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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

OPEN THEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF THEODICY

Janelle Zeeb

This article argues that open theism presents a theologically and biblically superior answer to the problem of theodicy. While this is not the traditional Reformed or evangelical position, the arguments here offer a clear presentation.

How Christians can believe that God is completely good and also omnipotent despite all the suffering and evil in the world is a perplexing theological question, known as “theodicy.” Philosophically, “the argument from evil is the one argument against God’s existence worth taking seriously.”¹ Our view of theodicy also affects our personal response to God. Thus, how theological systems address theodicy is rightly called “one of the most important parts of any debate over the superiority of rival theistic systems.”² If a system’s implications for theodicy are not acceptable biblically, or if it has serious pastoral or practical consequences, it may indicate a problem with the theological system. On the contrary, a system’s ability to explain theodicy in a biblical, consistent, and compelling way may indicate it is a promising theological system.

Open theism is one theological system which has been increasing in popularity over the last few decades. Even opponents note that “open theism is anything but a backwater movement and its impact is increasingly being felt in some of evangelicalism’s most significant denominations and institutions.”³ Open theists claim this is partly because open theism provides a more satisfactory response to the problem of theodicy than traditional views currently offer.⁴ This article explores the “open theism” advocated by Clark Pinnock as it relates to theodicy.⁵

¹ Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning: Contemporary Responses to the Problem of Pain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 16.

² David Basinger and Randall Basinger, “Theodicy: A Comparative Analysis,” in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2003), 144.

³ Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 25.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?: The Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 190.

⁵ This work is a revised form of Janelle Louise Zeeb, “An Analysis of Clark Pinnock’s Open Theism as a Potential Solution to Theodicy” (Master of Theological Studies

Pinnock's Personal Journey to Open Theism

Clark Pinnock, late professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity School, was an important voice in the open theist movement.⁶ He was considered “one of the most prominent and provocative theological voices in North Atlantic evangelical Christianity since the 1960s.”⁷ Through his education and personal theological reflection, Pinnock moved from Calvinism to embracing open theism.⁸ Yet Pinnock continually identified as evangelical and affirmed belief in “the great truths of incarnation and atonement, of salvation by grace through faith, ... of our everlasting hope only in Jesus Christ,” and the infallibility of the Bible.⁹ Despite this, many have questioned his orthodoxy,¹⁰ and he was nearly expelled from the Evangelical Theological Society, even though his opponents noted that his open theist views were based primarily on Scripture.¹¹ Opinions of Pinnock have ranged from a “staunch defender of the faith against the liberal disaster, to cautious biblical pioneer, to a dangerous and sophisticated carrier of subtle heresy into the contemporary faith.”¹² Despite the controversy surrounding his views, Pinnock's significant influence on evangelical thought is likely due to his attempt to be consistent, coherent, thorough, and to work through all the implications of his theology.¹³

thesis, Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2015).

⁶ Barry L. Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey toward Renewal: An Intellectual Biography* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 2000), 153 n. 65. Along with Pinnock, major open theist authors Gregory Boyd, John Sanders and Richard Rice will also be referenced to support Pinnock's arguments.

⁷ Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock*, xiii.

⁸ A short summary of Pinnock's theological journey can be found in “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1995), 15–26.

⁹ Callen, *Journey toward Renewal*, 133.

¹⁰ Callen, *Journey toward Renewal*, 4.

¹¹ Doug Koop, “Clark Pinnock Dies at 73,” *Christianity Today*, 17 August 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/augustweb-only/43-22.0.html> .

¹² Callen, *Journey toward Renewal*, 6.

¹³ Daniel Strange, “The Evolution of an Evangelical,” in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony J. Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2000), 15.

Is Open Theism Orthodox?

