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# THEODICY AND THE PROBLEMS OF OPEN THEISM

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*This article engages with some of the concerns highlighted by Open Theism, focusing on its rejection of exhaustive divine foreknowledge. It argues that Open Theism's proposed solutions, especially concerning theodicy, are unconvincing biblically, theologically, and pastorally. The article concludes that Open Theism is not a better alternative to Classical Theism or Reformed Orthodoxy.*

## Introduction

It has recently been argued that Open Theism offers a better response than Classical Theism or Reformed Orthodoxy to the problem of theodicy (the question of how a good God can permit evil).<sup>1</sup> This article will address that debate by touching briefly on some of the claims made for Open Theism.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Open Theism and Orthodoxy

The first claim is that Open Theism is both orthodox and evangelical, despite the fact that its proponents deny God's exhaustive foreknowledge.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Janelle Zeeb, "Open Theism and the Problem of Theodicy," *Churchman* 130.4 (2016): 299–317. In this article, I am focusing on Open Theism's proposal that the future is "open" to God; that is, God does not have an exhaustive foreknowledge of the future, given the real creaturely freedom of all personal beings (i.e. angelic beings and human beings). Open Theists disagree whether God has no foreknowledge or some. My article is not meant to be an exhaustive response to Open Theism, merely engaging in some pertinent issues raised by Zeeb.

<sup>2</sup> I dedicate this article to the memory of my friend and mentor, Rev. Dr. Michael J. Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill College. This article should have been written by him and I am indebted to him for many of the arguments here. All faults are, of course, my own.

<sup>3</sup> Zeeb, "Open Theism," 301–2, rightly acknowledges that Open Theism and Socinianism share a commitment to a God who does not know all future contingencies. Note also the family resemblance of Open Theism to Christian Process Theology. This is based on "the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (sometimes as modified by Charles Hartshorne) and expressed above all, prototypically, by Paul Tillich, John Cobb, David Griffin, Norman Pittenger, Delwin Brown, et al." One of the concepts that Christian Process Theology shares with Open Theism is a belief that God is "radically temporal; God learns as history

Classical Theism argues that God is a timeless being in eternity, who created both time and matter in Gen 1:1. Therefore, when God interacts in space-time history he knows the end from the beginning and hence he “foreknows” the future of 2018 from our viewpoint in 2017. For example, God says, “Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isa 46:9f.). From the viewpoint of Israel in exile, God foreknows that Israel will return and that ultimately there will be a new creation (Isa 65:17–25).

Foreknowledge is part of God’s relationship with creation, though it flows from who he is in himself. In fact, it is only from our perspective in space-time history that we speak of God foreknowing; God knows all things in the one moment of himself, and has nothing to learn. Classical Theism argues God knows himself perfectly and exhaustively, including all his creative ability. Therefore, God knows all things by knowing himself; that is to say, for God knowledge is seamless and not compartmentalised, on account of his perfections and simplicity. God’s exercise of exhaustive foreknowledge is integral to his attributes and thus to his identity. Since Open Theism denies God’s exhaustive foreknowledge, it would be appropriate to describe the God of Open Theism as different to the God of Classical Theism.

This ties in with God’s omniscience, traditionally understood that God knows all things past, present, and future. It is sometimes claimed that the Open Theist God has the attribute of omniscience in his being, but has decided to lay aside exhaustive foreknowledge in his dealings with his creation. Quite apart from the question whether an omniscient being can lay aside an attribute and still be the same being, Classical Theism asserts that the God of the Bible is omniscient in the economy of creation as well as in his essential attributes. To paraphrase Rahner’s Rule: “The essential attributes are the economic attributes, and the economic attributes are the essential attributes.”<sup>4</sup> Otherwise, we would have a God who acts in a different way to his nature, and therefore whom we do not really know.

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unfolds and how history unfolds is ultimately up to creatures.” Roger E. Olsen, “Why I Am Not a Process Theologian,” 4 December 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/12/why-i-am-not-a-process-theologian/> (accessed 10th January 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner proposed a rule for any discussions of the Trinity: The immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity.

