# *Evangelical Review of Theology*

**EDITOR: DAVID PARKER**

**Volume 26 • Number 3 • July 2002**

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith*

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2002) **26:3**, 240–264 0144-8153

# Divine Omniscience and Future Contingents: Weighing the Presuppositional Issues in the Contemporary Debate

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**Keywords**: Classical theism, open theism, anthropomorphism, nature of God, omnipotence, freedom, theodicy, good, evil, combatibilism, libertarianism, time, eternity, prayer

## Introduction[1]

In recent years, the efforts of open theists to revise the classical understanding of the nature of the future about which God knows has revived an ancient controversy over the doctrine of divine omniscience. Evangelicals thinkers on both sides of the debate have naturally centred their arguments on 'what the Bible says' even as they have not ignored other issues. As with other long-standing theological disputes, however, neither side appears to have a knock-down biblical argument. I propose, therefore, to inquire into the interpretive presuppositions—hermeneutical, theological and philosophical—operative in both the classical and openness accounts of the doctrine of divine omniscience.

Hermeneutical issues include operative root metaphors regarding the God-world relationship, notions about the nature of biblical language, and commitments to various

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1 My thanks to members of the audience at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in November 2000 for their responses and questions. I am grateful to Gregory Boyd and Tyler DeArmond for their critical reading of an earlier draft.

hermeneutical paradigms. Theological issues include the essential nature of God, divine omnipotence, and the meaning of divine freedom. More philosophically oriented issues include the problem of theodicy, the meaning of creaturely freedom, and the nature of the relationship between God, time, and eternity. Rather than being a detailed explication of these issues, my paper focuses instead on showing how intuitively made decisions in each of these areas impacts how one reads the Bible.

My purposes are threefold: a) to show the complex web of beliefs—both presuppositional and doctrinal—that go into the formulation of a single theological doctrine; b) to identify the range of historical and contemporary methods on each issue that informs and underwrites—both consistently and inconsistently—attempts to articulate a coherent doctrine of God's knowledge of the future; and c) to raise the question about whether or not there is a hierarchy of doctrines about God, and if so, where the specific doctrine of God's knowledge of future contingents fits into that hierarchy.

I also need to be clear, however, that this paper does not aim to be an exhaustive analysis of all the presuppositions that go into reflection on the doctrine of omniscience. This non-exhaustiveness should be read in at least four ways. First, my focus here is on the debate within evangelicalism, i.e., between classical theism and open theism. I do not even consider this debate in the larger historical and contemporary Christian context.[2] Second, there are just too many presuppositional issues to fully enumerate, much less consider. One philosophical presupposition that I do not mention here but which I discuss at length elsewhere is the issue of the nature of possibility and how that relates to what God does and knows.[3] Third, even my treatment of the various issues I do engage remains on the surface in that I do not, because of space constraints, detail the arguments as developed by either side. I assume readers who are generally familiar with the overall contours of the debate will either affirm or deny that my at-times gross generalizations have hit their intended mark. Finally, I should also add that my interests are methodological rather than strictly theological in that I do not set out to resolve the current debate.[4] My feeling is that the issues

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2 For an example of what would be entailed if this restriction were lifted, see how I develop the brief sub-section here on the question of God's relationship to time and eternity into a full article that surveys some of the most prominent responses in the history of Christian thought to this question: 'Divine Knowledge and Relation to Time', in Thomas Jay Oord, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction to Issues* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill/Nazarene Publishing House, forthcoming). It goes without saying that even a full article does not begin to do justice to the complexity of the question.

3 See Yong, 'Possibility and Actuality: The Doctrine of Creation and Its Implications for Divine Omniscience', *The Wesleyan Philosophical Society Online Journal* [http://david.snu.edu/~brint.fs/wpsjnl/v1n1.htm] 1:1 (2001).

4 In some ways, I am doing for the debate on omniscience what Kelly James Clark did a short while ago for the debate on divine impassibility between those represented then on the traditionalist side by Richard Creel and on the progressive side by Nicholas Wolterstorff; see Clark's 'Hold Not Thy Peace At My Tears: Methodological Reflections on Divine Impassibility', in Kelly James Clark, ed., *Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), pp. 167-93.

involved, even if restricted as here to the intra-evangelical debate, are extremely complex, and that those who attempt to settle the issues in the scope of a single paper do not represent the art and craft of theological reflection well. With these caveats in hand, on with the argument.