The controversy over Pinnock's beliefs and orthodoxy is mirrored in the debate surrounding open theism itself. Some opponents say that its claims of non-exhaustive divine foreknowledge place open theism outside the boundaries of orthodox Christianity,¹⁴ and thus should not be tolerated.¹⁵ A minority have called open theism heretical,¹⁶ equating it with the views of Faustus Socinus, who believed that God did not know all future contingencies.¹⁷ Others claim that open theism is too similar to Process Theology,¹⁸ which believes that God is finite and dependent on the world. A few critics have gone so far as to argue that because the open theists have a different understanding of God's omniscience and omnipotence, their god is different from the God of the Bible.¹⁹

Open theists reject these charges. Pinnock wonders why it is heretical to consider an alternative understanding of the future,²⁰ and is concerned that orthodoxy is being defined by particular theological constructs instead of a living faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.²¹ Regarding the comparisons with Socinus, Socinus had Pelagian views of salvation,²² and the Socinians were anti-Trinitarian.²³ Unlike Socinus, open theists are not Pelagian or semi-Pelagian,²⁴ they affirm the Trinity, and have orthodox

¹⁴ Bruce A. Ware, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?" *JETS* 45, no. 2 (2002): 194, 212.

¹⁵ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 9.

¹⁶ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 33.

¹⁷ Ben Merkle, "Liberals in Drag," in *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 68–71.

¹⁸ Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 31.

¹⁹ Douglas Wilson, "Foundations of Exhaustive Foreknowledge," in Wilson, *Bound Only Once*, 163–168.

²⁰ Clark Pinnock, "Response to Part 2," in Gray and Sinkinson, *Reconstructing Theology*, 152.

²¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), xi.

²² Ben Merkle, "Liberals in Drag," 68.

²³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 107.

²⁴ Tony Gray, "Pinnock's Doctrine of God and the Evangelical Tradition," in Gray and Sinkinson, *Reconstructing Theology*, 139–142. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 166, says that while we must accept God's offer of salvation, he appeals to the idea of prevenient grace and says accepting a gift is not a 'work,' and thus he is not Pelagian or semi-Pelagian.

Christology.²⁵ Unlike Process Theology, open theism affirms the orthodox teaching that God is infinite, necessary, ontologically independent of the world, transcendent, and omnipresent.²⁶ Thus, although open theism has similar views to Socinus and Process theologians with respect to God's knowledge of the future, open theism is not heretical. Open theists do not worship another god, but rather debate what the Bible reveals about God's characteristics.²⁷ In the end, it is an issue of biblical interpretation.

Open theists argue that they stand in the tradition of free-will theism which was put forth by various church fathers and is held to in Wesleyan, Arminian, and Pentecostal denominations of Christianity.²⁸ Open theism has even been called "consistent Arminianism" by its Calvinist critics,²⁹ who recognise that it can give God providential control without requiring the exhaustive divine foreknowledge which jeopardises libertarian freedom.³⁰

An Introduction to Open Theism

The term "open" means that God is open to new experiences and is flexible in how he works in the world,³¹ and also that the future has not been predetermined by God. Humans (and angels) to whom God has given free will have some real influence over how the future progresses.³² Open theism shares the traditional Arminian idea that God gives us freedom to love him and to be morally accountable for our actions,³³ though there are some differences in how it defines God's omnipotence and omniscience.

²⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 107.

²⁶ Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 11.

²⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 104.

²⁸ Clark H. Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," *Dialog* 44, no. 3 (2005): 238; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, x. Also see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 140–160 which supports Pinnock's statements that many early church fathers held to free-will theism.

²⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 12.

³⁰ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 42.

³¹ Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, 16.

³² Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 3–5.

³³ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 32.

Omnipotence

God's omnipotence is his ability to achieve his ultimate purposes. It is not the ability to control everything that happens in the world down to the finest details. Pinnock says "omnipotence does not mean that nothing can go contrary to God's will (our sins go against it) but that God is able to deal with any circumstance that may arise."³⁴ God is able to achieve his goals in a variety of ways because he is the most intelligent, wise, resourceful, and adaptable being; God is like a master chess player who can counter any moves that his opponent may make.³⁵ He does not need to know everything about the future in order to achieve his purposes or fulfil his promises. This is critical, for one fundamental claim of open theism is that God does not know everything about the future.

Omniscience

Pinnock says, "God knows everything that any being can know. He knows everything that has ever existed, everything that now actually exists, everything that could possibly exist in the future, and everything that he has decided to do."³⁶ It is no more insulting to God's omniscience to say that there are some things that even God cannot know than it is insulting to God's omnipotence to say there are things God cannot do.³⁷ It is commonly accepted that God cannot cease to be God and cannot do logically impossible things, so it is not much different to say there are some things even God cannot know about the future. Pinnock claims that in open theism, God actually knows more than what is traditionally credited to him, because he knows not only what will occur (the things in the future that he has settled) but also what might occur (the things that are only possibilities).³⁸

Libertarian Freedom

The primary assertion of open theism is that God cannot know with certainty anything that depends on a future free creaturely action or choice. Pinnock believed that if God foreknew what we would do it would take away our freedom, because a person could only choose

³⁴ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 114.

³⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 52; Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 127.

³⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 138.

³⁷ Clark Pinnock, "Response to Part 1," in Gray and Sinkinson, *Reconstructing Theology*, 86.

³⁸ Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," 242.

to do actions that God had eternally foreknown.³⁹ Open theists uphold creaturely freedom as important because God gave humans free will in order for real love between God and humans to be possible. Pinnock writes, “Humans are not robots who have no choice. God loves us and wants to be loved in return. Love cannot be forced; it must be freely given.”⁴⁰ Libertarian freedom (the ability to choose otherwise if all else remains constant) also ensures that a person is morally responsible for his actions, whereas compatibilist freedom (the freedom to act according to one’s strongest desire, even if that desire is controlled by God),⁴¹ is not real freedom. For example, people under hypnosis or people who are brainwashed believe that what they are instructed to do is what they actually want to do, but we would recognise that they are not truly free.⁴² Thus, open theists reject both the Arminian view that God foreknows how we will freely act, and the Calvinist idea of compatibilist freedom. Yet open theists believe God knows what our options are and what the likelihood of our choosing them is, but we can still choose a less-likely option, effectively “surprising” God.⁴³

In sum, open theists believe God does not determine our desires, and does not foreknow exactly how we will use the freedom he has given us, yet because of his omnipotence he can work with any of our choices in order to fulfil his purposes.

Pinnock Criticises Traditional Theodicy

Pinnock argues that traditional predestinarianism frequently leads to the conclusion that God is the author of evil. He writes,

The logic of consistent Calvinism makes God the author of evil and casts serious doubt on his goodness. One is compelled to think of God’s

³⁹ Clark Pinnock, “Clark Pinnock’s Response,” in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: 1986), 137–138. Also see Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, 25.

⁴⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 162.

⁴¹ Jack W. Cottrell, “The Nature of Divine Sovereignty,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, 101.

⁴² Jack W. Cottrell, “The Nature of Divine Sovereignty,” 102.

⁴³ Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 93.

planning such horrors as Auschwitz, even though none but the most rigorous Calvinians can bring themselves to admit it.⁴⁴

When Calvinists appeal to the role that creatures play in evil, Pinnock says,

If God's sovereignty extended to all things it would extend to evil too and even sin. Despite efforts to blame creaturely agents for their part in it (e.g. God hires A to kill B and doesn't do the deed himself), God's power is so decisive that it is difficult to think of God as good. It casts a shadow over God's character. It makes God inscrutable because he simply does what he pleases and we have to submit.⁴⁵

Regarding the common appeal to "mystery," Pinnock says "to say that God hates sin while secretly willing it ... such things do not deserve to be called mysteries when that is just a euphemism for nonsense."⁴⁶ Even the popular argument that God causes evil for a greater good purpose is not adequate, because

If he [God] is in control in a monopolistic sense, everything that happens has to have a reason. Even the Holocaust has to have a reason and has to contribute in some way to the greater good, if only we could see it from God's point of view. In this way evil is taken up into God and a dark shadow is cast over God's goodness.⁴⁷

As shown, Pinnock believes that all Calvinistic explanations of God's relationship to evil either make God the author of evil, or are contradictory or nonsensical. He argues that we cannot expect Christians to love and delight in God, or for non-Christians to be interested in knowing God "if we portray God in biblically flawed, rationally suspect, and existentially repugnant ways."⁴⁸ Pinnock says, "Indeed, the strongest, and perhaps only, argument for atheism is the existence of evil, which, if God secretly planned it and had a reason for it, makes belief in God impossible."⁴⁹ In

⁴⁴ Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, 21

⁴⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 177.

⁴⁶ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 115.

⁴⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 132–133.

⁴⁸ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 104.

⁴⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 133.

contrast, as we will see, the primary advantage of open theism regarding theodicy is that it ensures that God is completely good.

The Free-will Defence Works Better with Open Theism

Like Arminian theology, open theism holds that evil happens when creatures misuse their free will to do things which go against God's good will; this is called the free-will defence. However, open theists argue that it works better if God does not know exactly how creatures will misuse their freedom.

