

# A Response to John Sanders on Providence “Your God Is Too Small!”<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

This essay of John Sanders is in many ways a summary of the case made for open theism in his large, seminal work, *The God Who Risks. A Theology of Providence*.<sup>2</sup> This was a pioneering work and is still probably the most scholarly philosophical-theological presentation of the movement known as open theism or free will theism. This movement, whose other principal exponents are Gregory Boyd,<sup>3</sup> Clark Pinnock,<sup>4</sup> and the philosophers, William Hasker and David Basinger, has evoked a firestorm in the evangelical community (all of these people consider themselves evangelicals) with the result that there was an effort to remove open theists from the Evangelical Theological Society. Sanders documents that dispute in this essay.

It may be significant that main line theologians, including those in the Reformed tradition, have generally ignored this controversy. An exception might be the British philosophical theologian – and a staunch Calvinist – Paul Helm. However, Sanders claims to have several Reformed worthies in his camp, viz., the South African theologian Adrio König (Sanders’ doctoral adviser), Hendrikus Berkhof, and Vincent Brümmer (Utrecht University).<sup>5</sup> The biggest gun in Sanders’ arsenal is the Reformed philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff and his view of time and eternity.<sup>6</sup> Sanders makes only a passing reference to Wolterstorff in this essay, but elsewhere he appeals to him again and again. Most of the critics of Sanders and company are conservative Presbyterians and

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the popular little book with that title by J. B. Phillips.

<sup>2</sup> Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible. A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover. A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). Pinnock, along with Sanders and others, edited the volume that sparked the whole controversy: *The Openness of God*, published interestingly by the InterVarsity Press in 1994. However, the origin of the phrase seems to come from Richard Rice in *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1980), but this pioneering book did not attract much attention

<sup>5</sup> *The God Who Risks*, 163. In a note on page 284 Sanders adds maverick Christian Reformed scholars, Harry Boer and James Daane to the list.

<sup>6</sup> An early essay by Wolterstorff has had a great influence in philosophical circles, viz., “God Everlasting” in *God and the Good*, edited by Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

Calvinistic Baptists.<sup>7</sup> Sanders dismisses such people and classical Augustinian-Reformed types (including Luther) ranging from Augustine and Calvin to J. I. Packer and John Piper as ‘determinists,’ a not very happy way to carry on theological dialogue. Moreover, any theologian who has a personal and relational view of God is claimed by Sanders as an ally for his cause. This includes theologians as diverse as Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, on the one hand, and the Lutheran theologians Robert Jenson and Wolfhart Pannenberg, on the other – and even C. S. Lewis.<sup>8</sup> A closer examination of these theologians, however, does not support Sanders’ implication that they would support his view. He simply claims too much in order to find widespread support for his program. Another dubious claim is that this is just another form of Arminianism, whereas there is a fundamental difference. Arminians maintained that God has comprehensive foreknowledge,<sup>9</sup> whereas for Sanders God’s foreknowledge is severely limited. To label this movement ‘neo-Arminianism’ does not do justice to Arminians!<sup>10</sup>

### The Issue at Stake

There are several dimensions to openness of God theology, otherwise known as free will theism.<sup>11</sup> Most of them have to do with certain biblical motifs such as the repentance of God, petitionary prayer, and the nature of prophecy and prediction. A theological issue that is often brought into the discussion is the impassibility of God, i.e., whether God suffers with his creatures. Sanders also raises an important issue of a more philosophical nature, viz., the relation of time and eternity, more specifically, how God relates to the historical process. On the basis of a re-examination of these issues Sanders and company have come to the conclusion that God is not omniscient as traditionally believed. Rather, his foreknowledge is severely limited. The issue is sometimes stated in terms of

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. John M. Frame, *No Other God. A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2001) and Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware, editors, *Still Sovereign. Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995, 2000). Frame has taught at Westminster Seminary in California; Schreiner and Ware are professors at the Southern Baptist Seminary.

<sup>8</sup> *The God Who Risks*, 163.

<sup>9</sup> Jacobus Arminius in *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), Vol. 3, 66.

<sup>10</sup> John Piper and Bruce Ware label open or free will theism ‘neo-Arminianism,’ especially in reference to Clark Pinnock, in *Still Sovereign*, 124 and 207. John Frame maintains that “open theism is not as new as it claims to be,” *No Other God*, 27. In fact, Frame and others suggest that it is a form of Socinianism, a late sixteenth century movement that was condemned by both Catholics and Protestants. The Italians Leo Socinus and his nephew Fausto Socinus, denied not only the deity of Christ but also the belief that God has foreordained the decisions of free agents and that God foreknows what those decisions will be. See Frame, *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> The philosopher member of this school, David Basinger, prefers to speak of this approach as free will theism. See his book, *The Case for Freewill Theism. A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Clark Pinnock and Gregory Boyd, like Sanders, prefer to speak of the open view of God.

God's exhaustive foreknowledge (the Calvinist view) as over against the view that "divine omniscience contains both definite and indefinite beliefs" (Sanders). Sanders makes a further distinction not always recognized in critiques of open or free will theism, viz., that free will theists and open theists differ as to the nature or extent of God's foreknowledge. Neither group denies that God has no foreknowledge whatsoever. However, free will theists believe that what God knows is "simple foreknowledge" whereas open theists affirm "dynamic omniscience" when God "'observes' what we do but does so temporally rather than timelessly." In both cases, Sanders concludes, there is agreement "that whatever is knowable, God knows it. They disagree as to what is knowable" (Sanders MS, 7-8). In short, "divine omniscience contains both definite and indefinite beliefs" (MS, 13).<sup>12</sup> I cannot refrain from commenting that it must be nice to know how much God knows and doesn't know!