## I. Hermeneutical Presuppositions

It is certainly the case that what I call theological and philosophical presuppositions (sections two and three below) also serve as hermeneutical presuppositions in so far as they inform and influence the ways in which we read the Bible. In this section, however, my focus is on the principles of interpretation themselves. The question here revolves around how Scripture is read and understood by classical and open theists. I want to broach that question by examining how root metaphors for the God-world relationship function, how understandings of biblical language influence interpretation, and how the idea of hermeneutical paradigms plays a central role in the present debate.

### *Root metaphors for the God-world relationship*

The Bible presents God as genuinely related to the world. However, this relationship is also depicted in a variety of ways, each of them reflecting various aspects and serving diverse functions. For our purposes, consider that God is creator, judge and sovereign on the one hand, and saviour, lover and friend on the other. There is no question that each triad is clearly portrayed in Scripture, so neither side can accuse the other of being 'extra-biblical' in this regard. Yet, each triad also communicates distinct aspects of God's relationship with the world. As creator, judge and sovereign king, God's omnipotence and purposiveness regarding creation is emphasized. As saviour, lover and friend, God's omni-benevolence and genuine responsiveness to creation in general and to human beings more specifically is accentuated.

At one level, the debate between classical and openness theists turns on which triad of metaphors about God's relationship to the world is dominant. On the classical side, the latter set is subservient to the former at least conceptually if not rhetorically. In other words, while classical theists do not deny God as saviour, lover and friend, logical priority is placed on God as creator, judge and sovereign. The result is that God's interaction with the world is subordinated to God's intentions for the world. Another way of saying this is that classical theism emphasizes God's power, God's purposes and God's glory to the (unintentional) neglect of the more personalistic attributes of divinity. Classical theists are convinced that if one should err, it should be on this side rather than on the other.[5]

5 This is evident in the collection of essays published in response to the openness position; see Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, eds., *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995); cf. also Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Open theists, however, are not persuaded. As with the classical strategy, open theists certainly do not deny the creating, judging and ruling aspects of God's relationship with the world. However, these aspects are subordinated—clearly in this case rhetorically, but perhaps even as clearly conceptually—to the saving, loving and befriending aspects of that relationship. The result is that God's interaction with the world is understood much more in terms of a robust or mutual relationality as opposed to the more one-way or asymmetrical relationality in the classical paradigm. Another way of saying this is that open theists emphasize God's love, compassion and personableness with regard to God's relationship to the world in general and to human beings more specifically. This last point is especially important since the human experience of interpersonal relationships enables human beings to understand what it means to affirm God as personal. Open theists are convinced that because God is a saving, loving and personal God, if one should err, it should be on this side rather than the other.[6]

Now it is important to remember that both sides will resist any suggestion that they either deny or consciously subordinate one triad to the other. My thesis, however, is that this subordination takes place hermeneutically at the level of root metaphors. Root metaphors function underneath full consciousness at the worldview level and define what is considered axiomatic, valuable and criteriological.[7] This enables the resolution of tensions in the biblical text. Thus, classical theists read God's saving work in the light of God's creating work, while open theists understand God as creator in light of God as saviour. The tension between God's power and God's love is resolved by classical theists in the former direction and by open theists in the latter direction. Put another way, the divine-human relationship is understood either as predicated on God's initiative (the classical emphasis on divine sovereignty and graciousness) or as being genuinely interactive (the open theist emphasis on divine love and relationality). For both sides, the questions raised by the triad of metaphors on the 'other' side is explicated in terms of what the Bible says about the root metaphors on their own side. The question at this level, then, is whether God is first and foremost sovereign, etc., or friend, etc. Which serves as the set of root metaphors that founds one's worldview and that shapes one's interpretive intuitions?

