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# Open Theism: Framing the Discussion

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## ckground

On November 5-6, 2002, Dr. Clark H. Pinnock delivered the annual Fall cture Series at Ashland Theological Seminary. The lecture series achieved crything a theologian could desire from such an event: it raised important theological ues; it encouraged participants to consider the implications of theology for life and votion; it engaged the whole seminary community; and it required everyone, atever their perspective, to reflect on their own understanding of God.

Open theism is a controversial issue within evangelicalism. It has been the us of numerous books and articles, Internet web sites, and the 2001 annual meeting the Evangelical Theological Society. It has led to thoughtful discussions, lively bates, and, on occasion, personal attacks and denunciations of heresy. How should as evangelicals approach this issue? In what follows, I will give some background open theism and attempt to locate it in relationship to Calvinism, classical minianism, and process thought. I will address several misconceptions about open ism and conclude with some reflections on how we might proceed.

Open theism is a movement that has grown up within the Arminian wing of angelicalism. The movement has attracted biblical scholars, theologians, and ilosophers; people associated with it include Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Gregory yd, and a number of others. It is not a monolithic movement; those involved in it do t agree on every issue. This perspective has been developing for over twenty-five ars. Some of its proponents had been involved in developing Arminian responses to lvinism, resulting in the essay collections *Grace Unlimited* (1975) and *The Grace of od, the Will of Man* (1989)[1] Exploring the issues that divided Calvinists and minians led some of them to become dissatisfied with traditional Arminianism as ll.

What happened for some was a collision between evangelical theology and angelical piety. The doctrine of God as traditionally taught in seminaries seemed dequate to deal with practical Christian life, particularly with personal tragedies. If od controls everything, how can we say that he is not responsible for the evil and ffering in the world? Why do we pray, if we believe that the future is already settled d prayer can't change anything? What is the character of the God we worship? Does govern his creation through coercive power or through the self-denying love we see Jesus? These questions and others led to the publication in 1994 of *The Openness of od*, in which several scholars proposed modifying some aspects of the traditional view

of God in order to make it more biblical and more relevant to Christian experien
Since that time, numerous books have been published by scholars on both sides of
debate.[3] Open theists have argued that we should not understand God as a timel
distant, impassive deity who decrees everything that happens, but as a dynai
trinitarian community of love who desires to form real give-and-take relationships w
human beings. To achieve this aim, God has chosen to create a world that allc
human beings significant creaturely freedom—a world whose future is partly op
even for God.

Open theism has come under intense fire from Calvinists, for at least th
reasons. First, open theists are currently the most visible evangelical advocates
Arminianism, and therefore they represent the greatest challenge to evangeli
Calvinism. Second, the primary theological strategy of Reformed theologians is
pack everything they can into the doctrine of God. The sovereignty of God is th
theological starting point, and they have made God's exhaustive controlling sovereig
the basis for everything else in their system. They believe that the doctrine of G
when properly understood, logically leads to Calvinism. Arminians, in their view,
logically incoherent because they accept the traditional understanding of God but fai
recognize its logical implications.[4] When open theists critique the traditional doctr
of God, therefore, they are attacking the foundations of the Calvinist system.

Third, open theists have brought to the foreground the question of what
theological systems imply about the character of God. They have pointed out that
all-controlling God of Calvinism cannot be said to respond to human beings or
answer prayer. God always initiates, and prayer serves only to bring human beings i
alignment with God's eternal will. It also makes no sense to say that the Calvinist G
grieves at the sin and suffering of human beings, since he causes everything t
happens to them. This picture of God is problematic for evangelical believers, wh
devotional lives usually assume that God is quite different.

Some non-Calvinists have also reacted against open theism, although th
reaction has been less vehement and has developed more slowly. Because open thei
developed out of Arminianism, the contested issues tend to be more narrowly focus
Also, since free will theists pack less into the doctrine of God, their disagreements w
open theists are usually less foundational.[5] The greater part of open theism is qu
congenial to other varieties of free will theism, since it focuses on God's relationa
and responsiveness.