### **The Repentance of God**

Since the appeal to God's repentance is one of the lynch pins of the case for open theism, I will turn to this first. At the outset, however, I want to point to the newer translations of the Hebrew word commonly translated as 'repent' in reference to God's changing his mind. It should have been apparent to translators long ago that it is hardly appropriate to speak of God as 'repenting' (so KJV, ASV, and RSV) in that when humans are urged to repent, it is of some evil thing they have done. No one – traditionalists or open theists – ever suggests that God's repentance is necessary because he has been evil. This, in effect, is suggested in 1 Samuel 15:29: "Surely the glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man that he should repent" (RSV. The NRSV reads, "Moreover the glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal that he should change his mind.") However, a few verses later (15:35) we read that "the Lord repented ["was sorry," NRSV; "regretted," NIV] that he had made Saul king over Israel" (cf. 15:11). Note the change in translation in contemporary versions. More importantly, note how in verse 29 it says that the Lord will not repent or change his mind and six verses later says that he did! People on both sides of the fence here should beware of taking texts out of context. In other places both the NIV and NRSV frequently substitute 'relent' or 'change his mind' for 'repent.' For example, Exodus 32:14: "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." Here the NIV, the New Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible read 'relent' instead of 'repent.'

These are obviously anthropomorphisms, but that does not mean that they can be dismissed as having no theological significance. Such expressions are metaphorical and tell us something significant about how God operates. Such

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *The God Who Risks*. "I affirm that the future is partly definite and partially indefinite for God (that is, the openness of God)," 75.

phrases are found frequently in the Old Testament (cf. Genesis 6:6; Judges 2:18; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2). However, the open theists are not the first to point out the importance of such passages. Lester J. Kuyper, longtime professor of Old Testament at Western Seminary, published an essay on “The Suffering and Repentance of God” in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* in 1969. This appeared later in revised form in his book, *The Scripture Unbroken*.<sup>13</sup> He, like Sanders, is critical of Calvin’s handling of these texts, for the reformer declares in principle that repentance cannot properly be ascribed to God since nothing unexpected can happen to God.<sup>14</sup> However, Kuyper, unlike Sanders, urges caution in regard to these passages and warns against under-interpreting them or over-interpreting them. Traditional Calvinists may be guilty of the former; openness of God and free will theist theologians are guilty of the latter, for as Kuyper says pointedly, to make too much of these passages is to “reduce God to human frailty and absurdity.”<sup>15</sup>

Kuyper, as a careful biblical scholar, does not pretend to know how much God knows and how much he doesn’t. His friend and contemporary, the Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof, however, responds to Kuyper’s essay in a festschrift for the latter with an essay titled “The (Un) Changeability of God.”<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon theologians like H. M. Kuitert (a Dutch maverick), Hans Küng, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Karl Rahner, Berkhof concludes, “Although it appears that they have abandoned the concept of God’s unchangeability, no one of them . . . speaks about a becoming and developing God.”<sup>17</sup> (The last phrase refers to process theologians influenced by A. N. Whitehead.) All of them stress God’s involvement in the world, “but at the same time, all of them shrink back from making God the subject, let alone the victim of a process of change.”<sup>18</sup> N. B., contrary to Sanders, God is *not the subject* of the process of change.

Berkhof also points to Karl Barth who is “the most profound” in regard to this issue, but Berkhof goes beyond Barth in suggesting that “not only we, but also God, will in the end be enriched by the covenant process.”<sup>19</sup> This smacks too much of process theology. It is not surprising that Sanders can claim Berkhof as one of his allies. The same cannot be said of Karl Barth, who has a much more nuanced, not to mention profound, understanding of God’s repentance than either Berkhof or Sanders.

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<sup>13</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, Chapter VIII.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Scripture Unbroken*, 230-1 where Kuyper summarizes Calvin’s approach to this issue.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>16</sup> *Grace Upon Grace*, James Cook, Editor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 21-27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Barth has a lengthy excursus on the repentance of God in his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume II, 1, *The Doctrine of God*.<sup>20</sup> The excursus is in the context of a discussion of two of the attributes ('perfections') of God, viz., his 'constancy' (*Beständigkeit*) and omnipotence. 'Constancy' is Barth's preferred term for God's omnipresence and immutability. "The one, omnipresent God remains the One he is. This is his constancy. It is not in conflict with his freedom and his love."<sup>21</sup> Barth then warns against an abstract notion of immutability where God is immobile. Properly understood, God is immutable "as the One he is, gracious and holy, merciful and righteous, patient and wise." It is "by virtue of his constancy that God is alive in himself and in all his works."<sup>22</sup>

Barth now comes to the controversial issue of whether God changes or not in relation to his creation. Barth, along with the majority of modern theologians, agrees that God does change. "There is such a thing as a holy mutability of God." On the one hand, "he is above all ages" as their Lord, as "the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17). On the other hand, "His constancy consists in the fact that he is always the same in every change."<sup>23</sup>

Note how Barth can acknowledge both poles: God's mutability and his constancy in contrast to those who say it must be one or the other. This leads Barth into a discussion of the repentance of God, which he treats at some length. He begins by citing Numbers 23:19 where it says that God is not one who "should repent" ("change his mind," NRSV), and adds, "Has he promised and will he not do it? Has he spoken and will he not fulfill it?" But, Barth continues, this does not deny or cancel all the other passages which speak of God repenting or "retracting his retraction, returning to what he had originally said or done."<sup>24</sup>

Then Barth goes on to quote and comment on all the passages that Sanders and company love to quote in this connection: Genesis 6:6f; Genesis 8:21; Genesis 18:20ff.; Numbers 11; Amos 7:1-6; and "a decisive passage for the understanding of this subject," viz., Jeremiah 18:1-10. "That God is of such a nature that 'He repents of evil' is included with his grace, mercy, forbearance, and clemency as one of his divine attributes (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). "Therefore it would be most

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<sup>20</sup> Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957.