### *The nature of biblical language*

A second set of hermeneutical assumptions operative in the current debate concerns the nature of biblical language. One of the most hotly debated points is the question of

6 Representative of the relational emphasis in open theism is John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

7 On the concept of root metaphors, see Stephen Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942).

when language about God is anthropomorphic and when it is not. Both sides agree that the Bible contains anthropomorphic language on the one hand, but also includes clearly literal predications about God on the other. Thus references to God's wings (e.g., Ruth 2:12 and Ps. 17:8) or God's eyes (e.g., 2 Chr. 16:9 and 1 Pet. 3:12) are of the former type, and statements such as 'God is love' (1 Jn. 4:8) and 'God is light' (1 Jn. 1:5) are of the latter type. But what about statements regarding God coming to find something as if it were new to him (e.g., Gen. 18:21, 22:12 and Deut. 8:2) or having incorrectly anticipated the ways things would turn out (e.g., Jer. 3:7, 19:5 and 32:35), or cases where there is a change in the divine mind about specific actions (e.g., Ezek. 20:21-22, Amos 7:1-6 and Jon. 3:10)? Historically, these also have been read as anthropomorphisms, and contemporary classical theists insist on following the lead of the ancients.[8]

The response of open theists, however, has been 'Not so quick!' Rather, these kinds of statements not only tell us something about God, but they also tell us something about the future, namely that the future is open; some things are determined, but other things, specifically that connected to what free creatures have yet to determine, are not. What has formerly been understood anthropomorphically is now, in the open theist scheme of things, literally predicable of God.

The question that arises is why one party retains the classical notion of anthropomorphism in these cases and the other party does not. I would like to explore the controversial thesis that one's notion of biblical language plays an important role in determining how one feels about anthropomorphisms. Let me suggest that the centrality of the doctrine of analogy to classical hermeneutics is a key factor. This doctrine emphasizes that while the same property signified of God and of human beings is the same, it is also different in some significant way(s). Thus, God is good, but God's goodness is not exactly similar to ours (the difference being expressible only in negative terms). Alternatively put, there is an 'excessive' dissimilarity whereby God is infinitely and perfectly good in contrast to our finite and imperfect 'goodness'. The result is not only that our knowledge of God's goodness is analogical to our experience of finite goodness, but also that our knowledge of goodness itself is imperfect.

Important implications follow. First, the analogical conception of biblical (and religious) language means that while God is therefore revealed to human beings in some (analogical) way, yet God remains hidden from human beings to the same extent that the language of rev-

8 Thus Bruce Ware has defended the classical view, and in the process offered to clarify the definition of anthropomorphism: 'A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him' ('An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:4 [1986] pp. 431-46).

elation assumes similarities-*in-differences*. The apophatic strand deep within Christian orthodoxy from Augustine through Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and Kierkegaard testifies to the classical claim to both know God and yet not know God simultaneously. Second, the doctrine of analogy underwrites an allegorical, spiritualist or typological hermeneutic that understands the biblical text to communicate in multiple layers appropriate to the level of the reader or listener of the Word of God. If God is not fully revealed but remains partially hidden in the language of revelation itself, allegorical and especially spiritualistic interpretations of the text are required in order to keep us from being deceived that we have fully understood what is ultimately incomprehensible.[9]

Finally, might it not also be seen that the doctrine of analogy thereby supports one's intuition that anthropomorphisms permeate the biblical portrayal of God? If in fact there is a chasm between God in Godself and our human selves that is not completely bridged by biblical revelation, does it not make sense to assume that the scriptural text both reveals and conceals the essential reality of God? Would not anthropomorphisms then be the rule rather than the exception? After all, God would need to be revealed in human terms—anthropomorphically—in order for humans to grasp the divine reality.

The alternatives to an analogical conception are to understand biblical language either equivocally or univocally. To opt for the former is to opt for a thoroughgoing *via negativa*. Because this means that we do not really know what predicates for divinity mean after all, it has not been a live option for evangelical thinkers. The notion of biblical language as univocal, however, has had its evangelical advocates. Following Scotus and Ockham, univocal language means that we are applying predicates to God and intending them in the same sense although without the imperfections attached when applied to human beings. Evangelicals who are committed to truth as propositional find this alternative attractive.[10] It enables them to make fairly literal assertions about God without the uncomfortable feeling that things really aren't that way, or that something else remains hidden and shrouded in obscurity (as in the doctrine of analogy). Typological interpretations and reliance on anthropomorphisms are less appealing in this framework.