In traditional Arminian views, "God foresaw the occurrence of suffering in advance, decided to create a world with creaturely freedom anyway, and prepared to deal with it in positive ways when it occurred," whereas in open theism, "God knew that creaturely freedom involved the inherent risk of rebellion and resultant suffering, but did not know in advance whether or not the creatures would actually choose to rebel."⁵⁰ So open theists say that Arminians still have a problem with theodicy; if God foreknew perfectly what Hitler would do, yet created him anyway, then either God is guilty for 'unleashing' such a person on the world,⁵¹ or God knew it was better to allow Hitler's actions than to not allow them.⁵²

Arminians have found ways to justify why God allows evil that he foreknows. Norman Geisler argues that God foreknew all evil that would happen in each potential universe, and God chose to create this universe which is the best one possible which does not violate creaturely free will, and is the best way to achieve the best possible universe in the future (the new heaven and new earth).⁵³ While less problematic than the concept that God causes each specific evil for a greater good purpose, it still leads to the conclusion that God allows every evil that he foreknows to occur. In Geisler's view, every evil in the world is either unavoidable or necessary, and so our current world is as good as it could possibly be. However, most people could imagine a better world where even one less person contracts AIDS, one less person is murdered, or where one less person ends up in hell. Must we believe the "ghoulish conclusion" that each and every tear

⁵⁰ Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 145. See also Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 46–47.

⁵¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 10.

⁵² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 98–99.

⁵³ Norman L. Geisler, *If God, Why Evil? A New Way to Think About the Question* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011), 68.

shed by an abused child is necessary for the maximum goodness of this world and the next?⁵⁴

In contrast, open theists hold that much evil which happens is unnecessary in terms of God's larger plan for the world. Pinnock says there are "genuine tragedies that God did not will and which are not part of some greater good."⁵⁵ He also says,

Some believers seem to derive comfort from the thought that God has a reason for all the terrible things that happen to people. Open theists, by contrast, think it appalling to say, for example, that God had any reason for Auschwitz. We think that God the Father—like Jesus—wept over it.⁵⁶

This view is able to comfort many Christians who find it hard to love God while believing that God caused the evil they experience.⁵⁷ John Sanders says he has received thousands of responses to his book on open theism, *The God Who Risks*, thanking him

for the help it gave them in reconciling belief in a loving God with all the evil in the world. Countless numbers have said that since they finally found a theology in which God does not (secretly) want evil in the world, they no longer agonized about why God wanted their loved ones to suffer as they did. It is not God's desire that they experience suffering at all.⁵⁸

Thus, open theists find comfort in the idea that God never wills or foreknows the evil that happens to them. Opponents argue that this removes the meaning behind suffering which provides the ability to endure it.⁵⁹ However, because God is flexible, adaptable, and able to achieve his purposes despite misuse of creaturely free will, Pinnock can say, "God did

⁵⁴ Gregory Boyd, "Response to Paul Kjos Helseth," in *Four Views on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 77.

⁵⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 176.

⁵⁶ Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," 244.

⁵⁷ John Sanders could not accept the divine determinist explanation that God had caused his non-Christian brother's death in order for Sanders to become a Christian in Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 12–13, and Gregory Boyd was able to comfort a woman who lost her baby in childbirth by explaining that it was not God's will that the baby died in Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame?: Moving Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 11–15.

⁵⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 11.

⁵⁹ Paul Kjos Helseth, "God Causes all Things," in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, 52.

not want them [evils] to happen even though, having happened, God can often accomplish something good through them.”⁶⁰ God is so capable of recovering good out of unforeseen evil that it may look as if his backup plan was his original plan.⁶¹ Thus, open theists can still trust the promise of Romans 8:28 that God can work all things for their good (although not necessarily *greater* good).

Objection: Why Doesn't God Prevent More Evil?