On the other hand, the Open Theist argument that God knows all future possibilities is ultimately meaningless. In knowing “everything” he really knows nothing, for he cannot grasp which of the available possibilities will actually take place.

Similar problems emerge when we consider the attribute of omnipotence. Clark Pinnock redefines this to mean that the Open Theist God is omnipotent in the sense of being able to achieve his purposes because he is like a master chess player who can counter any moves that his opponent may make.<sup>5</sup> This God does not need to know everything about the future in order to achieve his purposes and fulfil his promises. Classical Theism on the other hand, understands that God is quite simply all-powerful; anything that happens can only occur on account of God’s will, because he is the first cause, creator, and sustainer of all things. So during Paul’s time in Athens, he says, “in him we live, and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27).<sup>6</sup> According to Scripture, all creation, in every aspect, is dependent on its creator (Rev 4:11). Open Theism is left with the challenge of explaining how something can happen without God either causing, approving, allowing, or knowing it.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Open Theism blurs the creator-creature distinction by asserting that creatures are independent of their creator and effectively “divinises” creatures, making them independent of God. Consequently, it inadvertently falls into a form of deism, in that God is removed from the free decisions of human beings, and, against all Open Theist intentions, becomes a distant God who began creation but who is not involved with it in an intimate way.

Not only does Open Theism redefine omniscience and omnipotence, its position must mean that omnipresence is effectively denied as well. For Open Theism, God is not present in the future decisions and choices of human beings, despite the assertions of Psalm 139:16, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” Here we see that God has written the entire script of David’s life in advance, being omnipotent. Indeed, Psalm 139 shows us that the doctrine of God

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<sup>5</sup> Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 114, cited by Zeeb, “Open Theism,” 303.

<sup>6</sup> Paul may be directly quoting Epimenides of Crete or a popular Greek catchphrase derived from Epimenides, but whomever Paul is quoting, he clearly agrees with the quotation.

<sup>7</sup> Open Theism seems to ignore the doctrine of creation and its impact on the doctrine of God. Notice also in Ps 8, Rev 4:11 that God being the creator means that he continually sustains all life.

is a seamless robe. Unstitch the attribute of omniscience, and the threads of omnipresence (i.e., both transcendence and immanence), omnipotence, and immutability come apart as well. Therefore, Open Theism redefines the entire doctrine of God.

The difference this makes can be seen, for example, in worship. Imagine a terrorist incident in the Middle East in which Christians die (an event not difficult for even a human being to foresee). In an Open Theist church the following Sunday, the preacher says that God grieves but he could not have foreseen it or avoided it, and prays for the bereaved hoping that the Holy Spirit may be able to comfort them (if they will accept it). In a Classical Theist church, the preacher assures the congregation that God foreknew about the terrorist attack, that somehow it belongs within God's good purposes, and prays that the bereaved will be comforted. The two churches are actually worshipping different gods.

## 2. Open Theism and “Mystery”

Clark Pinnock asserts that the Reformed appeal to mystery, in explaining how God foreknows exhaustively and yet humans are responsible, is “nonsense.”<sup>8</sup> The concept of divine “mystery” states that what God has authoritatively revealed in Scripture is not always explicable according to the dictates of fallen human reason, but that God knows how his self-revelation is coherent and rational (Deut 29:29; Ps 73:12–17).

The problem is that the dismissal of the category of “mystery” leaves Open Theism with a rationalistic hermeneutic and no real defence against anti-Trinitarianism. After all, is not the Trinity truly a mystery to our reasoning? How can there be three persons in one being without affirming a mystery to our fallen minds? Further, Classical Theism believes that the doctrine of Christ (one person in two natures, human and divine) guards the biblical doctrine that Christ is both God and Man, yet it remains a mystery to us as how one person can have two natures.<sup>9</sup> Open Theists need to show where Reformed theologians appeal to “mystery” and how they define it before they dismiss the idea. Reformed Theologians assert

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<sup>8</sup> Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 115.