The 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Colora
Springs focused on drawing the boundaries of evangelicalism, with a particular vi
toward deciding whether open theism was inside or outside those boundaries.
membership passed a resolution affirming God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge

no other action.[6] A second resolution passed at the 2002 meeting raised the ibility that some proponents of open theism may be expelled from the society.

## tral Issues in the Debate

Open theists have argued that the early development of Christian theology was ily influenced by Greek philosophy, resulting in a doctrine of God that was not biblical.[7] This influence affects the doctrine of God in at least four areas. Space o limited to explore these areas in detail, but I will outline the main points. For her discussion from different perspectives, see the books listed in the footnotes to article.

**God and time**. Traditional theology presents God as timeless, standing ide of time and seeing all time in a single, timeless instant. This model creates a blem: how can a God who cannot experience time act in human history, as the le repeatedly claims? Evangelicals have come to a variety of conclusions on this e. Open theists argue that God experiences successive time as we do; he embers the past and anticipates the future. They usually affirm that God is also scendent with respect to time, but that tends to be less well defined.

**God and change**. Traditional theology describes God as immutable, a quality was interpreted by the church fathers as static perfection. Since God is perfect, any nge in God would be change for the worse. When extended to the emotional realm, idea of immutability means that God must be impassible—that is, he cannot feel otions as we do. Since emotions change, feeling emotion would make God ngeable and therefore imperfect. To maintain this perfection, God must be onditioned (unaffected by creation). God acts upon creation, but God himself ains the Uncaused Cause and the Unmoved Mover.

The problems with this view are obvious. How can such a God actually ond to human beings or form relationships? How can such a God be said to love? ny theologians have been questioning the traditional understanding of God's nutability, although Reformed theologians have been the most resistant.[8] On this nt, open theists agree with other free will theists. God's character and purposes do change, but he alters his specific actions in response to the actions of human beings. example, Jeremiah 18:1-11 describes how God will change his plans of judgment or ssing if the people concerned change in their attitudes and actions. So God's actions partly dependent upon what we do—and on what we pray.

**God's sovereignty**. This is the issue that has traditionally divided Calvinists l Arminians. Does God have to control everything that happens in order to be ereign? Calvinists argue that he does.[9] Any diminishing of God's direct control

diminishes God's sovereignty. Like other Arminians, open theists agree that Go sovereign, but they believe that he has chosen to exercise his sovereignty differe He has chosen to grant human beings free will and allow them to make signifi choices. Although God has established the boundaries of his ultimate purposes creation, he allows human beings to make meaningful decisions within t boundaries—including the choice of whether or not to accept his gift of salvation.

**God's foreknowledge**. This is the most controversial aspect of open the and this is where open theists divide from classical Arminians. Calvinists contend God knows the future in complete detail because he has predetermined it. Clas Arminians believe that God simply knows all that will happen in the future, but tha foreknowledge does not determine those events. Open theists respond that, if knows the future in complete detail, then the future is settled and cannot be chan God's knowledge of future events does not *cause* these events, but it renders t certain, because God's knowledge must be infallible. Thus, as the events occur, pe do not have the freedom to do otherwise than God has foreseen from eternity. Since future is fixed, prayer can never change anything except the attitude of the pe praying.

According to open theists, God knows the past and present in exhaus detail. He knows everything about the future that he has decided to do, so he can fu prophecy and keep his promises. He also knows all the necessary consequences will result from previous choices. But his knowledge of future human choice probable, not definite. Because he knows people better than they know themselves can predict their actions with a high degree of accuracy, but he does not know t actions with certainty. This view is known as presentism.

