

An Introduction to Open Theism

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Introduction

When I was a young Christian I was taught that our prayers of petition could influence what God decided to do. Not that God has to do what we ask, but that God graciously decides to take our concerns into account in formulating his responses (just as he did with Moses and others). However, in college I was assigned some standard evangelical theology books that described the nature of God as “impassible” (could not be affected by creatures in any way) and “strongly immutable” (could not change in any respect). My spiritual life was thrown into a quandary: either I had been incorrectly taught that my prayers could affect God or the theology books were wrong on these points. The search for a theology of prayer led me into other areas of providence and, ultimately, to the openness of God perspective.¹

Summary of Openness of God

According to openness theology, the *triune* God of love has, in *almighty* power, created all that is and is *sovereign* over all. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have eternally loved one another – love has always been an aspect of reality. Love had always been internal to God and in deciding to create others, the divine love flowed externally. In *freedom* God decided to create beings capable of experiencing his love and it was God’s desire for us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with God as well as with our fellow creatures. In creating us the divine intention was that we would come to experience the triune love and respond to it with love of our own and freely come to collaborate with God towards the achievement of his goals.

Second, God is almighty in that he has all the power necessary to deliver and care for us. However, God has chosen to not override our freewill and make us love (which would not be love anyway). Instead, God restrains the full use of his power. God has not given up or lost power, he simply chooses not to always exercise it to its fullest extent.² God has, in *sovereign freedom*, decided to make some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions. God elicits our free collaboration in his plans. Hence, God can be influenced by what we do and God

¹ For a wide array of information on openness theology see www.opentheism.info.

² Some open theists speak of God’s “self-limitation” in this regard but it is preferable to say God “restrains” the use of his power.

truly responds to what we do. God genuinely interacts and enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us. That God changes in some respects implies that God is temporal, working with us in time. God, at least since creation, experiences duration.

God decided to make some of his decisions contingent upon our actions because God is love and love does not force its way (1 Cor. 13:4-7). This made it possible for us to misuse our freedom and commit sin which brought grief to God (Gen. 6:6). We experience something of what God does when we choose to have children. When you open yourself in this way you open yourself to suffering — you become vulnerable to being grieved. In spite of our sin God has chosen to endure our lack of love. However, divine forbearance does not mean that God is blind to the evil infecting us. Rather, God evaluates our situation and takes the steps necessary to try to prevent the beloved from destroying herself and bring about reconciliation. God's wisdom is adept at overcoming obstacles that hinder the divine project. God is competent and resourceful in working with recalcitrant sinners. Despite the fact that humanity failed to love God and others as God intended, God remains *faithful* to his intentions by enacting a plan of redemption.

Third, the only *wise* God has chosen to exercise general rather than meticulous providence, allowing space for us to operate and for God to be creative and resourceful in working with us. God has chosen not to control every detail that happens in our lives. Moreover, God has flexible strategies. Though the divine nature does not change, God reacts to contingencies, even adjusting his plans, if necessary, to take into account the decisions of his free creatures. God is endlessly resourceful and wise in working towards the fulfillment of his ultimate goals. Sometimes God unilaterally decides how to accomplish these goals but he usually elicits human cooperation such that it is both God and humanity who decide what the future shall be. God's plan is not a detailed script or blueprint, but a broad intention that allows for a variety of options regarding precisely how his goals may be reached. What God and people do in history matters. If the Hebrew midwives had feared Pharaoh rather than God and killed the baby boys, then God would have responded accordingly and a different story would have emerged. Moses' refusal to return to Egypt prompted God to resort to plan B, allowing Aaron to do the public speaking instead of Moses (Ex. 4:14-16). What people do and whether they come to trust God makes a difference concerning what God does — God does not fake the story of human history.

Finally, the *omniscient* God knows all that is logically possible to know. I call this "dynamic omniscience" in that God knows the past and present with exhaustive definite knowledge and knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). God's knowledge of the future contains knowledge of what God has decided to bring about unilaterally (that which is definite), knowledge of

possibilities (that which is indefinite) and those events that are determined to occur (e. g. an asteroid hitting a planet). Hence, the future is partly open or indefinite and partly closed or definite. God is not caught off-guard since he has foresight, anticipating what we will do. Also, it is not the case that just anything may happen, for God has acted in history to bring about events in order to achieve his unchanging purpose. Graciously, however, God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the open part of the future into being.