<sup>9</sup> Open Theism also raises further Christological questions: For Open Theists, how can Christ fulfil his mission to be saviour if his human will and nature are independent of his divine will and nature? Do Open Theists believe that Christ's human will and nature are dominated by his divinity, as in a *Eutychian* Christology, or is Christ's human nature separated from divine nature, in which case is Christ really one person?

that God is truly good and has exhaustive foreknowledge of all events, and yet there is sin and evil in the world. The Reformed view is only “nonsense” if Open Theists can show that God cannot be both good and omniscient while evil still exists.

Here Martin Luther’s comments in *The Bondage of the Will* are helpful. Luther argues that it is a mystery and an insoluble problem for human reason how it can be just for a good human person to suffer and a bad one prosper, but this problem is solved by grace (that all of us are sinners and rebels, and God graciously saves without any recourse to human merit). Yet, for both fallen human reason and Christian understanding, it seems unjust of God that he saves some and damns others, given the bondage of our will. But, Luther argues, while now we may find God’s righteousness incomprehensible, in the light of glory of the second coming and the new creation, we will be shown how God’s righteousness is most perfect and manifest.<sup>10</sup> Mystery is a category that we anticipate will be resolved eschatologically (1 Cor 13:12b). Without recourse to the idea of mystery, Open Theism is left with no defence against rationalistic, secular unbelief.

### 3. Open Theism and Evil

There are a number of Scriptural passages which indicate that God is the ultimate cause of things, including evil (e.g. Ex 4:11; Eccl 7:14; Isa 45:7; Amos 3:6). In addition, there are twelve passages within Isaiah chapters 40–49 that indicate that “God declared the end from the beginning” (41:4, 22–23, 26; 42:9; 43:9; 44:7–8, 25–26; 45:19–21; 46:9–11; 47:13; 48:3–5; 48:15.) These passages are very significant: they indicate that God’s foreknowledge of the Babylonian exile and Persian restoration are worked examples of his exhaustive foreknowledge, which means that Israel can trust God. The basic difference between the Lord and the idols is that the idols do not know the future but the Lord does. For Isaiah, a god who does not know the future is an impotent, worthless, and lifeless god.

Classical Theism insists that while nothing, including evil, escapes God’s purposes, nevertheless God is never the author of evil, in that he can be charged with responsibility for an intentionally malicious act. Rather, God acts in a way that intends to bring good out of an act that humans intend for evil. So, in Gen 50:20, Joseph says that while his brothers intended evil in selling him into slavery, God was involved concurrently

<sup>10</sup>Kirsi I. Stjerna, ed., *Word and Faith*, vol. 2 of *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 254.

and in the very same act of the selling into slavery of Joseph, intending it for good—the ultimate salvation of Israel from famine: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Job 1–2 presents a long passage where God shows his sovereignty over evil. Here God and the Satan (adversary) are in the heavenly council, and Satan asserts that Job only worships God because God is good to him. God allows Satan to cause Job suffering by the elimination of his wealth, the death of his children, and his illness. Yet while God gives up Job to Satan, he orders Satan that he cannot take Job’s life: “And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.’” In the life of Job, we have a clear example of God’s sovereignty over evil: God knowingly allows Satan to cause Job’s suffering. In the case of Job 1–2, there is distinction between proximate and ultimate causes (a distinction employed in Reformed theology). In Job, Satan is the proximate cause of Job’s sufferings, intending sufferings for evil by destroying Job’s faith, while God is the ultimate cause of Job’s sufferings, intending them for Job’s greater good; a greater trust in him, and to his glory as the sovereign creator who can inspire trust even in suffering.

Indeed, Open Theists concede that God does use evil to punish sin, but do not realise how damaging this concession is to their position.<sup>11</sup> If God sometimes is the cause of evil, then Open Theism’s contention, that Classical Theism is seriously problematic because it makes God responsible for evil, is self-defeating; Open Theism is guilty of the same charge.