Opponents charge that open theists are limiting God's omniscience. O theists deny this. They argue that we should understand God's omniscience just as understand God's omnipotence. Classical theists have noted that if we simply say God can do anything, this gives rise to logical absurdities, such as the question whe God can make a square circle or a rock that is too heavy for him to lift. Instead, should say that God can do anything that is logically possible to do.[10] Similarly, c theists say that God knows all that it is possible to know—but that the future decis of free creatures are not logically knowable. In other words, God knows the fu perfectly—but he knows some of it as certainties and some of it as possibilities. future is thus partly fixed and partly open.[11]

## Open Theism in Context

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **nship world** | God is the creator of the world.. God is both immanent and transcendent. | | | God does not create the world, which is eternal. God is immanent only, like the soul of the world. |
| **ability** | God does not change in any respect. | God is constant in his character and purposes, but he changes his actions toward human beings as needed. | | God evolves along with the world. |
| **ignty** | God controls everything. | God is in control but allows humans libertarian freedom (the freedom to choose otherwise). | | God doesn't control anything. |
| **edge** | Exhaustive definite foreknowledge | | Presentism | ? |
| **does now?** | Past, present, and future in complete detail (because he has predetermined it) | Past, present, and future in complete detail (because he simply knows it) | Past and present in complete detail. Of the future he knows what he has decided that he will do (e.g., prophecy) and the necessary consequences of previous choices. He knows the future free decisions of others as probabilities, not as certainties. | The past and the present. Nothing of the future; God hopes to draw the world toward a more ideal state but cannot guarantee that this will happen. |
| | **Classical Calvinism** | **Classical Arminianism** | **Open theism** | **Process thought** |
| **nents** | Augustine<br>John Calvin<br>B. Ware<br>T. Schreiner | David Hunt | Clark Pinnock<br>John Sanders<br>Greg Boyd | A. N. Whitehead<br>C. Hartshorne<br>John Cobb |

## Charting Open Theism

One of the liveliest topics in the debate over open theism concerns hov classify open theism. Can it be considered evangelical? Can it be considered ortho at all? Is it just a watered-down version of process thought? The accompanying c shows how open theism compares with Calvinism, classical Arminianism, and pro thought in some of the areas I have just discussed. How one locates open the depends upon what question one is asking.

On the most fundamental question, the God-world relationship, open the aligns itself with Calvinism and classical Arminianism, all of which affirm that created the world out of nothing and is both transcendent and immanent with respec creation. In process thought, God did not create the world, which is eternal. Go immanent rather than transcendent with respect to the world and participates in world's process of development.[12]

Views of God's immutability form a spectrum. Most Calvinists reject change in God. Since God determines everything, God has no need to change. At other extreme, process thought pictures a God who evolves along with the world tow more ideal states of being. Between these views, open theism agrees with Arminian that God's character and purposes do not change, but he changes his actions in respo to the behavior of human beings.

Views of God's sovereignty are similar. Again open theism aligns itself v classical Arminianism as opposed to Calvinism, believing that God allows human will rather than causing all things. But all of these views differ from process though which God is not really sovereign at all. Because he is evolving along with the wo God cannot exercise control over the world's development. God desires to draw world toward greater perfection, but he cannot guarantee that this will actually happe

On the question of God's knowledge, Calvinism joins with class Arminianism in affirming God's exhaustive knowledge of past, present, and fut Open theism asserts that God knows past, present, and a good deal of the fut Process thought affirms God's knowledge of past and present but denies God definite knowledge of the future.

On these four issues, open theism has more in common with class Arminianism—and even with Calvinism—than it has in common with process thou Beyond that, where one draws the line depends upon whether one thinks the issu knowledge is more foundational than the issues of immutability and sovereignty. open theism simply another variety of Arminianism, to be evaluated as such, o classical Arminianism in basic agreement with Calvinism, leaving open theism bey the bounds of orthodoxy? Where is the great divide?