The Watershed Divide

Open theism arises out of the freewill theistic tradition of the church which goes back to the early church fathers. Freewill theists share a family resemblance when it comes to theologies of salvation, providence, anthropology, and impetratory prayer (God responds to our prayers). In fact, open theists have nothing to add to the vast majority of theological stances taken (such as conditional election) or explanations of various biblical texts propounded by their freewill theistic forebears. The "Hatfield" freewill theistic family has been in a feud with the "McCoy" theological deterministic family for sixteen hundred years.

The watershed divide separating these two families is whether or not one affirms that God is ever affected by and responds to what we do. Does God tightly control everything such that what God wants is never thwarted in the least detail? Does God ever take risks? Is God ever affected by what we do or does everything work out precisely as God eternally foreordained? Freewill theists such as John Wesley and C. S. Lewis are on one side of this divide and theological determinists such as John Calvin and John Piper are on the other.

Theological determinists affirm that God exercises meticulous providence, controlling everything that happens down to the smallest detail. Consequently, the divine initiatives in every instance are always fulfilled – God never takes risks. Humans have compatibilistic freedom (you are free so long as you act on your strongest desire) so God is able to guarantee that whatever he wants done will be done by ensuring that each of us always has the particular desire God wants us to have at any moment. Those theological determinists who care about logical consistency hold that God is strongly immutable (never changes in any respect such as in emotions) and strongly impassible (never affected by us). Regarding prayers of petition, Jonathan Edwards stated this position correctly when he said, "speaking after the manner of men, God is sometimes represented *as if* he were moved and persuaded by the prayers of his people; yet it is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers. . . . he is self-moved. . . . God has been pleased to constitute prayer to be antecedent to the

bestowment of mercy; and he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence of prayer, *as though* he were prevailed upon by prayer."³

Freewill theists believe that God granted humans libertarian freedom (you could have done otherwise than you did in the same circumstances) such that God does not meticulously control everything that happens. Hence, God cannot guarantee that everything will go precisely the way he would like. Because of sin, creation has miscarried: there is no "happy fall" (*O felix culpa*) into sin. For freewill theists God is weakly immutable in that the *character* of God does not change, but God can have changing plans, thoughts and emotions. God is also weakly impassible because God is affected by and responds to our prayers and actions though he is not overwhelmed by emotions as we are apt to be.⁴ Dallas Willard puts it well: "God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend he is answering our prayers when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does or does not do."⁵

Open theists think that two beliefs, customarily affirmed by freewill theists, need to be modified in order to improve the biblical fidelity and rational coherence of freewill theism. Both areas concern God's relationship to time. A longstanding debate among freewill theists has been whether God is atemporal or temporal. The majority view has been that God is timelessly eternal, that God either does not experience time at all (timeless) or that God experiences all time at once (simultaneity). A minority of freewill theists have said God experiences temporal succession: God is everlasting in that he always was, is, and will be. Open theists side with this minority view within the freewill family.

The second disagreement is about whether God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge of future contingent events. Though all freewill theists affirm divine omniscience (God knows all that is knowable) they disagree about what is knowable. They differ over foreknowledge, not omniscience. Most freewill theists affirm what is known as "simple foreknowledge" by which God so-to-speak "looks ahead" and "sees" in exhaustive detail exactly what we are going to do in the future. Open theists affirm dynamic omniscience in which God also

³ Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer-Hearing God," *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Edward Hickman ed. in 2 volumes (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), vol. 2, 115-6 (emphasis mine).

⁴ Most of the early church fathers were freewill theists who affirmed weak immutability and weak impassibility. See the outstanding study by Paul Gavrilyuk *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* The Oxford Early Christian Studies series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 244. Willard comments about divine foreknowledge on pages 244-253.

“observes” what we do but does so temporally rather than timelessly.⁶ Both views agree that whatever is knowable, God knows it. They disagree as to what is knowable.

Support for Open Theism

Open theists provide a wide array of biblical and theological reasons in support of divine temporality and dynamic omniscience. Due to space limitations, only an exceedingly brief overview of these reasons is possible.⁷ Before we examine the biblical material let me state at the outset that other well informed Christians interpret these texts differently, so a straightforward appeal to scriptural teaching will not settle the matter.⁸

1. The Bible portrays God as authentically responding to people.

God had the prophet Isaiah announce to King Hezekiah that he would not recover from his illness. However, Hezekiah prayed and God responded by sending Isaiah back to announce that God had changed his mind, Hezekiah would recover and not die (2 Kings 20). Such texts reveal divine flexibility utilizing various ways of achieving his agenda depending upon human responses.