<sup>21</sup> *Church Dogmatics* II, 1, 491.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 495. Barth prefers to speak of God's constancy rather than his immutability because of the notion that the latter connotes inactivity. But "there is such a thing as a holy mutability of God," 496.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

unwise to try to understand what the Bible says about God's repentance as if it were merely figurative," for there is "an underlying truth here."<sup>25</sup>

Thus far Sanders would no doubt say 'Amen!', but would he agree with Barth's conclusion?

It would not be a glorifying, but a blaspheming and finally a denial of God, to conceive of the being and essence of this self-consistent God as one who is, so to speak, self-limited to an inflexible immobility, thus depriving God of the capacity to alter His attitudes and actions. God is Himself in all His attitudes and actions, as they are manifested in His revelation in concurrence or in sequence. And He Himself does not alter in the alternation of His attitudes and actions (Ps. 102, 26f.). In all of them he intends and maintains Himself, His love and His freedom. He neither loses Himself nor becomes untrue to Himself. Yet He is not prevented by this continuity from genuine life and therefore from life in this concurrence or sequence. He is not prevented from advancing and retreating, rejoicing and mourning, laughing and complaining, being well pleased and causing His wrath to kindle, hiding or revealing himself.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Sanders would certainly not concur in Barth's strong emphasis on election and predestination. For Barth, "The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel."<sup>27</sup> For Sanders, it would appear to be the openness of God and a libertarian view of human freedom.

Karl Barth's approach to this matter of God's repentance may be too sophisticated for some people,<sup>28</sup> so I would like point to the more straightforward biblical response to open theists on this issue by Steven Roy in his book, *How Much Does God Know? A Comprehensive Biblical Study*.<sup>29</sup> Roy

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., "As Creator and Lord of the world he [God] is not less nor more than he was before. Creation cannot bring him any increase, decrease, or alteration of his divine being and essence by reason of its existence as the reality distinct from himself, of its essence and its vitality, which grows and decays and alters," *ibid.*, 499.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> There have been many critiques of the open theists' use of the repentance of God passages to 'prove' that God doesn't have exhaustive foreknowledge. A good succinct critique is given by John Piper in an essay, "Why the Glory of God Is at Stake in the Foreknowledge Debate" in *Modern Reformation* 8/5 (1991), 41ff.

<sup>29</sup> Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006. Further scriptural support for a more traditional theism position can be found in *Still Sovereign*, edited by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, Part 1, "Biblical Analyses."

examines carefully all of the texts concerning the repentance of God cited by open theists and the Lutheran Old Testament scholar Terrence Fritheim, which allegedly 'prove' that God doesn't have knowledge of how certain events will turn out. Sanders himself concedes that to focus almost exclusively on such passages is one-sided.<sup>30</sup> Thus the dice are loaded, or to put it more biblically, with the openness of God and free will theists we do not have "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27b). Roy devotes a chapter each to the Old and New Testament evidence of divine foreknowledge and concludes that "there is significant evidence in both the Old and New Testament to support an exhaustive model of divine foreknowledge."<sup>31</sup> Roy also points out eight Old Testament passages that speak of the non-repentance of God and discusses two of them in particular (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29).<sup>32</sup>

The point is that there are far more passages in the Bible that refer to God's sovereignty and omniscience than those that don't. However, it is not simply a matter of numbers. There are fundamental hermeneutical issues involved here. One has to do with what appear to be paradoxical statements in Scripture, but which for the biblical writers are acts where divine decisions and 'free' human actions coalesce.

Two illustrations of a different sort: It would appear that the Jews' and Romans' crucifixion of Jesus were free acts. Yet, according to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). The apostle Paul often attributes everything to God's grace as in his testimony in 1 Corinthians 15:10. On the one hand, he says, "By the grace of God I am what I am." On the other hand, "I worked harder than any of them [the disciples], though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me." Here and elsewhere in the Scriptures God's sovereignty and human responsibility coalesce.

Karl Barth refers to this coalescence of divine and human action in terms of what George Hunsinger calls the 'Chalcedonian pattern.' That is, "a pattern of unity ("without separation or division"), differentiation ("without confusion or change"), and asymmetry (the unqualified conceptual precedence of the divine over the human nature of Jesus Christ)."<sup>33</sup> Here we are dealing with that which is both miraculous and mysterious, but that does not mean that this divine-human relationship is absurd or incoherent. However, "The event in which divine and

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<sup>30</sup> *The God Who Risks*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> *How Much Does God Know?*, 25. Such passages are too numerous to list.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 147. They are Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; 20:16; Ezek. 24:14; Hos. 13:14; Zech. 8:14.

<sup>33</sup> *How to Read Karl Barth. The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1991), 85. This idea is developed in Chapter 7.

human actions coincide, in which they coexist and coinhere . . . according to the mystery of the Chalcedonian pattern is an event that is absolutely unique in kind.”<sup>34</sup> Barth is as opposed to any form of determinism as is Sanders, but the accent is quite different. For Barth, too, “The actuality of human freedom is affirmed (and by no means denied). But the condition for its possibility in relation to God is found not at all in human nature itself, but entirely in divine grace.”<sup>35</sup> Note, that contra Sanders, the emphasis in Barth – and all those in the Augustinian-Reformed tradition – is on divine precedence and human subsequence.<sup>36</sup> In sum, in following the Chalcedonian pattern we have asymmetry, intimacy, and integrity. “This double agency is ‘intimate,’ because through the agency of the Spirit, divine and human action are thought to perfectly coincide. Yet the two actions [human and divine] have their own ‘integrity,’ in the sense that ‘being determined’ is both one hundred percent human and one hundred percent divine.”<sup>37</sup>

It is this kind of paradox Sanders and company cannot tolerate. Their goal is logical coherence rather than a bowing before the mystery. As Christopher Hall comments in his dialogue with Sanders, the latter is constantly concerned with logical coherence.<sup>38</sup> Generally this is a virtue in philosophical or theological discourse. However, when dealing with God and the great issues of the faith, one must at certain points acknowledge with great theologians like Karl Barth, that ultimately we are dealing with miracle, mystery, and the working of the Holy Spirit who moves in ways we cannot always discern. It is precisely here where open theists seem unwilling to bow before the mystery and put God in a box, the very thing they accuse their ‘determinist’ (i.e., Calvinist) opponents of doing.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 189, 197.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 206. Hunsinger supports this analysis by lengthy quotations from the *Church Dogmatics* III, 3, 113-115 and IV, 2, 578-9.