Even if God does not foreknow the evil that will occur, should not God's present omniscience make him able to predict it? For example, regarding the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, God would have known the plans of the terrorists and would have seen them carrying out each step, yet seemingly did nothing to stop them.⁶² How do open theists respond to this argument? First, even if God intervenes occasionally to prevent what might be regarded as the “worst” moral evils, we would be unaware of it (as it did not happen) and would demand that he also prevent the “next-worst” moral evils that do occur. This would continue in a cycle until God would be expected to prevent all moral evil. But if God did this, then he would need to override all creaturely free will, and no moral choices would be possible.⁶³ Thus, Pinnock argues that God does not revoke freedom whenever a creature wants to use it in a way that goes against God's will, because

to prevent his creatures working evil would be to act against the liberty God gave them and removing that freedom would show that God was not serious in giving it in the first place. He made a kind of covenant of non-coercion with creatures, which involved the necessity of his enduring their decisions as free agents for a time. Thus, he also accepted the need to work around their evil influences.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 47.

⁶¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 106; Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God*, 113.

⁶² James Larsen, “When Bad Things Happen to Innocent People: Open Theism and the Problem of Evil” (Master of Theology thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006), 27.

⁶³ Bruce Reichenbach, “God Limits His Power,” in Basinger and Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will*, 122.

⁶⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 136.

Pinnock believes “God is moved by love to restrain the divine power, temporarily and voluntarily, out of respect for the integrity of creatures, even creatures whose activities fall short of God’s purposes.”⁶⁵ He notes that in Jesus’s parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) the father respects the rebellious son’s freedom by giving him the inheritance, yet hopes that his love will melt the son’s resistance away.⁶⁶ Similarly, God voluntarily limits the use of his power in order that he can make love real, as love cannot be compelled or forced.⁶⁷ A side-effect of this is that God allows those who freely choose to rebel against him to do so for a time, hoping they will be drawn back by his love, realise their errors, and repent. So even open theism appeals to a version of the “greater-good” argument for evil; it is simply that the “greater-good” is allowing creatures to exercise their libertarian freedom.

Open Theism’s Implications for Prayer and God’s Guidance

The idea that God does not foreknow all evil that will occur is helpful in another way for theodicy, as shown in Gregory Boyd’s pastoral example of Suzanne. Suzanne felt led by God to marry a particular Christian man, but two years later the man committed adultery, became abusive, and divorced her.⁶⁸ Suzanne argued that “if God knew exactly what her husband would do, then he bears all the responsibility for setting her up the way he did.”⁶⁹ Instead, Boyd explained that God did not foreknow how her husband would misuse his free will. Initially, Boyd said, God believed that Suzanne would probably have a happy marriage and fulfilling ministry with this man, but when her husband misused his free will, he became different from the person God had intended her to marry.⁷⁰ This explanation was very comforting to Suzanne, and it helped her love God again.⁷¹

Critics argue that if God did not know how Suzanne’s husband would hurt her, then God is incapable of providing important long-term guidance,⁷² or may even give guidance which later turns out to be harmful. Pinnock counters that

⁶⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, “Constrained by Love: Divine Self-Restraint according to Open Theism,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 150.

⁶⁶ Pinnock, “Constrained by Love,” 154.

⁶⁷ Pinnock, “Constrained by Love,” 150.

⁶⁸ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 103–104.

⁶⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 105.

⁷⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 105–106.

⁷¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 106.

⁷² Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 182.

God may have a specific piece of guidance about what we should do in a given situation. Mostly though, he wants us to be a certain kind of person who loves and obeys him. God wants us to go through life together with him, making responsible decisions as we go.⁷³

Pinnock says that God gives us freedom to choose our future, and cares about our input so much that he will even work with less-than-ideal plans,⁷⁴ because God can continue to conform us to the image of Christ in a variety of ways.⁷⁵ Open theists are happy to trust that God can adapt to any circumstance they face, and any positive or negative choices that they may make, in order to keep developing Christ-like character in them.

Pinnock also argues that open theism gives more reason to seek God's guidance than traditional options. If God were to predestine everything that would happen to us, then there really isn't any reason to seek God's guidance. No matter what we do, it would be what God had wanted us to do.⁷⁶ Asking God to help us avoid evil would not do any good if he had predestined evil to afflict us. The Arminian view fares no better; if God knows exactly what will happen in the future, then nothing we do now can prevent it, so God cannot give guidance to help us avoid it. In contrast, open theism suggests that we can proactively avoid evil since it is never caused by God,⁷⁷ and we are not doomed to a particular fate because God foreknows it. Yet God's exhaustive present knowledge makes him able to predict the future much better than we can, so relying on his guidance is always better than trusting our own judgement.