Further, if God is sovereign over evil, then Open Theism offers no better perspective on spiritual warfare, since it fails to distinguish between God’s sovereign will (where God intends to bring good out of evil) and God’s revealed will in Scripture (where God instructs that evil acts are sinful, because God knows our wills intend evil; cf. Gen 6:5 and discussion below). It is important to recognise that Satan, in Job, is God’s adversary, yet his power is limited by God and Satan’s actions fulfil God’s purposes. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians, Paul instructs the church to hand over the sinful man to Satan who will destroy the man’s flesh so that “his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5). Here, Satan’s evil work can oddly serve God’s purpose of salvation.

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<sup>11</sup> Zeeb, “Open Theism,” 313–4.

#### 4. Open Theism and the “Greater Good”

Janelle Zeeb rightly demonstrates that even Open Theism appeals to a version of the “greater good” defence against the existence of evil; evil is allowed because of the “greater good” of creaturely freedom.<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally, that is no better than the “greater good” defence of Reformed Orthodoxy (which Open Theism dismisses) that God may allow evil for the sake his own glory. Reformed Orthodoxy argues the “great good” defence to the problem of evil can be seen primarily in the cross: God ordains the evil of that horror and suffering in order to bring about the great good of our salvation. For example, in Acts 4:23–41, the early church cites Ps 2:1–2 and proclaims to God that Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the Jewish establishment who put Jesus to death Jesus to death did “whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:28). Here then the death of Jesus is seen as a great evil (indeed what could be a greater evil than the murder of the Son of God?) and yet it is according to God’s plan and will.

What, in God’s purposes, could be the “greater good” to come out of this “greatest evil?” The clear, biblical answer is that it is at the cross that we see the full glory of God’s love, because the cross reveals God’s mercy and grace (1 John 4:9–10). Indeed there would be no cross in the theological sense (and hence no love or grace) without the sins that Jesus bore, and the evil suffering he endured. In other words, God permitted sin and suffering for the “greater good” of the love of he displayed at the cross. That “greater good” also means our salvation and rescue *from sin, evil, and death* (Acts 4:12), and so we will praise God eternally for our salvation.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Christ’s death is part of his and his Father’s glory—it shows the glory of his love and grace (John 17:1–5; Phil 2:11). Regrettably, Open Theism misses out on the riches of God’s love, grace, and mercy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zeeb, “Open Theism,” 309.

<sup>13</sup> For Open Theists, the doctrine of the exclusivism of the Gospel is problematic. They generally prefer an “inclusive” view of salvation, which is that people who have never heard of Christ or people of good will can be saved without knowing Christ and Lord and Saviour. See the discussion in my *Empty and Evil: The Worship of Other Faiths in 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Today* (London: Latimer Trust, 2010), where I argue that Open Theists do not take such texts as 1 Cor 10:18–22 seriously; that other faiths are involved in demon worship.

<sup>14</sup> Open Theism also raises key issues about the doctrine of salvation. Open Theism acknowledges the presence of grace in salvation but it is not grace *alone*, given Open Theism’s commitment to libertarian human freedom. So, in Open Theism, God can work hard to make it possible for an unbeliever to hear the Gospel, and



## 5. Open Theism and Theodicy

Open Theists take comfort in the idea that God never wills the evil and suffering that happens to human beings.<sup>15</sup> The argument that Open Theism offers a better alternative to the problem of theodicy is unconvincing for the following reasons.

First, it has become an axiom in recent times that all theology should be done in the shadow of Auschwitz; that any theological proposal ought to answer the problem for theodicy that the evil and horror of Auschwitz raises. Yet Open Theism has no answer for Auschwitz. In 1939 it would not have been very difficult for an Open Theist God to foresee that Hitler would wage a world war and order the holocaust, given his history of tyranny, militarism, and anti-Semitism. In fact, it seems that the Open Theist God is either a very poor chess player, who missed what some humans could see about Hitler in 1939, or this God could foresee the holocaust but declined or was unable to do anything substantial about it. After all, surely the Open Theist God could have prevented the construction of Auschwitz or destroyed the railway lines to Auschwitz, so saving thousands of lives.