Having read and listened to several Calvinist polemics against open theism, I observed that Calvinist scholars have great difficulty attacking open theism without attacking Arminianism as well. This places them in some rhetorical difficulty, they want to enlist Arminians in the effort to defeat open theism, but they cannot to resist taking shots at their potential allies. For example, Paul Helm believes "what is at the heart of the contrast between open theism and classical theism is . . . profoundly different appreciation of the plight of humankind and the saving grace of ." Open theism has "a shallow view of the need of humans and the power of God." acknowledges that "[this] same point applies also to those who espouse minianism or middle knowledge." His objection boils down to the fact that open sts, like other non-Calvinists, reject irresistible grace.[13] With this rhetorical move, m has redefined "classical theism" to exclude all views except Calvinism. ilarly, Bruce Ware admits that his criticisms of open theism also apply to minianism.[14] Although he discusses open theism only briefly in *No Place for ereignty*, R. K. M. Wright regards it as a logical development in free will theism's vitable drift toward liberalism: "[The] assumption of human autonomy creates a tinual pressure toward finite godism," which he identifies as idolatry.[15]

The perspective of these scholars reinforces my own sense that the great divide ideed between Calvinism and all varieties of free will theism, open theism included. issues illustrated in the accompanying chart seem to bear this out. One's view of l's foreknowledge is dependent upon one's view of the kind of world God chose to ite and the kind of relationship God chose to establish with that world. For mple, if an immutable God has created a world in which he controls everything that pens, he must know the future in exhaustive detail. If God is evolving along with co-eternal world, he cannot know anything about the future with certainty. If God created a world of genuine give-and-take relationships with free human beings, then future may not be completely predictable.

Although its model of divine foreknowledge is what makes open theism inctive, this is a secondary point compared with the issues on which open theists Arminians agree. For that reason, I would classify open theism as a version of minianism. Any limitations on God's foreknowledge were *freely chosen* by God en he decided what kind of world he would create. Different varieties of minianism operate with different theological models in other areas, as well. For mple, Arminians subscribe to various theories of the atonement. They also disagree ut whether election means God's choice of a people in Christ or God's choice of ividuals for salvation on the basis of his foreknowledge of their response to the pel. Some who are otherwise Arminian believe in eternal security. Disagreement

on the nature or extent of God's foreknowledge need not exclude open theism from t Arminian tradition.

**Where Do We Go from Here?**

Before making some suggestions on how to proceed, I would like to addre some misconceptions. First, open theism does not deny God's sovereignty. Like t early church fathers, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, t Anabaptist tradition, the Arminian/Wesleyan tradition, and all other non-Calvin traditions, open theism asserts that God remains in control while allowing his creatur to make free decisions within the boundaries of his set purposes for creation. Secon open theism does not say that God does not know the future. As I have explain earlier, open theists affirm that God has extensive knowledge of the future. They reje exhaustive definite foreknowledge, the idea that God knows every detail of the future already settled. Third, open theism does not affect issues of salvation. Wh significant differences exist between Calvinist and Arminian views of salvation, op theists are in agreement with classical Arminians on these issues.

Fourth, open theists do not say that the outcome of God's plan for creation in doubt. They sometimes use the analogy of a chess master playing a novice. T master does not need to know in advance what moves the novice will make. T master has such an extensive knowledge of possible moves and countermoves, as w as so much wisdom from experience, that he or she can handle any moves the novi makes and still win the game. God is the "infinitely intelligent chess player" who c anticipate any possible move and plan to counter it.[16] Furthermore, unlike the che master, God retains the ability to intervene coercively if necessary in order to ensu that his goals are achieved.

Finally, open theism does not violate inerrancy. Those who make this char are confusing the authority of Scripture with the interpretation of Scripture. T differences between open theism and traditional theism arise from differe interpretations of a Bible that all sides hold in equally high regard. In fact, open theis *depends upon* inerrancy, in that it affirms that the language of Scripture must be tak with utmost seriousness because it is divinely inspired. Most expositions of t doctrine of inerrancy have assumed that we should follow the plain sense of Scriptu whenever possible, as open theists are attempting to do. The debates that open theis have with their critics over the interpretation of particular passages of Scripture wou never take place in a liberal setting. But open theists, because of their commitment Scripture, are obligated to consider every biblically based critique carefully and respo to it thoughtfully.