Something of the same is found in the New Testament. Jesus is said to heal a paralyzed man because of the faith of his friends (Mark 2:5). He responded to the faith of this small community by granting their request. People’s faith, or lack of it, deeply affected Jesus and his ministry. Mark says that Jesus could not perform many miracles in Nazareth due to the lack of faith by the people in the community (6:5-6). As James says, we have not because we ask not (4:2).

⁶ Many critics of open theism have failed to understand this connection to the freewill tradition, claiming that the watershed is between those who affirm exhaustive definite foreknowledge and those who do not. They claim that proponents of dynamic omniscience cannot be considered "Arminian" since Arminians affirm simple foreknowledge. Though this is a difference between the views it is not the crucial difference. For elaboration on the fundamental similarities between simple foreknowledge and dynamic omniscience see Steven M. Studebaker, "The Mode of Divine Knowledge in Reformation Arminianism and Open Theism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 47.3 (September, 2004): 469-480; and John Sanders, "Open Theism: a Radical Revision or Miniscule Modification of Arminianism?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38.2 (Fall 2003): 69-102.

⁷ For more see Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, revised edition, chapters three and four; Richard Rice, "Biblical Support," in Clark Pinnock et. al. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional View of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 22-50; Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 53-87.

⁸ For elaboration on this point see my "How Do We Decide What God is Like?" in *And God saw that it was good: Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence E. Fretheim*, ed. Fred Gaiser, (Word and World supplement, 2006) and John Sanders and Chris Hall, *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003) 124-129.

Genesis 6:6 says that God was grieved because humans continually sinned. Why would God grieve if God always knew exactly what humans were going to do? It makes no sense to say that a timeless being experiences grief. Also, the biblical writers, when describing God's speeches, use words such as "perhaps" and "maybe." God says "perhaps" the people will listen to my prophet and "maybe" they will turn from their idols (e. g. Ezek. 12:1-3; Jer. 26:2-3). Furthermore, God makes utterances like, "if you repent then I will let you remain in the land" (Jer. 7:5). Such "if" language – the invitation to change – is not genuine if God already knew they would not repent. Nicholas Wolterstorff says that if God does not relate the way the Bible describes in the texts cited above then we "would have to regard the biblical speech about God as at best one long sequence of metaphors pointing to a reality for which they are singularly inept, and as at worst, one long sequence of falsehoods."⁹

Other support is derived from those predictions in scripture which either do not come to pass at all (Jonah 3:4; 2 Kings 20:1) or do not come to pass exactly as foretold. For example, Ezekiel declares the destruction of the city of Tyre (Ezek 26). Even allowing for hyperbole, two aspects of the prophecy are clear: (1) King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is specifically named as God's intended agent to destroy Tyre and (2) the city would be utterly destroyed and would never be inhabited again. However, God himself admits that the prophecy failed and so he revised it (29:17-20). God acknowledges that Nebuchadnezzar tried very hard to take the city but was unsuccessful so God said that instead of Tyre he would give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar as payment for his services (which never come to pass either).

In his study of this prophecy Kris Udd asks: "Why would God declare the destruction of Tyre by Nebuchadnezzar, if his foreknowledge meant that he knew when giving the prophecy that it would not come true?"¹⁰ Proponents of dynamic omniscience explain such "failed" prophecies as divine intentions that are implicitly conditional (if God decides not to act unilaterally). Thomas Renz puts it well when he says, "prophetic predictions are not historiography before the event but a proclamation of God's purposes" which are flexible and revisable in light of changing human situations.¹¹ Consequently, God did not deceive nor

⁹ Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good*, ed. C. J. Orlebeke and L. B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 181-203.

¹⁰Kris Udd, "Prediction and Foreknowledge in Ezekiel's Prophecy Against Tyre," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56.1 (2005): p. 35. See also, Thomas Renz, "Proclaiming the Future: History and Theology in Prophecies Against Tyre," *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000): 17-58.

¹¹Renz, "Proclaiming the Future," 17.

was he wrong since he was not declaring what would in fact be the case but what he desired to be the case.

For open theists predictions fall into one of the following three categories. (1) God may utter predictions based on his determination to unilaterally bring an event about. In this case, the issue is whether God has the power to do it, not whether he has foreknowledge. For example, God promises to bring about the eschaton. (2) God may predict a future event based on inferences from his exhaustive knowledge of past and present. In this type of prediction God states what he believes is the most probable state of affairs to materialize. A case of this type is the prediction of the destruction of Tyre by Nebuchadnezzar. (3) Most predictions are conditional in nature even if not stated conditionally.¹² God declares that some event will happen if or unless certain other events come to pass. For example, God repeatedly seeks a change of behavior from people (Jonah; Jer. 15; and Ezek. 12:1-3).