Open theists do not deny there are anthropomorphisms. They only

9 For the connections between an allegorical hermeneutic and the apophatic tradition, see Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

10 The connection between a commitment to biblical and religious language as univocal and what is now known as the openness position was anticipated by the British philosophical theologian, Richard Swinburne. In his *The Coherence of Theism* (orig. 1977), Swinburne opted for Scotus's doctrine of univocity in order to preserve the argument for God as personal (rev. ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993], pp. 51-73). While his role in the present debate has been minimal because of his confessional and geographical location, I suggest that the argument for univocity operates as a hermeneutical assumption underlying openness theology.

wish to avoid the tactical temptation to hide behind appeals to mystery when pushed, a strategy that appears at least at first glance to be substantiated by the anthropomorphic principle. Instead, the Bible's statements, stories and narratives are genuinely and directly revelatory about God. The cash value of this position is that it encourages and even requires us to face up to what the Bible does say about God, at least on the surface of things—i.e., God does come to find out something new, incorrectly anticipate how things turn out, or change the divine mind. For open theists, then, the issue in the debate thus turns not on how the Bible reveals God (i.e., anthropomorphically), but on our having accurate conceptions about the nature of the future.

## Paradigm changes in hermeneutics

I wish to take this question of hermeneutical presuppositions to the next level and ask about the constellation of interpretive principles themselves. Both the relationship of root metaphors to hermeneutic presuppositions and concomitant convictions about the nature of religious language can be fruitfully explored not only with regard to where they derive from (the tensions of the biblical texts), but also with regard to the kind of hermeneutical framework they underwrite. For our purposes, I propose a heuristic exercise of distinguishing between the classical and the openness interpretive paradigms as following after the ancient Alexandrian and Antiochene schools of interpretation respectively.[11]

I suggest that classical theism is intrinsically wedded to what could be called the medieval or Augustinian-Thomistic synthesis, and this, in turn, could be traced back to the Alexandrian school of hermeneutics originating in the work of Philo and Clement and Origen of Alexandria.[12] This interpretive framework was founded on and sustained by the ancient and medieval political models of kingship, aristocracy, and serfdom. It is, principally, an elitist hermeneutic developed by social, political, and ecclesial hierarchies. It is supported by a doctrine of inspiration connected with the ecstatic experiences of poets in the ancient Greek world and prophets in the Hebrew tradition. This leads, naturally, to an emphasis on Scripture as primarily the Word of God and only secondarily as, in or through human words.

The result is a rather authoritarian structure and fairly strict dependence on the citation of tradition. Readers are more or less passive recipients of the divine message as mediated

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11 David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), provides an excellent overview of the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools of interpretation against the background of patristic hermeneutics as a whole.

12 In opposition to open theism, Norman Geisler retrieves and reaffirms the classical paradigm, especially in its Thomistic forms; see Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New 'Open' View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997); and Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001).

through scripture. Alexandrian hermeneutics in the first millennium and the medieval synthesis of the second millennium CE can thus be said to proceed from above to below, prioritizing God over the world, privileging Scripture as first and foremost the Word of God rather than as human words, and emphasizing the side of the (divine) author of the text rather than that of the reader.

On the other side, open theists may in large part be correct when they claim classical hermeneutics to be dependent on a Hellenistic worldview (along with its attending metaphysics and ontology), but this does not in and of itself mean their critique is also right. This is not only because guilt does not occur simply by historical association, but also because open theists themselves partake of and derive from an historically locatable hermeneutical and methodological tradition. This is the Antiochene school associated with Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, and mediated to us through developments during the Renaissance and the early modern period.