Secondly, Open Theism offers no answer to the problem of natural evil. Take, for example, the South Asian tsunami of 2004 which killed 250,000 people. Surely any god worth his salt is in charge of earthquakes and tsunamis. Certainly, the God of the Bible is in charge of natural evils (in Jonah 1, God sends the storm to reveal his wrath at Jonah's disobedience and then the big fish to rescue Jonah.) Yet, the natural evil of the tsunami implies that the Open Theist God is either a very bad earthquake forecaster or he decided to allow 250,000 people to die, without giving them warning of its coming. Since both options are unpalatable to Open Theism, this suggests that Open Theism does not really offer any solution to the problem of theodicy.

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the Holy Spirit can influence a person's will, but the ultimate decision is left to the person's will. For Open Theism, the decisive factor in salvation is the person's *free choice* of Christ. Indeed, in Open Theism, a person who chooses Christ must be exalted and commended for his right choice (cf. Rom 3:27a). Further, Open Theism needs to answer the question as to why Christ died. If Christ does not die as our penal substitute, then why does he die? To paraphrase Paul in Gal 2:21, if justification comes by our independent, sovereign, free-wills, then Christ died for nothing.

<sup>15</sup> Zeeb, "Open Theism," 307.

Thirdly, Open Theism does not account for the biblical portrait of the justice of God. In Rom 1:18–32, God *gives up* a humanity, which has *exchanged* the true Creator for idols, to its own evil desires:

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom 1:24f.)

This “giving up” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28) is both judicial and permitting an evil, yet there is a “greater good” here; God’s punishment of sin is to allow sinners to continue to sin more; the punishment fits the crime of sin.

Fourthly, eschatologically, the horror of hell exceeds all evils; but God quite clearly allows and ordains hell. For God, hell establishes his abhorrence of sin and love of justice (Rev 20:15; 22:15). Open Theists generally do not believe in eternal punishment in hell, but what is their alternative? Annihilation would mean that God will destroy a huge number of people, which is more drastic than merely punishing them. Giving the condemned a second chance to be saved is also problematic—when would that be and in what circumstances? What would happen to those who continued to reject God’s offer of salvation? Open Theists have no satisfactory answer to these questions.

In Reformed thinking, hell is the dark backdrop to the sparkling jewel of God’s grace. Hell accentuates the preciousness of his grace and glory. Grace can only be grace if God’s love is lavished on the chosen, otherwise it is a mere disinterested benevolence to all. At least in part, to love is to choose (Eph 1:4f.). The elect will glorify God for his grace and love—a grace that can be seen because it represents an escape from hell. In Romans 9:6, 18, God chooses Jacob and rejects Esau, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” to display his mercy. He hardens Pharaoh’s will (Ex 4:21) in order that his glorious name might be proclaimed in the world:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” [Ex 9:16] So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (Rom 9:17f.)

Therefore, in these four areas we can see that Open Theism offers a woefully inadequate theodicy compared to Classical Theism.

## 6. Open Theism and Human Responsibility

A key tenet of Open Theism is that it upholds personal human responsibility. Yet, Open Theism does not account for the fact that our wills are not free-floating, autonomous, entities but under the control of our nature. The same is true of God. He has free will; indeed, he is the freest of all beings, but he cannot sin or be tempted to evil (Jas 1:13) because he is by nature a purely holy being (Isa 6:3). Yet his divine freedom is not limited by his inability to choose evil; rather he is free because his choices are determined by his holy and sinless nature.

In creation, Adam and Eve were free (being in the image of God) but nevertheless God foreknew Adam and Eve's sin; he was not taken by surprise by Adam's sin; by planting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden, God must know, at the very least, that Adam and Eve may disobey (Gen 2:15–17). Adam and Eve are created able not to sin and able to sin. Otherwise, the fall becomes impossible and utterly incoherent.