2. The Bible portrays God as testing people in order to discover what they will do. God puts Abraham to the test and afterward says, "now I know that you fear me" (Gen. 22:12). God puts the people of Israel to the test to find out what they will do (Ex. 15:25; Deut. 13:3). After the sin of the golden calf God asked the people to "put off your ornaments that I may know what to do with you" (Ex. 33:5). Why test them if God eternally knew with certainty exactly how the people would respond? One could say the testing was only for the benefit of the people since it added nothing to God's knowledge but that is not what the texts themselves say.

3. The Bible portrays God as changing his mind as he relates to his creatures. God announced his intention to destroy the people of Israel and start over again with Moses but Moses said that he did not want to do that and so God did not do what he had said he was going to do (Ex 32). Also, God's original plan was to have Saul and his descendants as kings forever in Israel (1 Sam. 13:13). In other words, there would have been no "Davidic" kingship. Latter, due to Saul's sin, God changes his mind and rejects Saul and his line (1 Sam. 15:11, 35).¹³ If God always knew that he was never going to have Saul's line be kings, was God deceitful?

There is a give-and-take quality to these texts. If God is affected by creatures and is responsive as these texts indicate then God has a before and after –

¹² This is the view of Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva. See their *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 148-9.

¹³ See Terence Fretheim, "Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Constancy, and the Rejection of Saul's Kingship." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47, no. 4 (Oct. 1985): 595-602.

succession – in his experience. This means that God is temporal and has a history.

Open theists believe there are two motifs of scripture regarding divine knowledge of the future. The texts cited above fall into the motif of the open future category where God is portrayed as not possessing exhaustive knowledge of the future.¹⁴ In the motif of the settled future God is portrayed as guaranteeing a specific event will take place (e. g. the Babylonian exile, Isaiah 42:9). If God decides to unconditionally guarantee that some event will happen then that future event is definite and God knows it as such. Since most events are not determined by God (he has given us freedom) these are indefinite and God knows them as indefinite (possibilities). Both motifs are true. God can declare the future with certainty regarding those events that are determined and God can be grieved, change his mind, or opt for plan B about those future events that are indefinite. Hence, divine omniscience contains both definite and indefinite beliefs.

Space does not permit a discussion of these points in relation to Jesus. Suffice it to say that we believe these same relational qualities are exemplified in the life of our Lord and this is important because the clearest manifestation of what God is like was embodied in Jesus (Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:3).

Theological Support

1. Maintaining the Core Beliefs of Freewill Theism

At its core freewill 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 doctrines of freewill theism.

There are two major theories of time: the dynamic view and the stasis view.¹⁵ 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. The past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist. Though we speak about “the future” as though it were an entity it is really a conceptualization we use to understand our lives. The stasis theory, on the other hand, holds that the past, present and future all have

¹⁴ I believe the biblical language about God is best understood as conceptual metaphors and are not to be taken literally. For explanation see the revised edition of my *God Who Risks*, chapter 2. On conceptual metaphor theory see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ For a discussion of these theories as they relate to God see Gregory Ganssle ed., *God & Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

equal ontological status since all events of the past never go out of existence and all the events of the future never come into existence. Rather, every event exists always because every moment of time is just as ontologically real as any other moment.

Today, the majority of philosophers hold that divine timelessness requires the stasis theory of time and since the stasis theory implies determinism (because there are no open possibilities), then freewill theists cannot affirm divine timelessness.¹⁶ Another significant problem is that a timeless being cannot be said to plan, deliberate, have changing emotions, adjust his plans, anticipate, respond or change his mind.¹⁷ All such actions require a before and an after.

The dynamic and stasis theories of time have very different understandings of the ontological status of the future and this has immense significance for the foreknowledge discussion. If the future already ontologically exists (is real) then God must know it but if it does not exist then there is literally “no thing” to know. If the future is not real then God’s knowledge is not “limited.” Open theists affirm the dynamic theory of time.

As with timelessness, the theory of simple foreknowledge has problems accounting for give-and-take relations with God. According to the theory of simple foreknowledge God “sees” all of what is actually going to happen, not what might or might not happen. If so, then how can God be said to interact, respond, suffer, or change his mind? If God actually changes his mind or goes to plan B because humans failed to do what he expected them to do then it cannot be the case that God had certain and comprehensive foreknowledge of the future. The idea that God is affected by and responds to our prayers and actions is undermined if God has exhaustive definite prescience. Consequently, open theists claim that divine temporality and dynamic omniscience better uphold the core beliefs of freewill theism.