<sup>36</sup> Hunsinger’s terminology, 215.

<sup>37</sup> This is William Stacey’s summary of Hunsinger’s argument in Chapter 7 of his book, *The Mystery of God. Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 136. The last statement in this quotation is reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards’ ‘solution’ of the divine-human coalescence in the experience of salvation. Barth never read Edwards, as far as I can determine, but note how similar the approach to this matter is.

In efficacious grace we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do *some* and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all, God produces all and we act all. For that is what he produces, viz., our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors,” Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 8, part 3, quoted in I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed*, Second Edition (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1988), 40.

<sup>38</sup> *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence* by Christopher A. Hall and John Sanders (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 182.

<sup>39</sup> Sanders would seem to answer this objection in footnote no. 17 on p. 15 (MS). “By using human reasoning we do not claim to understand everything about God. There is room for mystery and paradox in our theologizing, but logical contradictions pop the circuit breakers of our mind, shutting off any understanding of the divine.” (Sanders’ cohort in this program, Gregory Boyd, at

This leads to the next issue raised by Sanders, viz., the relation of time and eternity. This is relevant to Sanders' point that "God is temporal and has a history" (MS 12).

### God and Time<sup>40</sup>

The openness of God approach has the advantage of being seemingly simple and logical. That is, God is intermeshed in our history and responds to the actions of human beings, which he can't anticipate. They probably would resonate with Walter Brueggemann's notion of God's "responsive sovereignty,"<sup>41</sup> although in the case of Sanders, God would seem to respond more than initiate. This raises again the nagging question of who is in charge in this interplay between God and humanity. Who really sets the agenda and who determines the future of our free will is the determinative factor.

According to Sanders,

At its core *free will theism* affirms that God is a personal agent who experiences dynamic give-and-take relationships with his creatures. *Open theists* hold that divine timelessness and simple foreknowledge are incompatible with the core doctrine of freewill theism (MS 14, emphasis mine).

I don't understand the distinction here for I had the impression that openness of God people also affirm that "God is a personal agent who experiences give-and-

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one point also expresses an atypical modesty in regard to the issue of God's repentance vis-à-vis God's wisdom. "Even if this is a mystery to us, it is better to allow the mystery to stand than to assume that we know what God's wisdom is like and conclude on this basis that God can't mean what he clearly says", *God of the Possible*, 57.) Nevertheless, I still think Sanders claims to know too much about God and his mysterious ways. Would that he had read Barth more carefully who keeps reminding us that we must not judge God's ways by our ways of thinking and acting. "To the glory of God," Barth maintains, we must be aware of the fact that "in the operation of God as a cooperation with that of the creature we have to do with the mystery of grace in the confrontation and encounter of two subjects who cannot be compared and do not fall under any one master-concept," *Church Dogmatics* Vol. III, 3, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 135. Actually, neither Barth nor Sanders pay sufficient attention to the Holy Spirit in this regard. It is most revealing – and astounding – that there is no listing of the Holy Spirit in the index of Sanders' *The God Who Risks!*.

<sup>40</sup> This is the title of a book, edited by Gregory E. Ganssle. There are four contributors – Paul Helm, Alan G. Padgett, William Lane Craig, and Nicholas Wolterstorff – who present four views of this relationship (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> Brueggemann uses this phrase in reference to the analogy of the potter and the clay in Jeremiah 18:7-10. However, Brueggemann goes on to point out that "the potter completely controls the clay, can reshape it, and is not committed to any form of it. . . . The oracle asserts Yahweh's complete sovereignty and Israel's complete subservience," *To Pluck Up and Tear Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160.

take relationships with his creatures.” Be that as it may, Sanders proceeds to posit two major views of time: the dynamic view and the stasis view. “For the dynamic theory, the present or now has a special ontological status because it exists in a way that past and future do not” (Ibid.). This is a very interesting, if not problematic, notion – that only the present has “ontological reality.” Already a severe limitation is being placed upon God.

The stasis theory (ostensibly the view of ‘determinists’), on the other hand, “holds that the past, present and future all have equal ontological status since all events of the past never go out of existence and all events of the future never come into existence” (Ibid.). Again, a peculiar, idiosyncratic way of stating the matter. For Sanders, there are only two possibilities, the stasis theory, which implies timelessness, and the dynamic view where there are open possibilities. Sanders refers to the book, cited above – *God and Time* – but does not interact with the *four* views taken by its authors. Here we see a subtlety and variety not recognized by Sanders. Only one of the authors, the British philosopher-theologian Paul Helm, holds what he believes is the classical Christian view of God’s relation to time, i.e., “the view that God exists timelessly eternally. On this view God does not exist in time, he exists ‘outside’ time.” He acknowledges that this view – ‘eternalism’ – is now the minority view among contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion.<sup>42</sup>

Helm notes that it is now fashionable – as with Sanders and company – to argue that a timelessly eternal God can not be omniscient. However, for eternalists such as Boethius and Augustine “to an eternal God everything is present *all at once*.” Such a view is rejected out of hand by temporalists such as Sanders and his philosophical cohort, William Hasker, but Helm responds by saying that such people are “content to adopt a weakened or modified account of divine omniscience, usually on the grounds that God’s infallible knowledge of the future is incompatible with human free action.”<sup>43</sup>

Helm points out that there are at least two kinds of language in the Bible about God’s interaction with his creatures. On the one hand, there is language that “asserts God’s all-encompassing knowledge, including knowledge of matters that are future to us and that encompasses the free decisions of human agents.” Such a view is suggested by texts such as 1 Samuel 23:10-11; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 139:16; Isaiah 45:13; 46:9-10; 48:3-5; Jeremiah 38:17-18; John 6:64; Acts 2:23; and Hebrews 4:13.