So where do we go from here? I would suggest that we should not be afraid of king questions, because asking questions is how we discover truth. Questioning ditional doctrinal formulations in light of Scripture is an appropriate task for anyone o affirms the authority of Scripture. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to ide God's people into truth (John 16:13-15). The Anabaptist tradition, in which I ate myself, has always been convinced that doctrinal issues are best worked out thin the body of believers functioning as a hermeneutical community. A community believers who read Scripture in submission to Christ and to one another can be nfident that the Holy Spirit will lead them to discern the mind of Christ.

In order to do this, however, we must keep talking to one another. I am deeply ncerned about the efforts of some evangelicals to silence the discussion of open ism and disfellowship its proponents. Ironically, some of those attempting to do this Calvinists who say they believe in God's exhaustive sovereignty. The reasons they ve for their actions are the need to oppose false doctrine and prevent people from ing led astray. Surely, in the Calvinist universe, people can never be led astray unless od wants them to be led astray. After all, God's will is never frustrated. Whether we Calvinists or non-Calvinists, we can surely affirm that God in his providence can pe with open theism.

We must also be willing to give one another time to reflect on these issues. ost Calvinists will probably reject open theism, for the reasons mentioned earlier. owever, non-Calvinist evangelicals need time to interact with open theism and aluate it from within their own free will traditions. Open theism itself is still veloping; constructive interaction should help all of us refine our theological models d make them more biblical. I would like to hope that such interaction could be nducted in a spirit of mutual love and concern for one another as brothers and sisters Christ.

Open theists are asking important questions out of a desire to honor God and faithful to Scripture. Whether we come to agree with them or not, their proposal serves serious study and prayerful reflection, and they deserve the respect due to all embers of the body of Christ. As we seek the mind of Christ on this matter, I hope at we can practice the adage adopted by the Brethren and other groups influenced by etism: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

[1] Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975); Clark H. nnock, ed., *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: ondervan, 1989).

[2] Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

[3] Books supporting open theism have included David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); William Hasker, *Time, God, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Books opposing open theism have included Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God – Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997); Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000); and R. K. M. Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Free Will Theism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Wright's book deals with free will theism more generally and mentions open theism only briefly. Some of the books in InterVarsity's "four views" series usefully explore central issues in this debate: David and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986); James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); and Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God & Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

[4] Clark Pinnock believes that Calvinists tolerate classical Arminians because they believe Arminians are simply confused. According to Pinnock, Calvinists perceive open theism as a greater threat because it is more logically coherent than classical Arminianism. *Most Moved Mover*, 12, 14.

[5] For example, simple foreknowledge proponent David Hunt observes: "So while I disagree with Boyd on whether God changes his mind and on the best way to interpret Scripture, I can't get too exercised over our differences. No one's salvation hangs on this dispute." Beilby and Eddy, 54. However, Robert E. Picirilli argues that open theism's rejection of God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge is significant enough that it cannot be considered a variety of Arminianism. "An Arminian Response to John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001): 491.

[6] "Scholars Vote: God Knows Future," *Christianity Today*, 7 January 2002, 21.

[7] *Openness of God*, 59-60.

[8] For an example of a Reformed theologian who modifies God's immutability and ssibility, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 308.

[9] See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. Neill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 60), Book I, Chapter 16, Section 3.

[10] See Erickson, 303.

[11] See Boyd, 15-17.

[12] For an introduction to process thought, see John B. Cobb and David R. Griffin, *Process ology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976). For interactions ween open theism and process thought, see Clark H. Pinnock, "Between Classical and Process ism," in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 313-327; and John Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock, *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

[13] Beilby and Eddy, 64.

[14] Ware, 42.

[15] Wright, 229, 226.

[16] Boyd, 127.