¹⁶ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” Gregory Ganssle ed., *God & Time: Four Views*, 187-213.

¹⁷ This is shown by Norman Kretzman and Eleonore Stump, “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-458. There are those, however, who claim that a timeless God can experience changing emotions and give-and-take relations. They do not care if this is logically contradictory (A and non A). Some object that the application of human logic to our understanding of God places limits on God. 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. For further discussion see my “Mystery and Nonsense” in *God Who Risks*, revised edition, (2.4).

Overview of the Debate on Open Theism in Evangelicalism

Let me provide a brief overview of the history of the debate within evangelicalism. For many years the core ideas of openness had been buried in academic journals and I thought it was time to bring them to the attention of a broader public so I organized a team and we published *The Openness of God*. That the book had immediate impact is indicated by the fact that it placed eighth in the *Christianity Today* book of the year awards and that in January of 1995, *Christianity Today* reviewed the book with not just one but four reviewers.¹⁸ The lead review asked some good questions and was generally favorable but the other three absolutely trashed the book. One of the latter said that if only we had known of Aquinas' doctrine of analogy we would never have produced such nonsense. In 1998 I published *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* which presented the fullest case to date of the biblical, theological and philosophical bases for open theism.

In a February 1998 article in *Christianity Today*, Tom Oden wrote: "The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected. . . ." ¹⁹ John Piper, a prominent pastor in the Baptist General Conference (BGC), used Oden's heresy comment to argue that Greg Boyd, a professor of theology at Bethel College in Saint Paul and pastor in the BGC, should be fired from the college and his pastoral credentials revoked. A great deal of time and energy was spent in this attempt. A board of inquiry was formed that ultimately found Boyd within the boundaries of BGC doctrine. At the 1999 and 2000 annual meetings of the BGC resolutions were introduced to remove Boyd but they failed.

The Calvinist critics of openness had some success in the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1999 they introduced a resolution on divine foreknowledge that the delegates approved to include as a revision to the *Baptist Faith and Standard*. In 2000 the SBC approved the following: God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. However, these changes were not ratified by a number of state conventions, most notably the Texas convention, which is the largest. Responding to the 1999 SBC resolution, *Christianity Today* (February 7, 2000) published the editorial "God vs. God," exhorting the critics of open theism to continue to debate rather than seek political means to squelch it. Evangelical critics of open theism were outraged at the editorial, questioning whether *Christianity Today* could be trusted any longer.

This same aspersion was cast upon Baker and InterVarsity Presses when they decided to publish more books by open theists. One high-profile critic, who has

¹⁸ Also, it is now in its twelfth printing indicating that it continues to have an impact.

¹⁹ *Christianity Today*, (February 2, 1998): p. 46.

several books published with Baker, threatened to withdraw all his books if Baker went ahead with its plans to publish Greg Boyd's *God of the Possible*. They published the book. This provoked the neo-fundamentalist magazine, *World*, to publish a scathing attack on open theism and Baker Books. Virulent and inaccurate critiques of openness appeared in the September 1999 issue of *Modern Reformation* with the theme: "God in Our Image" and in the March 2001 issue of *Christianity Today* titled "God at Risk."

However, in May and June of 2001 *Christianity Today* published a series of e-mail exchanges on openness between Chris Hall and me titled "Does God Know Your Next Move?" This finally allowed a proponent of openness to explain the position to a large evangelical readership. The editors at the magazine must be given credit for allowing this theological debate to continue in the face of intense pressure to cut it off at the knees.

Other critiques of openness appeared in the winter 2002 edition of *Contact*, the news magazine of Gordon-Conwell Seminary and in the March 2003 issue of *Moody* magazine.

In 2001 some pastors in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (UB), a dwindling denomination that owns Huntington College, organized an attempt to have me removed from the college. A board of inquiry constituted of Trustees and faculty found that my writings did not conflict with the College's statement of faith.

During this time opponents of openness sought to get open theists expelled from membership in the Evangelical Theological Society (a predominately white, male, Calvinistic rather than Reformed, conservative evangelical, group that desires to speak for all evangelicalism). At the 2000 annual meeting the Executive Committee announced that the theme for the following year, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries" would include an examination of open theism. At the 2001 meeting over three dozen papers were read on openness. At an ad hoc business meeting the majority of the membership endorsed the following resolution: "We believe the Bible *clearly teaches* (emphasis mine) 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." The June 2002 issue of the journal of the society was dedicated to a discussion of open theism.