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<sup>42</sup> *God and Time*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 40-1.

On the other hand, Helm acknowledges there is also “biblical language about God that implies that God learns, that he is surprised at what happens (because apparently he does not know what is going to happen before it does) and that he changes his mind.” How, then, from an eternalist perspective (Helm’s position), he asks, “Can we make sense of the biblical language of change that implies that God is in time?”<sup>44</sup>

In answering this key question Helm relies primarily on the argumentation of Thomas Aquinas (“ . . . not that God’s will changes, but that he wills change”) and Calvin’s notion of accommodation.<sup>45</sup> This is helpful, but I don’t think that Helm really answers the question. The other authors in *God and Time* offer more satisfying alternatives. They all reject Helm’s conviction that God is outside of time and hence timeless, although the latter term requires some qualification. I find particularly persuasive the arguments of Alan Padgett, a Lutheran theologian, and William Lane Craig, a philosopher at Talbot School of Theology. Padgett describes eternity as “relative timelessness.”<sup>46</sup> “Space-time, as we know it has a beginning,” Padgett avers, “but God does not. Thus God must be beyond time, as we know it, in some sense.”<sup>47</sup> Padgett rejects both the stasis view of time (as does Sanders) and the process view of time (a la Whitehead) with which the open theist view has some affinity. For the latter the future does not exist; the problem with the former is that it cannot account for important facts. Padgett, instead, argues that “God is the creator of space-time, which God transcends.” “God is the ‘Lord of time.’”<sup>48</sup> God’s time is different from our time, which I believe, distinguishes this view from Sanders, and allows for God to be both “fully omniscient” and responsive to human free acts. God, according to this view, in some sense, is immutable. Padgett explains:

God is immutable relative to essential divine attributes, those powers and properties that constitute a perfect Being. God changes only in relational ways in order to create and care for that creation. The ability to change in response to others is part of what makes God a perfect Being.<sup>49</sup>

Craig also holds to a dynamic view of time, as does Sanders, but like Padgett he comes to quite different conclusions. His chapter in this volume is entitled “Timelessness and Omnitemporality,” and he immediately raises the much debated question, “Is God temporal or timeless?” He admits that from a biblical

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 44-6.

<sup>46</sup> *God in Time*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 109.

standpoint, this question “turns out to be surprisingly difficult to answer.”<sup>50</sup> He cites biblical passages on both sides of the issue, but Craig concludes that God does not remain untouched by the world’s temporality.<sup>51</sup> In creating the world, God in some sense undergoes change, but this does not involve intrinsic change but only extrinsic change.<sup>52</sup> Craig’s subsequent argument is long and involved, but it appears that his view is that God is ‘omnitemporal’ and therefore in his “creative activity in the temporal world” he has “complete knowledge of it.”<sup>53</sup> This, I take it, supports the view of traditional theists concerning God’s foreknowledge, rather than the open or free-will theists.

This type of argumentation is basically philosophical, but it demonstrates, if nothing else, that Sanders’ two alternatives are not the only ones and that it is possible to have a dynamic view of God who relates to temporal events who is at the same time omniscient in the classical sense of the term.

There are, of course, other approaches to this question of God and time, one being that of Karl Barth,<sup>54</sup> who the above four authors do not even mention. This is not the case with two contributors to an issue of *Theology Today*,<sup>55</sup> Michael Welker, professor of systematic theology at the University of Heidelberg, and William R. Stoeger, S. J., staff astrophysicist at the Vatican Observatory Research Group at the University of Arizona. Note well the titles of their essays: “God’s Eternity, God’s Temporality, and Trinitarian Theology” by Michael Welker, and “God and Time: The Action and Life of the Triune God in the World.” In both cases the focus is on the Trinity, something virtually missing in the contributions

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<sup>50</sup> *God and Time*, 129.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 153. In his book *The Only Wise God. The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Baker, 1987) Craig clearly takes a position contrary to that of Sanders. Here he appeals to the notion of middle knowledge, “a kind of knowledge that is logically prior to foreknowledge.” This was first proposed by Jesuit theologians in the sixteenth century, 127. This is a complex idea, but here I will only note Craig’s conclusion: “Given middle knowledge, the apparent contradiction between God’s sovereignty, which seems to crush human freedom, and human freedom, which seems to break God’s sovereignty, is resolved. In his infinite intelligence, God is able to plan a world in which his designs are achieved by creatures acting freely,” 135.

<sup>54</sup> Barth’s view of God’s eternity is unique – and complex. “Pre-temporality, supratemporality, and post-temporality are equally God’s eternity and therefore the living God himself . . . . Eternity is the living God himself. This radically distinguishes the Christian knowledge of eternity from all religious and philosophical reflection on time and what might exist before and after time,” *Church Dogmatics* II, 1, 638.

Barth gives a more biblical exposition of the New Testament view of time in his *Doctrine of Creation* (*Church Dogmatics* III, 4), 581ff. One should also not forget the classic study of Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time. The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (London: SCM Press, 1951).