Whereas Alexandrians drew their inspiration from Platonic and neo-Platonic categories, Antiochenes were drawn toward Aristotle's emphasis on empirical reality. The Alexandrian emphases on allegory and the spiritual sense were downplayed in Antioch in favour of the text's historical and literal sense understood against the backdrop of the author's and original audience's context. Care was thereby taken to determine the historical contexts of Scripture's origins, its canonical development, and its transmission, all of which concerned and involved humans. Antiochene hermeneutics can thus be said to have proceeded from below in recognizing the human aspects of Scripture, even while attempting to maintain the conviction that the fully human words of the Bible nevertheless communicated the word of God.

During the Renaissance and modern periods, the Antiochene model was taken up and expanded by various schools associated with Erasmus, Spinoza and Schleiermacher. With regard to theology and hermeneutics, this marked a number of movements intrinsic to Antiochene principles: movements from elitism to democracy, from tradition to autonomous rationality, from cerebralism to experientialism, from traditionalism to individualism, from institutionalism to personalism, from conservatism to inquiry, from hierarchicalism or the 'house of authority' to mutual dialogue.[13]

However, whereas the patristic Antiochenes identified the Bible as both the word of God and the word of human beings, modern hermeneuticians have de-emphasized the former and subordinated it—sometimes to the point of denying the divine element altogether—to the latter. Recognition of the human dimensions of the biblical text has resulted in a change of empha-

13 The 'house of authority' language is Edward Farley's; see his phenomenological-historical analysis of the modernity's movement away from authority and reliance on tradition in theological method in *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), Part 1.

sis. Whereas the patristic Antiochenes focused on the text's author(s), modern hermeneuticians focus on the text's readers. Instead of seeing the message of Scripture as a monologue whereby the Bible speaks in a unidirectional manner to readers, moderns are much more conscious not only of what readers bring to the text experientially but also of the communalistic, personalistic, and dialogical dimensions of authorship, reading and inquiry. Thus can be seen the influence of what has come to be known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral on hermeneutics and theological method. While not denying the normative priority of the Bible, Scripture is interpreted in light of community and tradition, divinely constituted reason, and personal experience.

The implications of this paradigm shift in hermeneutics can now be discerned with regard to the debate at hand. In former generations, evangelicals recognized the sole sufficiency of Scripture for doctrinal and theological purposes. Classical hermeneutics continues to insist on the importance of right interpretation for theological understanding, and limits such interpretative methods and strategies to the elite who have had the requisite theological education.

Openness hermeneutics, on the other hand, fully accepts the democratic principle of Bible reading. It advocates what could be known also as a hermeneutics of the laity: the Bible speaks plainly to all persons and is to be understood simply and literally in what it affirms. Whereas classical hermeneutics limits the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to personal piety, openness hermeneutics extends that doctrine to biblical interpretation and theological reflection as well. And, while classical hermeneutics remains firmly committed to the authority of the tradition of Christian orthodoxy, openness hermeneutics subordinates tradition not only to the Bible but also (and this is important) to reason and experience. The latter, of course, is not just the sophisticatedly understood 'experience' of the theological elite, but the practical and unpretentious experience of every man, woman, boy and girl, forged in daily life and supported by a web of other beliefs and practices ranging from assumptions about how God acts in the world to the value and importance of prayer.[14]

While I will return to these points later, yet it needs to be mentioned at this juncture that openness hermeneutics is just as socially and historically conditioned as is classical hermeneutics. If open theists insist that the latter is guilty by association with Hellenism in general and Alexandrian hermeneutics more specifically, then they should confess their own guilt by association with the patriarchs of Antioch and one tradition of hermeneutics in the modern era.

I have no space here to adjudicate

14 Exemplary of the openness hermeneutic in each of these respects is Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000).

either the hermeneutical or methodological issues.[15] However, my point in this section is to bring to the surface the hermeneutical presuppositions underlying the contemporary debate on divine omniscience between classical and open theists. The former insist on God's exhaustive foreknowledge of future contingents and appeal to a traditional, elitist reading of Scripture that affirms the principle of anthropomorphism and emphasizes certain root metaphors for divinity. The latter deny God's knowledge of future contingents as actual and appeal to a lay, democratic reading of Scripture that prioritizes the literalness of biblical language and emphasizes other root metaphors. These generalizations will be qualified as well as explicated as we turn to the theological and philosophical presuppositions that are also interrelated with these hermeneutical ones.