Open Theism Upholds Personal Moral Responsibility

Another advantage for open theism's theodicy is that creatures are held responsible for the evil they do to a greater extent than other views. Pinnock argues that if God knew everything about the future as Arminians claim, then events would be fixed and determined, in which case "human freedom is an illusion, ... we make no difference and are not responsible."⁷⁸ Calvinism is more difficult, Pinnock argues, because

⁷³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 175.

⁷⁴ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 116.

⁷⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 176.

⁷⁶ Pinnock, "Clark Pinnock's Response," in *Predestination and Free Will*, 59.

⁷⁷ Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 369.

⁷⁸ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 121.

God ends up “holding people accountable for deeds he predestined them to do and they could not but do.”⁷⁹ For example, while Calvinists might recognise that mass starvation is partly due to human inaction to “create a more equitable global economic system,” ultimately they would believe that since humans cannot resist God’s will, mass starvation must be God’s will,⁸⁰ and thus humans would not be responsible for the situation. To open theists, mass starvation would be at least partly attributable to human misuse of free will and humans would be morally responsible for their contribution to it.⁸¹

Critics say that if open theism attributes evil and the responsibility for it to creatures, then it must also attribute good and the responsibility for it to creatures, thereby depriving God of the credit and glory for the good that creatures do.⁸² Pinnock disagrees, and points out that “our cooperation is possible because of God’s empowering Spirit working within us.”⁸³ We can only do good works because of the motivation, abilities, resources, and opportunities that God has given us. Therefore, God still gets the glory for our good works.

Open Theism Encourages Us to Work Against Evil

What we believe about God’s relationship to evil will affect our own motivation to work against evil. Pinnock says that in Calvinism

whatever happens is thought to be God’s will so it is difficult to see [how] there can be genuine evil. Evil turns out to be in every case something good in disguise. Evil things happen because they fit somehow into his plan, which makes it hard to hate evil without hating God.⁸⁴

In this view, to work against evil is to work against God’s plans for greater good. So then why should anyone try to prevent evil? Instead, the open theist view means that “one can fight evil without fighting God.”⁸⁵ Since evil is not predetermined by God and is fully against his will, we can enthusiastically oppose it without fear that we might be ruining

⁷⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 16.

⁸⁰ David Basinger, “Practical Implications,” in *The Openness of God*, 172.

⁸¹ David Basinger, “Practical Implications,” in *The Openness of God*, 173.

⁸² Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 225.

⁸³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 164.

⁸⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 176–177.

⁸⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 176.

God's plan. Consequently, Pinnock suspects that open theism may appeal "more to activists than to mystics."⁸⁶ He wonders if God does not prevent more evil because he desires to work with humans as covenant partners, so when we do not pray for God to overcome evil and do not expect him to make a difference in the world, he restrains his influence on the world.⁸⁷ This idea that our cooperation may allow God to be more active in overcoming evil should encourage us to pray and to do what we can to help him defeat evil.

Calvinists would respond that they do act to overcome evil, yet they must appeal to God's "will of command" given in Scripture and not God's "will of decree" which is shown by what actually happens in the world.⁸⁸ So Calvinists can say it is God's will for us to join in wiping out AIDS as participation in lifting the curse of futility,⁸⁹ yet if consistent, they must acknowledge that AIDS continues to exist because God wills it. Therefore, Pinnock suspects that Calvinists face an inconsistency between what their beliefs imply and how they actually live. He says,

A conventional theist can, of course, persevere because the gospel requires it but they cannot give an account of why they do so. They have to live as if their view of God were different than it is, i.e. they live as if it were, in fact, the open view.⁹⁰

Even if God predestines everything, Pinnock says it is "better" and "safer" to live as if the open theist view is true, because it encourages action instead of resignation.⁹¹

Objection: Scripture Says God Causes All Evil

Despite the apparent advantages of open theism for theodicy, opponents argue that it is all overruled by Scripture, which clearly shows that God causes evil. Some verses frequently referred to are Ecclesiastes 7:14,⁹²

⁸⁶ Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," 244.

⁸⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 135.

⁸⁸ John Piper and Justin Taylor, "An Interview with John Piper," in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 236.

⁸⁹ John Piper and Justin Taylor, "An Interview with John Piper," 237.

⁹⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 154.

⁹¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 155.

⁹² Mark Talbot, "All the Good that is Ours in Christ," in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 42.