Because of original sin, all fallen humans are born corrupt. So, to give just one example, it states categorically in Gen 6:5, after the fall, that "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Notice here that this is God's perspective and that it is his verdict that the will ("the heart") of all humans is "only evil continually" even down to "every intention of his thoughts." Fallen human beings desire evil and these evil desires then lead to evil acts. God cannot be held accountable for either our evil desires or our evil acts even as he exhaustively foreknows them; after all it is human beings who perform them, not God. God's desires are wholly good, and he acts in a wholly good way to renew creation (Isa 65:17f.). Given Gen 6:5, God knows that while our wills are free to sin, we cannot choose the good and will choose evil all the time. Therefore, he needs to intervene and give us renewed wills so that we can trust in Christ (Jer 31:31–34).

Saying that we choose God's love establishes a rational-voluntaristic anthropology, not a biblical one. God and Christ irresistibly woo and draw by the wonder of divine love (John 6:44).<sup>16</sup> After conversion, we

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<sup>16</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), *passim*, makes the important point that the love of God in Scripture is complex: God's invulnerable intra-Trinitarian love is distinct from his providential love towards creation, which is different from God's yearning love for all to be reconciled, which is different from God's elective love which is other-person centred and involves in communion with the Trinity, which is different from

have a new nature (John 3:3–8; Titus 3:3–6), therefore we are free to choose good. Eschatologically, in the new creation we will be unable to sin because our natures will have been made perfect, and so we will enjoy genuine freedom.

By contrast, our consciences (based on Scripture) tell us that “Hitler was an evil character,” not that “Hitler’s free will made some bad choices.” Moral virtue and blame cannot be accorded merely to an autonomous, independent, free will, but rather to a person and their character.

How then does God relate to his creatures so that he can sovereignly determine our desires? Luther here is very helpful on this question in *The Bondage of The Will*. He states:

God works evil in us i.e. by means of us, not through any fault of God, but owing to our own faultiness ... God makes good use of this evil in accordance with God’s Wisdom for God’s own Glory and our salvation.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, God can use and determine to use our evil desires for noble purposes. A good example is God working through the desires and wills of Scripture writers so that what is written is both the word of men and the Word of God. Peter says that no prophecy of Scripture is due to a human’s independent free-will, but rather that “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21; cf. 2 Tim 3:16f.). Scripture writers are responsible for what they write (so, for example, Isaiah writes in his own unique style and way) but nevertheless the Holy Spirit so determines the Scripture writers’ minds that what is written are the very words of God.

The elimination of character and nature in any discussion of personal responsibility leaves Open Theism vulnerable at what it believes is its strongest point.

## 7. Open Theism and Prayer

Gregory Boyd has given the example of the case where a Christian woman, Suzanne, prays for guidance for a godly husband, and feels led by God to marry a man who turns out to be adulterous and abusive.

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God’s disciplinary love to the people of God. All these different loves must not be confused. Further, biblical love is very different from sentimental notions of love in vogue today and the post-modern idea that to say that someone is wrong on a cherished value is “unloving.”

<sup>17</sup> Stjerna, *Word and Faith*, 226.

Boyd believes that it pastorally helps to say that God was not responsible, despite Suzanne's prayers for guidance, because God did not know in advance that this man would turn out to be unsuitable.<sup>18</sup> Five responses can be made to Boyd's example.

First of all, there are no recorded promises in Scripture that God is obliged to provide the answer we want to our prayers for guidance about spouses. Indeed, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that our feelings of being led should be relied upon.

Secondly, however, surely if the Open Theist God is the brilliant chess player the Open Theists assert that he is, then he ought to have been able to discern that, given the man's past and his divine insight into the human heart, that there was a very good chance that this man would be bad husband material. The fact that the Open Theist God did not reveal to the woman, asking for his guidance, that there are substantial risks in marrying this man, implies that the Open Theist view is flawed. This God is not a brilliant chess player, and this theory is of no real pastoral comfort.

Thirdly, prayer in the Scriptures is focused on praying for God to fulfil his revealed will. To give one example, in 2 Sam 7, David prays to God that the Lord would fulfil what he has already promised to do, in establishing him as a perpetual royal dynasty:

“And now, O Lord God, confirm forever the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, and do as you have spoken,” (2 Sam 7:25.)