At the 2002 meeting Roger Nicole, one of the founding members of the society, formally charged Clark Pinnock and me with violating the doctrinal statement of the society by our denial that God possessed exhaustive definite foreknowledge. He charged that this implied that we denied the truth of scripture – his main argument was that we held that God could change his mind. The members voted

to have the Executive Committee hold a formal hearing, which was done in October of 2003. The Committee decided that Pinnock was not guilty of the charge but that I was. The reason centered on the truth value of statements about the future actions of free creatures. I said they are only probabilities, not certainties because the future did not exist. For them, any biblical statement about the future must be true in the sense that it is a certain fact to occur. It seems to me that such a view presupposes the stasis theory of time which open theists reject. The Committee exonerated Pinnock because when asked about his stand on this matter he replied that he did not know much about such philosophical intricacies. Shortly before the 2003 annual meeting the faculty of the Southern Baptist seminaries passed resolutions against open theism. At the November ETS meeting a lengthy special business meeting was held. The Presidents of the Southern Baptist seminaries showed up and spoke strongly against open theism. The vote of the membership was 67% to retain Pinnock while 63% voted to remove me. However, this fell short of the required two-thirds needed for expulsion. I think the vote represents the fact that Executive Committee voted for Pinnock and against me due to the philosophical issues. One way to read this vote is that 1/3 of the members voted to expel us no matter what the recommendation of the Executive Committee was, another third voted to keep us no matter what the recommendation of the Executive Committee was, and the final third were swing votes that went with the recommendation of the Executive Committee. Hence, the ETS is very split on the matter.

All of this fanned the flames of turmoil among the Board of Trustees at Huntington College. The push to get rid of me was led by Calvinist pastors on the Board as well as by a Trustee who was the former Academic Dean at Moody Bible Institute. Though the United Brethren denomination was historically Arminian, it was the Calvinist pastors of the five largest congregations who called the shots. They worked hard to deny me tenure. The President argued that my work far exceeded the criteria for tenure and that the Bishop of the denomination at the time of my hire had given his approval. The College administration expended a great deal of time coping with the numerous political maneuvers of these folks. Several high profile evangelicals such as Richard Mouw and David Neff wrote the Trustees of the college on my behalf and the honor society students at Huntington formed a group to draw attention to the fact that the College's published educational philosophy stated that "controversy [is] a normal and healthy part of its life as a university." However, when college enrollment dipped the President told the faculty and the Board that though the main reason was the previous increase in tuition by about 10% in one year (this made Huntington only slightly less expensive than Calvin and Wheaton but without the academic reputation), he added, based on "anecdotal evidence," that one of the reasons for the downturn was the "controversy surrounding Dr. Sanders." Thus, the die was cast for my ouster.

After the Board pulled the plug the President informed the faculty of the decision. When asked whether other faculty who affirmed open theism would also be fired the President told the faculty that no other open theists would be fired since “you can be an open theist and teach at Huntington College, you just cannot be a well known one.” Consequently, the basis for my termination was not doctrinal but notoriety.

Clearly, open theism has become a hot topic within evangelicalism. I am aware of nineteen books from evangelical publishers alone, dozens of journal articles, and over seventy conference papers. That open theism has struck a raw nerve with neoevangelical Calvinists (the movement which came out of Fundamentalism in the 1940’s) can be seen in the titles of the books against open theism: *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*; *The Battle for God*; *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*; *God’s Lesser Glory: the Diminished God of Open Theism*; *No Other God*, and, from one of my former professors, *Creating God in the Image of Man*.

All is not bleak on the horizon, however, for the openness of God is gaining a hearing in Reformed, Wesleyan and Pentecostal circles where a genuine discussion takes place. Open theists do not claim to be able to prove their view or that the model is problem free. What we desire is dialogue to see whether or not this understanding of God is really helpful.

Key issues in the debate

One of the benefits arising from the openness debate is that a host of important issues have arisen, most of which had not been seriously discussed among evangelicals.

1. Philosophical Questions

The debate raised questions about nature of time itself as well as God’s relation to time. This led to the publication of *God and Time: Four Views* (IVP). Also, the decades of work by members of the Society of Christian Philosophers on the divine attributes (e.g. simplicity, immutability, atemporality and omniscience) was introduced to a wider readership. The debate over foreknowledge resulted in the publication of *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (IVP). These books have evangelical proponents of each view expounding and defending the position so the different views get a fair hearing. Evangelical theologians and pastors finally have to face up to some of the philosophical assumptions behind their theological stances.