<sup>55</sup> Vol. 55, No. 3 (October 1998). Also relevant, but less helpful, is the essay in this issue by John Polkinghorne, “Natural Science, Temporality, and Divine Action.”

of the four contributors to the book *God and Time*. Just a few points made by Welker and Stoeger that are relevant to our subject. Welker: We must “give up the abstract opposition of God’s eternity and temporality.” And then an important insight: “A way out of this dilemma can only be offered by a convincing concept of God’s eternity that permits us both to differentiate eternity from creaturely temporality and to relate eternity to creaturely temporality.”<sup>56</sup> This distinction is crucial because the openness of God theologians level the field, i.e., they limit God’s eternal and sovereign possibilities by only “relating eternity to creaturely reality.” To put it differently, we should not measure God’s time by our understanding of time. For open theists, God can only operate according to their canons of time and history. Moreover, “Without the activity of the Spirit, the cosmic biological, and cultural processes would remain subject to the connections we call ‘simply natural.’”<sup>57</sup>

William Stoeger, the Jesuit astrophysicist, in his essay, “God and Time. The Action and Life of the Triune God in the World” begins by noting that “In attempting to treat God and time we are dealing with two very slippery and illusive realities. We shall never have an adequate concept of God, and it is likely we shall never have an adequate model of time.”<sup>58</sup> Again, a call for modesty on the part of those who seem to know what God can and cannot do in regard to his creation!

Stoeger nevertheless makes an attempt at resolving the problem of God and time, one that transcends Sanders’ two alternatives. At one point he sounds like Sanders, but then note the appeal to God’s radical transcendence:

God creates and interacts fully with God’s creation to the extent of communicating God’s self to it in a continuous and pervasive fashion. God is permanently and totally involved in God’s creation, and that creation involves time. Hence, God is permanently and fully present in time and in temporal reality. But that does not mean that God is limited by time. God is unlimited but fully supportive and available to temporal reality. Here we see God’s radical immanence in creation enabled by God’s radical transcendence of it.<sup>59</sup>

This point has been made earlier, but it bears repeating. The solution, if there is such, concerning the seeming paradox of God’s responsiveness to human free acts and God’s sovereign, eternal will is precisely in this notion of God’s

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>57</sup> Welker, Ibid., 327.

<sup>58</sup> In *Theology Today* 55/3, 366.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 373.

transcendence-immanence relationship. God's temporality must always be viewed in the light of his eternity.

Stoeger then illustrates how the new insights of quantum physics in particular enlarge our understanding of time and encourage us to think outside the box, so to speak, when it comes to how God interacts with the created order. One of the consequences is that "we must avoid conceiving of God as determinate within the world as other entities are determinate or as a cause among other causes and functioning alongside them."<sup>60</sup>

Stoeger concludes his essay by affirming that despite God's action and involvement in time and history, "we can still affirm that the Trinitarian God does not change in the Trinity's essence or in its perfection. God freely chooses through the Word and by the Spirit to act and respond within that temporal-spatial-material framework that God has fashioned and sustained. . . . This is the mystery of God and time that embraces us and all things."<sup>61</sup>

Another contributor to the issue of *Theology Today* cited above is Ernan Mc Mullin, Director Emeritus of the Program in History and Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His main interest is in evolution and whether one can discern a cosmic purpose in it. He is critical not only of scientists such as Jacques Monod, author of *Chance and Necessity*, and Stephen Jay Gould who see only contingency in evolutionary change, but also of the theologian-scientist John Polkinghorne whose view of the temporality of God is more akin to that of Sanders. Rather, Mc Mullin questions whether the starting point of the above people is not wrong. "What, if we were to suppose that God is not, after all, a temporal being?" This, of course, is not such a radical notion, for "the belief that the Creator stands outside temporal process entirely, has, indeed, been the dominant one within the Christian tradition from Augustine's day onwards."<sup>62</sup>

Here Mc Mullin seems to revert to the old view that God is timeless and is not involved in time, whereas contemporary Calvinists as diverse as Thomas Torrance and John Frame concede that God is both above and involved in time (the incarnation of Christ being a prime example).<sup>63</sup> However, Mc Mullin moves beyond the ancient traditional view. He simply does not believe that God is

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 387-8.

<sup>62</sup> "Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution," in *Theology Today* 55, 3 (Oct. 1990), 407.

<sup>63</sup> See John Frame, *No Other God*, chapter 9, "Is God In Time?"; and Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and the Incarnation*, 31: "As the Incarnation meant the entry of the Son into space and time without the loss of God's transcendence over space and time, so the Ascension meant the transcendence of the Son over space and time without the loss of His incarnational involvement in space and time." Cf. 67.

temporal as we are. “God is not one more temporal thing among other things. The Creator is ‘outside’ time created, though the metaphor is an imperfect one.” At the same time God is “also immanent in every existent at every moment, sustaining it in being.”<sup>64</sup>

Then, in a passage that I find incisive and compelling – and the answer to the openness of God theologians – Mc Mullin concludes:

God knows the world in the act of creating it, and thus knows the cosmic past, present, and future in a single unmediated grasp. God knows the past and the future of each creature, not by memory or by foretelling, then, as a creature might, but in the same direct way that God knows the creature’s present. When we speak of God’s “foreknowledge,” the temporal “fore” has reference to *our* created reference-frame, within which the distinctions between past, present, and future are real. From God’s side, however, there is only *knowledge*, the knowledge proper to a maker who is not bound by these distinctions.<sup>65</sup>

Precisely! This is the point I have been trying to make throughout this essay in various ways. The sovereign Lord cannot, and must not, be judged by our understanding of time and history. To state the obvious, God’s ways are not our ways. We do well to heed the Apostle Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians: “No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God . . . For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” (1 Cor. 2:11, 16). Just because we cannot comprehend how God can be omniscient and at the same time allow for human contingencies does not mean that both cannot be true. Our God is too big, too majestic, to be confined to our canons of human logic.

### Prayer

This also applies to prayer, another area where Sanders and the openness people find tensions that move them to conclude that God is again to some extent dependent on human decisions and actions; that God “utilizes various ways of achieving his agenda depending upon human responses” (Sanders, MS, 9).