Isaiah 45:7, and Amos 3:6.⁹³ Narrative evidence includes how God sent evil spirits to Saul (1 Samuel 16:14–23), to the leaders of Shechem (Judges 9:23),⁹⁴ and to Ahab’s prophets (1 Kings 22:19–22).⁹⁵ They argue that the story of Job indicates God has control over Satan so that he is “on a leash held firmly by God’s sovereign hand.”⁹⁶ Other examples which show God causing evil are God destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, sending the plagues of Egypt, sending poisonous snakes to the Israelites (Numbers 21:6), and sending a pestilence that kills many Israelites (2 Samuel 24:15).

How do open theists interpret these verses? Pinnock argues that we must look at them in context. Thus, Isaiah 45:7 refers not to evil in general but to Israel’s deliverance from Babylon, and Amos 3:6 speaks about judgement on a city for sin, not disasters in general.⁹⁷ When Lamentations 3:38 claims, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?” Pinnock says it refers to the Babylonian exile, and when God says to Moses in Exodus 4:11, “Who makes the mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I the Lord?” it does not mean that God causes disabilities but that God can use imperfect people to achieve his purposes.⁹⁸ Pinnock does not deny that God’s wrath is real, but God only acts in wrathful ways when we have rejected his love.⁹⁹ Sometimes God punishes evildoers in order to protect good people,¹⁰⁰ or to vindicate himself.¹⁰¹ Pinnock argues that some of the violent commandments in the Old Testament were not God’s original plan, but were given because of the reality of sin, just as Jesus says that God allowed divorce as a concession to human weakness.¹⁰² Gregory Boyd believes that when God punished Israel’s disobedience, it was the lesser of two evils, and God is

⁹³ Mark Talbot, “All the Good that is Ours in Christ,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 44.

⁹⁴ Mark Talbot, “All the Good that is Ours in Christ,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 44.

⁹⁵ Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of God’s Sovereignty and Free Will* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2010), 28.

⁹⁶ Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, 28. For an open theist approach to Job, see Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 85–106.

⁹⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 55.

⁹⁸ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 55. For longer, more detailed exegesis of these verses see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 85–92.

⁹⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 82–83.

¹⁰⁰ Clark H. Pinnock with Barry L. Callen, *The Scripture Principle: Reclaiming the Full Authority of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 139.

¹⁰¹ Pinnock with Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 140.

¹⁰² Pinnock with Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 138.

sad when punishment becomes necessary.¹⁰³ Boyd also notes that God used punishments to teach Israel what it meant to be a faithful covenant partner—it does not mean that God uses evil to punish people in general.¹⁰⁴ So open theists do not deny that sometimes God uses evil to punish sin, but they deny that God causes *all* evil.

Open Theism Solves Problems with Spiritual Warfare

One major reason why we cannot say that God controls all evil is the reality of spiritual warfare. Pinnock says that while Calvinists accept the “appearance” of spiritual warfare, ultimately it must be an illusion if God acts on the side of both good and evil.¹⁰⁵ However, Pinnock notes that Jesus saw things like deformity, blindness, leprosy, and fever as evidence of the reign of darkness and due to demonic influence, not God’s providence (e.g. Matthew 17:14–20, Luke 13:11).¹⁰⁶ God’s message to Daniel brought by an angel was temporarily delayed due to an evil power (Daniel 10:13-14).¹⁰⁷ Gregory Boyd lists many other verses which show that we suffer under the rule of the power of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11, 2 Corinthians 4:4, Ephesians 2:2; 1 John 5:19),¹⁰⁸ and not because of God’s will.

Also, if Christians believe that Jesus is “the centerpiece of the Christian revelation,” and “the revelation of God without peer,”¹⁰⁹ then Jesus must fully and accurately reveal God’s relationship to evil. Yet the problem with the Calvinist approach to spiritual warfare is that

it posits a rift between the Father (who supposedly controls Satan) and the Son (who opposes Satan). Indeed, it creates an irreparable duplicity in

¹⁰³ Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 68. Also see Pinnock with Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 140 where Pinnock refers to Ezek 33:11 which says God does not delight in punishing sinners.

¹⁰⁴ Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 82. Pinnock does use the word “punish” when he translates Rev 3:19 as “I punish all whom I love,” in Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 82. Yet major Bible translations use the words “reprove and discipline” (ESV), “rebuke and discipline” (NIV), or “rebuke and chasten” (KJV) in this verse, not “punish” as Pinnock does.

