gordon Olson, “A Critique of Open Theism,” *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism, An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation*, (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 447-452.

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<sup>42</sup> Since Open Theism is an extreme form of Arminianism, writers opposing it are in both the Arminian and Calvinist camp. Understandably most are Calvinists. Nevertheless, their negative assessment of Open Theism is accurate. Open Theism presents a false picture of a God having enormous deficiencies in foreknowledge of man's free-will choices.

- D. A. Carson, “God, the Bible and Spiritual Warfare: A Review Article,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 42 (1999): 251-69.
- David T. Lamb, “The Immutable Mutability Of YHWH,” *Southeastern Theological Review*, STR 2:1 (Summer 2011) p. 25
- John Piper, “Answering Greg Boyd’s Openness of God Texts,” (1998).
- John Piper, “Why the Glory of God Is at Stake in the ‘Foreknowledge’ Debate,” *Modern Reformation magazine*, (Oct-Dec 1999)
- Michael Williams, Book review re: Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. *JETS*, 40:3 (Sept 1997) 499-502.
- Paul Kjos Helseth, “On Divine Ambivalence: Open Theism And The Problem Of Particular Evils,” (*JETS*), 44:3 (Sept 2001) 493-511.
- R. Albert Mohler, “Does God Give Bad Advice? New Evangelical View of God Presents a Deity with a Backup Plan,” *World Magazine* 15:24 (June 17, 2000).
- Robert A. Pyne & Stephen R. Spenser, “A Critique of Free-Will Theism, Part One,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:631, (July-Sep 2001) 259-286. See also Part Two, 158:632, (Oct-Dec 2001) 387-405.
- Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Does God Change His Mind,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (Oct 1995) p. 387
- Robert E. Picirilli, “An Arminian Response To John Sanders’s, *The God Who Risks: A Theology Of Providence*,” *JETS*, 44:3 (Sept 2001) 467-491.