2. How do we decide what God is like?

Another issue that has surfaced is the interplay between natural theology and biblical theology. Evangelicals have typically claimed to simply get their views

straight from the Bible, unencumbered by social or historical location. The notion that certain aspects of their doctrine of God were at all influenced by philosophy was not on their radar screen until open theism came along. For instance, that a philosophical heritage had anything to do with the conclusion that God was timeless was not mentioned. Evangelicals were unaware that philosophy colored their interpretation of the few biblical texts they used to support divine atemporality. Now, however, evangelicals are trying to sort out the proper relations between biblical and philosophical theologies. Today I find some evangelical theologians, such as Millard Erickson, admitting that every theology is influenced by philosophy. After explaining the philosophical and hermeneutical assumptions of classical and open theists Amos Yong concludes: "Each system interprets the Bible consistently and coherently within its presuppositional framework. . . . factors extraneous to the Bible itself determines how one reads and interprets the biblical text. . . with regard to the doctrine of divine omniscience in particular."²⁰ The full import of this has not yet sunk in. Evangelicals have regularly criticized liberal theologians for allowing philosophical commitments to govern their reading of scripture. But if evangelicals do this as well then what does this do to the presumed "objective" interpretation of scripture that most evangelicals think they possess? Ultimately, this means that there is no definitive way to settle the matter and this shakes the strong epistemological foundationalism of many evangelicals.

3. *The Nature of Language about God*

Evangelicals who affirm classical theism admit that there are passages of scripture where it looks as though God has emotional reactions, or that God does something in response to prayer, or even that God tests people to learn whether they will obey, but they insist that such texts are "anthropomorphisms" and do not mean what they say. Why should we interpret them as anthropomorphisms instead of straightforwardly as is customary in evangelicalism? Because, we are told these texts are metaphorical, not literal. One thing to notice here is that these evangelicals are unaware that the very literal/metaphorical distinction is a product of philosophical discourse.²¹ The very categories they use for biblical interpretation are shaped by philosophy of language.

4. *Hermeneutical issues*

Even granting the validity of the literal/metaphorical distinction, why are these expressions metaphorical? The answer is that if we took the biblical expressions such as God changing his mind literally, then we would be "reducing God to

²⁰ Yong, "Divine Omniscience and Future Contingents: Weighing the Presuppositional Issues in the Contemporary Debate," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 26.3 (2002): 263. Yong does not take sides in the debate and his is one of the best explanations of the underlying presuppositions.

²¹ Evangelicals have not seriously engaged theories of metaphor, such as cognitive linguistics.

human proportions.”²² Calvinist philosopher Paul Helm argues that the “clear,” “strong” and literal texts of scripture can be distinguished from the “unclear,” “weaker,” and anthropomorphic.²³ For Helm, the three biblical texts that say God does not change (Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29, Mal. 3:6) are the strong, clear texts that provide the truth about what God is really like. The dozens of passages where God is said to “change his mind” says Helm, are the unclear texts that must be subordinated to the clear ones. However, this begs the question for it assumes that a particular model of God is the correct one and the texts that support this model are the literal and clear passages.

5. *The Nature of Biblical Prophecy*

Many evangelicals view biblical prophecies as accurate predictions of what will happen and this is then used to prove the divine authorship of the Bible. Open theism raises questions about the nature of the future and points out the numerous biblical prophecies that either did not come to pass at all or did not occur in the way foretold. What exactly is the nature of biblical prophecies and, in particular, how do we decide which ones are conditional and which are unconditional?

6. *Different Forms of Spirituality*

Forms of piety differ greatly among Christians. Various faith communities emphasize different kinds of prayer, worship, and have divergent understandings of what it means to live the Christian life. Different forms of piety give rise to different understandings of the divine nature and God’s relationship to the world. The open theism debate has helped bring this factor to light.

7. *Sola Scriptura and the Role of Tradition in Theology*

The inability to settle this matter with a simple appeal to the Bible has led many critics of open theism to appeal to church tradition as a way of determining what theological perspectives are acceptable. Needless to say, it has been uncommon for evangelicals to cite “the tradition” as a trump card to settle theological disputes. It has amazed me to hear Southern Baptists, in particular, vituperate against open theism by shouting, “But it’s not traditional!” This brings forth a number of interesting issues. For one, just what exactly is “the” tradition? Has there really been a singular tradition on topics such as anthropology, harmartiology, soteriology or ecclesiology? Thomas Oden’s strong use of

²² For a full response to this charge see my “Reducing God to Human Proportions” in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark Pinnock*, eds. Anthony Cross and Stanley Porter (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 111-126.