¹⁰⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 148.

¹⁰⁸ Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 120.

¹⁰⁹ Pinnock with Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 34.

the Father himself: the Father's will is done by Satan, and the Father's will is also done by Jesus as he resists Satan.¹¹⁰

Thus, those who say that God controls Satan are claiming that the will of the Father is not the same as the will of the Son, and that Jesus did not perfectly reveal God's relationship to evil. This effectively divides the Trinity and disparages the Incarnation, so it cannot be correct. Instead, Pinnock argues that Messianic revelation means "the New Testament must be taken as the key for interpreting the Old Testament,"¹¹¹ which encourages us to re-interpret difficult passages in ways that are consistent with God's character as revealed by Jesus.

Pinnock says an open theist approach to spiritual warfare means that

At present, God's will is resisted by powers of darkness, but the day will come when his will shall triumph. At present, evil is mounting a challenge to God's rule with considerable effect. The powers of darkness put up stiff resistance and to a degree block God's plans; that is, they can restrict God's ability to respond to a given crisis.¹¹²

He says, "God is not now in [complete] control—we anticipate complete victory over evil only in the future."¹¹³ This does not mean God is a failure whenever something happens on the small scale that God does not want, since on the scale of eternity God will ultimately be successful. "God has the upper hand," Pinnock says, so we can confidently trust that God will have the victory, even though fallen angels and humans can resist his will and temporarily thwart his desires.¹¹⁴ Pinnock argues "It is not necessary [for God] to win every single skirmish and know every single detail ahead of time in order to deliver on his promise."¹¹⁵ The temporary setbacks that happen along the way are unfortunate by-products of the freedom which is necessary to achieve God's ultimate purpose: people who freely love him. Thus,

¹¹⁰ Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 187.

¹¹¹ Pinnock with Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 138–139.

¹¹² Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 115.

¹¹³ Clark H. Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," *TbTo* 53, no. 1 (1996): 19.

¹¹⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 36–37.

¹¹⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 52–53.

the full display of God's sovereignty would not be a present reality but something to come at the end of history, when his glory is revealed, rather than at the present time, when the Spirit suffers with us and the universe groans.¹¹⁶

He says the Lord's return is certain, and although our actions may affect its timing, we cannot change its reality.¹¹⁷ Even John Feinberg, a Calvinist, says:

It is easy to focus on what is going wrong. But when you stop to think about it, it is truly amazing that in a world where Satan is so dominant and sin so rampant anything ever goes right. That much does go right is ample evidence of God's grace and goodness to us.¹¹⁸

God never guarantees that everything will go perfectly for us in this life (Mark 13:9, John 16:33) but, we can trust that all things will work together for the good of those who love him (Rom 8:28). Every tear will be wiped away (Rev 21:4), and we will live forever with God in a restored creation which will be beyond compare with our present suffering (Rom 8:18).

Conclusion

As shown in this article, while open theism is still controversial, it is orthodox and also has several major advantages for dealing with theodicy. This may indicate that open theism has a promising future in Christian theology.

To summarise, open theism makes it easier to believe that God is good because evil is due to creaturely misuse of God-given free will, instead of being God's will. It rightly holds us morally responsible for our evil choices, and encourages us to work against evil because evil is never God's will, even though God's omnipotence means he can bring good out of evil without predestining it. Evil is never guaranteed to occur because God foreknows it will happen, so we can avoid it by how we act now. We never have to fear that God is guiding us into choices that guarantee we will experience evil. Open theism also provides a better explanation for

¹¹⁶ Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 117.

¹¹⁷ Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," 19.

¹¹⁸ John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 330.

why God does not prevent more evil in the world, without requiring us to believe that evil contributes to the greater good or is unavoidable. And finally, open theism takes spiritual warfare seriously, without attributing demonic activity to God's will, thus preventing any contradiction between the Father's and Jesus's wills, and ensuring that Jesus perfectly represents God to us.

More work on open theism is needed in other areas (e.g. biblical prophecy, biblical interpretation, God's relationship to time, the nature of creaturely freedom) to further the case that open theism is a viable Christian option. At the least, interaction with open theism's arguments may encourage traditional theologians to refine their own explanations for theodicy.

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