Fourthly, the Open Theist view undermines prayer pastorally. Under the Open Theist view, people cannot pray that God would intervene in world affairs or in bringing people to faith. This God is impotent to stop terrorism around the world because he has decided not to intervene in the lives of terrorists. Christians cannot ask this God to bring their unbelieving relatives and friends to faith; all he can do is arrange the circumstances by the Spirit so that people hear the gospel. The rest is up to the evangelist and the autonomous will of the unbeliever. Open Theism fails to see that sin means utter personal hostility to God our creator (Rom 1:18–23) and so God must overcome this enmity by his grace (cf. Rom 5:10).

Fifthly, there can be no guarantee in Open Theism that Christians will be eschatologically saved. A Christian could, after some years decide

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000), 103–106 in Zeeb, “Open Theism,” 309.

to freely leave the faith, and the Open Theist God could do little about it, except to plead to the backslider. Logically, Open Theism has no place for assurance of future salvation *contra* to Paul in Rom 8:1: “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Sadly, Open Theism undermines confidence and assurance in a prayer-hearing, prayer-answering, and saving God.

## 8. Open Theism and Biblical Prophecy

Janelle Zeeb says that more work needs to be done in the area of biblical prophecy.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Open Theism has no convincing way to account for it. To take an example, Scripture declares that the Christ must be a descendant of David: God, through the prophet Nathan, assures King David that David’s son, will rule:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam 7:12–16)

Given that David’s son, Solomon, did not rule forever, the prophet Nathan, the author, and God (especially in the light of the Canon) must foresee an ultimate Son of David, God’s own Son, who will rule forever. So, God’s promise of an eternal kingdom for the Son of David is developed into Messianic prophecies (Ps 2; Isa 9:1–7; 11:1–5). The genealogy in

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<sup>19</sup> Zeeb, “Open Theism,” 317. Open Theists could dismiss the argument from prophecy by adopting the liberal rejection of the whole idea of prophecy. On this liberal view, no one, not even God, can ever predict or foresee any future free-will choices of all. Therefore, so-called Scriptural “prophecies” were written after the event and made to seem like foretelling the future. Adopting this liberal view may make Open Theism more coherent but the dismissal of prophecy would imply that Scripture does not give us the truth, and undermine the doctrine of Scripture at its foundation, and hence all other doctrines as well.

Matt 1:1–18 confirms that with the birth of Jesus, God has fulfilled his prophecies of the Messiah.

However, the prophecy that the Christ must be the Son of David (cf. Rom 1:3) means that God has exhaustively foreknown all of David's descendants and all their acts in order to ensure that Jesus is in that family, and hence the Messiah.

The sort of foreknowledge needed, of a vast number of human choices over a long period of time is impossible for even a divine chess player to achieve, if human choices are uncaused and independent of God. The birth of the Messiah is only achievable through God's exhaustive foreknowledge of the choices of humans over many generations and hundreds of years.

Further, Open Theists cannot maintain that Christ will return and establish his Kingdom if God cannot exhaustively foresee the future. On their view, it must be possible that human beings will so freely choose and thwart God's plan that it becomes impossible for Christ to return.

Therefore, will Open Theists allow the God of the Bible, who does prophesy the future exhaustively, to disagree with them?

## Conclusion

I want to close by commending Janelle Zeeb for pointing out that classical Arminianism is inconsistent in upholding both libertarian human freedom and exhaustive divine foreknowledge.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the solution to the inconsistency is not to abandon exhaustive divine foreknowledge but to abandon libertarian human freedom in favour of compatibilism: That God exhaustively foreknows and yet humans can exercise free will based on their natures.

Open Theism does not provide an adequate answer to the problems it seeks to address. Those who have defended it claim that it reflects biblical teaching more faithfully than previous attempts, but actually they have failed to provide a viable alternative to Classical Theism and Reformed Orthodoxy which rightly retain the claim to be a superior exposition of the doctrine of God and theodicy revealed in Holy Scripture.

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<sup>20</sup> Zeeb, "Open Theism," 306–307.