In his Introduction, Sanders reveals that his coming to the openness of God position arose out of his questions about petitionary prayer. Early on he came to the conclusion that if God can be moved and affected by our prayers, then the traditional notions of God’s immutability and impassability were wrong. “The

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<sup>64</sup> “Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution,” 408-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

search for the theology of prayer,” he explains, “led me into other areas of providence and, ultimately, the openness of God perspective” (MS, 1).

Countless other devout believers have had problems with similar questions. How do our prayers influence God? What about so-called unanswered prayers? And, more particularly, if God knows everything beforehand, why does he ask us to pray? These are age-old questions which have sometimes led to doubt and despair – but rarely to the conclusions that Sanders and company draw.

Sanders does not deal with this issue in any substantive way in his essay, but in *The God Who Risks* it is discussed at some length.<sup>66</sup> In this essay he simply dismisses Jonathan Edwards’ view of prayers of petition as so absurd as to require no refutation. The implication is that for such ‘determinists’ God’s response to our prayers are a ‘charade’ (following Dallas Willard, MS, 6).

Two parables are particularly relevant in this regard:<sup>67</sup> the parable of the friend in need (Luke 11:5ff.) and the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1ff.). It is important to keep in mind that these are parables and that the lesson in both cases is that we must persevere in prayer.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, both parables give the impression that we are to twist God’s arm, so to speak, in order to get him to respond to our requests. Obviously God is not likened to an irritable neighbor or an unjust judge. To the contrary, if these people will eventually respond to persistent pleas, how much more will a loving heavenly Father answer the prayers of his children (see 11:13). In either case, persistent, petitionary prayer evokes a response. God, obviously, is affected by our prayers.

Sanders contends that if that is so, the traditional Calvinist or evangelical view that God is not conditioned by his creatures falls to the ground.<sup>69</sup> He insists that an honest view of petitionary prayer cannot be reconciled with the traditional attributes of God such as omnipotence, omniscience, and immutability.<sup>70</sup> This, in

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<sup>66</sup> See especially pages 268-274.

<sup>67</sup> It is odd that Sanders does not refer to either of these parables in *The God Who Risks*. But they certainly relate to the question raised by Sanders as to whether petitionary prayer “affects the divine will,” 160.

<sup>68</sup> I. Howard Marshall suggests that there are two possible lessons in the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-8). Moreover, he insists that “The point of the parable is clearly not: Go on praying because God will eventually respond to importunity; rather it is: Go on praying because God responds graciously to the needs of his children,” *Commentary on Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 463. He finds this point confirmed in 11:9-13.

Marshall also interprets the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) as not teaching the importance of importunate prayer but rather that the purpose of the parable is “that of encouraging the disciples to pray until the parousia and not give up hope,” *ibid.*, 669.

<sup>69</sup> *The God Who Risks*, 160.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

short, is the issue, although, as I have already indicated, one need not interpret those attributes in a Greek fashion.

Again, the problem posed by petitionary prayer is nothing new. That is, if God knows our needs beforehand, why does he ask us to pray? Recall Jesus' words, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:8). Why did Jesus, the one who had a unique knowledge of the Father, pray? There is admittedly a seeming paradox here, which Oscar Cullmann, the New Testament scholar (and not a Calvinist), has dealt with in a helpful way. "The paradox of petitionary prayer," he points out, is that "God knows what we need, yet nevertheless wants us to pray to him for it." However, although this is a paradox, it is "not a contradiction in God."<sup>71</sup>

Cullmann illustrates this in connection with one of God's attributes, the much maligned immutability of God.

This is indisputably presupposed in the Bible, but in the objections made to it, it is taken on its own with no reference to the way in which it is combined with another biblical presupposition which equally cannot be disputed, that of the divine freedom. Many objections to intercessory prayer, which as such seek to have an effect on God, to make God "change his mind," are based on this reduction.<sup>72</sup>

Then Cullmann makes a comment that applies to openness of God and free will theists, even though he had never heard of this movement. To wit, "Such a reduction is based on a particular mode of thinking which puts forward a view with a consistency which is pressed to the point of simplification, so that no juxtaposition of opposed statements is allowed to stand."<sup>73</sup> This is something like that which I have been saying all along, i.e., that (1) we need a larger, more majestic view of God; (2) that it is unbiblical to focus on one set of truths in Scripture to the exclusion of others; and (3) that we need to bow before the mystery of seeming contrarities and revere, not belittle, God's omnipotence.

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<sup>71</sup> *Prayer in the New Testament*, translated by John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 20. Later Cullmann qualifies this notion of paradox by stating, "From the perspective of God's communication of himself, God's foreknowledge and God's will that people should pray to him are not opposites, but condition each other," 132.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. Later in his chapter on prayer in the synoptic gospels Cullmann has a subsection titled, "The hearing of prayer in the light of God's unchangeable plan and God's freedom." *Inter alia*, he comments, "That 'everything is possible for God' (Mark 14:36) means that God can combine the plan for his kingdom with his freedom to grant the petitions of his creatures," *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Oscar Cullmann always pointed out that he was not a theologian, although his thesis about linking God's immutability with God's freedom may go beyond strictly biblical data. However, his one-time colleague Karl Barth was a theologian par excellence and in his treatment of prayer takes an interesting stance. He deals specifically with the question raised by Sanders and company, viz., to what extent is God moved and changed by our prayers? Barth here is more flexible and open than his critics give him credit for, although he does uphold steadfastly the sovereignty of God, even in regard to prayer and providence.<sup>74</sup> On the one hand, Barth readily says that God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. "For prayer exerts an influence upon God's action, even upon his existence."<sup>75</sup> (Here Barth clearly goes beyond some older, traditional views of prayer cited by Sanders in *The God Who Risks*.)<sup>76</sup> Not only that, Barth affirms that God in his free grace "makes [believes] his partners and himself their partner" in such a way that he forges a "close link between their invocation and his answering, their action and his."<sup>77</sup>