²³ P. Helm, *The Providence of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 51-4.

tradition led him to say that open theism is a “heresy” because dynamic omniscience is not in line with the theological consensus of the first eight centuries. According to this criterion, however, much of what came out of the Protestant Reformation is heresy and much of what evangelicals believe would fail the test as well. For example, I do not think dispensationalism was part of the early consensus.

8. *How do Evangelicals Settle Theological Disputes?*

Accusing fellow evangelicals of heresy has been a customary tactic of evangelicals. Despite pleas from his fellow evangelicals J. Gresham Machen refused to make room for premillennialism in his movement.²⁴ Instead, he said it is “a very serious heresy.” Given the popularity of the *Left Behind* series, this has become one lucrative heresy! Cornelius Van Til called Gordon Clark a heretic and E. J. Carnell called Fundamentalists “heretics.” Evangelicals have demonized one another over a host of issues rendering Gary Dorrien’s comment fitting: “The irony of evangelicalism is that while it contains an essentially contested family of theologies, it has been poorly suited to affirm pluralism of any kind.”²⁵

Because of open theism, once again evangelicals are confronted with the issue of how to handle differences in theology. If the debate cannot be settled by appeal to scripture or tradition then other means must be found to “remove this cancer from our midst.” Evangelicalism is a populist movement, lacking any central source of authority. In such a setting practicing dialogical virtues is not the fastest way to settle theological disputes. In order to get one’s way it is a common tactic to caricature the other view or label it with names that no upstanding evangelical would be associated with or simply use *ad hominem*. For example, one Calvinist academic wrote that the reason I developed a warped view of God is because I failed to properly cope with my brother’s tragic death. Open theists have been accused of worshipping a “finite god” and a “user-friendly” God. Some say we are Socinian. Others label us process theologians but the process folks say we are really just classical theists.²⁶ Nobody wants us. The sons of openness have nowhere to lay our heads.

²⁴ For this and the following see Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 27, 31, 41, 59, 69, and 73.

²⁵ Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, p. 3. In my opinion, is that branch of evangelicalism that arose out of fundamentalism that is ill-suited because a key characteristic of these “neoevangelicals” is that, epistemically, they cannot be wrong about what they believe.

²⁶ See David Ray Griffen’s comments in *Searching for an Adequate God*, pp. 14-24.

Why the brouhaha?

Why have Calvinist evangelicals reacted so strongly? One reason is that issues raised by the debate undermine the sense of certainty that some evangelicals desire to obtain in exegesis and theology. This leads to a crisis of authority. Who is right? How do we settle what is correct? Who has the right to determine what is acceptable for evangelicals to believe? It is at this juncture that the issue of control over institutions (publishing houses, colleges, etc.) arises.

Another reason is that open theists have presented the most acute criticism of, and alternative to, theological determinism in quite some time. Open theists have exposed the inability of the God of theological determinism to respond to what we do or be affected by our prayers. An unresponsive God is a hard sell in the evangelical pew. It is no surprise that virtually all of the virulent rhetoric has come from Calvinist evangelicals. It should be noted, however, that Reformed theology is much broader and richer than this form of Calvinism. In fact, some significant Reformed thinkers are proponents of divine temporality and dynamic omniscience (e. g. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Hendrikus Berkhof, Adrio König, and Vincent Brümmer).

Conclusion

At the end of his 1995 review of *The Openness of God in Christianity Today*, Roger Olson asked whether American evangelicals have “come of age enough to avoid heresy charges and breast-beating jeremiads in response to a new doctrinal proposal that is so conscientiously based on biblical reflection rather than on rebellious accommodation to modern thought? This may be the test.” It seems to me that evangelical theologians have failed this exam. Arthur Holmes once said that one of the reasons he studied philosophy rather than theology was that doing theology at an evangelical institution was too dangerous. William Hasker, a prominent open theist, taught philosophy at Huntington College for over thirty years but he was not fired. Evangelical philosophers are granted “idiosyncrasy credits” whereas theologians are kept on a tight leash at evangelical schools. Olson recently said that “At the moment most of the creative theological reflection and construction being done by evangelical theologians is taking place – and for the foreseeable future will be taking place – outside the power centers of conservative, establishment evangelical theological life.”²⁷

²⁷ Roger Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 65