On the other hand, Barth, like Cullmann, can appeal to God's immutability, but again not in the classical Greek sense, for God

is free and immutable as the living God, as the God who wills to converse with the creature, and to allow himself to be determined by it in this relationship. His sovereignty is so great that it embraces both the possibility, and, as it is exercised, the actuality, that the creature can cooperate in his overruling. There is no creaturely freedom which can limit or compete with the sole sovereignty and efficacy of God.<sup>78</sup>

So there is a certain "reciprocity" between the freedom of God and the freedom God grants believers by his grace. We are "not marionettes who move only at his will."<sup>79</sup> We are in a sense partners with God when we pray but this codetermination of the divine action implies no limitation of the divine

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<sup>74</sup> Here, and in what follows, I am utilizing some material from my essay, "Karl Barth on Prayer," in *Prayer* by Karl Barth, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 84ff.

<sup>75</sup> *Prayer*, 13. In his final lectures Barth says that God "lets himself be touched and moved" by our prayers, however feeble, flawed and inadequate they may be," *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, Part 4. *Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 106.

<sup>76</sup> *The God Who Risks*, 160. Sanders refers to A. W. Tozer and W. Bingham Hunter as illustrations of the view that God doesn't change, we do, in prayer.

<sup>77</sup> *The Christian Life*, 105.

<sup>78</sup> *Church Dogmatics* III, 3, 285.

<sup>79</sup> *The Christian Life*, 102.

sovereignty. It only means that God's sovereignty is not that of a tyrant."<sup>80</sup> God "never lets the reigns slip from his fingers."<sup>81</sup>

This type of reasoning may be difficult for some to follow, let alone accept. It is, in any case, another illustration of what Barth calls "double agency." Prayer, as Barth explains, represents the mysterious conception of this "double agency,"<sup>82</sup> i.e., the coalescence of the divine and the human. Here Barth searches for a conceptual understanding of how events in the world can be simultaneously the effect and evidence of God's transcendent actions, on the one hand, and the product of human activity, on the other. In short, the conjunction of divine and human operations whereby the integrity of neither is compromised. Only thus can one avoid the Scylla of determinism on the part of God and the charybdis of indeterminism on the part of humans or some form of dialectical identity.<sup>83</sup>

A quite different approach to the question of how prayer fits in with the providence of God is taken by the Anglican theologian Peter Baelz, one-time dean of Jesus College, Cambridge University. He tries to find a middle way between the charge that prayer is a superstitious attempt to bend the will of God and the opposite extreme of interpreting prayer as reflective meditation. Somewhat similar to Barth, he speaks of "the cooperation which God seeks from man in the pursuit of his purposes." Also, in petitionary prayer can be seen "the confluence of divine providence with human faith."<sup>84</sup>

Baelz tends to focus on God's love rather than his grace and freedom and that somewhat abstractly. For example, "In all love there is a giving and receiving. No exception can be made of the love of God."<sup>85</sup> The answer to the question of God's providence turns on "our understanding of the strength and weakness of perfect Love." From this it follows, according to Baelz, "We may be sure that nothing will take it [divine Love] by surprise. As God is the creative ground not only of the actual world but of all possible worlds, there is no possibility which somehow have escaped the divine forethought."<sup>86</sup>

I find this less helpful than Barth's approach, but it shows that there are others out there – very respectable theologians – who are not conservative Calvinists who are convinced that, mysterious though it may be, one can hold to God's

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>82</sup> On this notion of double agency, see again George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 189ff.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 223-4.

<sup>84</sup> *Prayer and Providence. A Background Study* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 101.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 141.

comprehensive omniscience and at the same time acknowledge the active and meaningful role human beings can play in the realization of God's kingdom.

In conclusion, I would like to point out a difficulty the openness approach has when it comes to prayer. Here I am indebted to my colleague, Todd Billings, assistant professor of Reformed theology at Western Seminary. He wonders how Sanders and his cohorts can pray meaningfully the psalms of lament because the laments assume several things:

(1) That God is responsible enough for what happens in the world that God should be **complained** to; the Psalmists *blame* God, plead with God, why are the righteous suffering and the evil prospering? If this tragic state of affairs was in the realm of "chance," completely out of God's permissive control (in the classical sense of that distinction), then there is simply no reason to complain to God. God feels as bad about the event as I do, and God couldn't do anything about it because of the restrictions he has placed on himself. (2) The Psalmist assumes that God is still trustworthy to complain to, and that God is powerful enough to change the evil/tragic circumstance in the world. Why complain to God if something is out of God's power?<sup>87</sup>

Other questions could be raised in regard to the openness of God approach, but this should suffice to show that the problems posed by Sanders and company are not insuperable. Moreover, as Sanders' friend, Christopher Hall, points out, "the weakest link in the openness argument is its exegesis."<sup>88</sup> It is not surprising that their approach, like that of the older and milder historic Arminian position, has a certain attractiveness for it appeals to the self-centered autonomous side of human nature. It is typically American in its desire to bolster our sense of independence.

Sanders, Boyd, and Pinnock may not be heretics as some conservative evangelicals allege. They claim to be evangelical and probably can recite the Apostles' Creed with a good conscience. However, theirs is a diminished view of God. In the case of Sanders one could ask, do you prefer a risky God or "the only wise God through Jesus Christ to whom be the glory for ever" (Romans 16:27).

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<sup>87</sup> Billings, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>88</sup> *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence*, 158. This has been demonstrated by, among others, by Steven Roy (*How Much Does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study*) and the volume edited by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (*Still Sovereign*), both cited above.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his  
ways!” (Romans 11:33).