## II. Theological Presuppositions

The foregoing hermeneutical presuppositions are intricately connected with theological assumptions. As will be seen, commitments made at the level of hermeneutics predispose one in certain directions on the theological matters to be discussed. At the same time, however, theological inclinations also shape and influence hermeneutical intuitions. Again, for heuristic purposes, however, I wish to isolate certain theological issues for discussion. Most pertinent to the subject at hand are views concerning the nature of God, divine omnipotence, and the meaning of divine freedom.

### *The nature of God*

I hypothesize here that if God's essence is conceived of in terms of the patristic and medieval doctrines of divine simplicity and aseity, then classical theism's constructs are sustained. However, if God is conceived of in social trinitarian and, especially, relational terms, then the central openness convictions take on further plausibility. Many, however, will recognize that this question about the internal life of God belongs to the realm of philosophical theology rather than biblical exegesis or theology. That is why I treat it as a presuppositional factor in the current debate on divine omniscience.

The options here are to follow the lead of the Jewish *shema* and Augustine on the one hand or of the Cappadocians on the other. The former begins with the oneness of God—God as spirit and thereby indivisible—and works out to the three persons. In the process, the doctrine of divine simplicity is adopted wherein the actions of God are understood to be unified and indistinguishable from the divine attributes.

Certain theological implications follow. First, emphasis remains on the one God rather than on any of the three persons; anything done by each of the persons is the common activity of all three persons. Second, any action of the one God is only verbally and logically distinguishable

15 I develop a postmodern hermeneutic that bypasses the classical-modernist debate in my *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*, New Critical Thinking in Biblical Studies and Theology series (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

from other actions of God but not ontologically so. The actions of God are ontologically one since there are no discursive moments to the divine intellect, nor can there be sequential operations predicated to the divine life. Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, neither God's intentions nor God's actions can undergo change from one status to another. Any change that we would wish to attribute to God derives from changes that we experience as human beings rather than from changes in divinity.

This is why the patristic theologians spoke about the eternal begottenness of the Son and the medievals about God as *actus purus*. From the divine and eternal perspective, there is no point that marks a shift between the Son as being unbegotten to the Son as begotten, nor is there a point where God who is not a creator becomes a God who is. Both doctrines point to the conviction that the actions of God are one and eternal, even if their effects are temporal—i.e., the incarnation in space-time or the creative and providential workings of God.

If one begins with the Cappadocians, however, one emphasizes the three persons and works from there toward the oneness of God. In this framework, God as irreducibly triune means that the differentiation between the three persons is safeguarded and the distinctiveness of their actions is preserved. Now certainly it is the case that the Cappadocian model did not require abandonment of the doctrine of divine simplicity, at least as far as the history of theology is concerned. Yet it is also the case that Cappadocian trinitarianism is far more conducive to the development of a social doctrine of the Trinity than is the monism of the Augustinian tradition. Contemporary social trinitarianism in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr and others rely on the trinitarian framework of the Cappadocians.[16] The result, in Moltmann for example, is to underscore the intra-trinitarian relationality between the three persons. Theological implications follow. First, recognition of the give-and-take of authentic interpersonal relationships requires the internal life of God to be reconceived in dynamic terms. Second, the intra-trinitarian relationality serves as a model for the God-world relationship. God is involved in a personal and dynamic relationship with the world, especially with free creatures. Finally, the give-and-take between God and free creatures must be open-ended in order to preserve its veritability. This transforms the path toward the eschaton from one that is a fixed, divinely-intended blueprint to one that is open, shift-

16 Moltmann's social trinitarianism has been developed over the past few decades. For a succinct statement, see his 'Some Reflections on the Social Doctrine of the Trinity', in James M. Byrne, ed., *The Christian Understanding of God Today: Theological Colloquium on the Occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Foundation of Trinity College, Dublin* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1993), pp. 104-111. Cf. also Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., 'Social Trinity and Tritheism', in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds., *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 21-47, and John L. Gresham, Jr., 'The Social Model of the Trinity and Its Critics', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993) pp. 325-343.

ing, and dynamic.

Each of these trinitarian moves can be seen as operative presuppositions in open theism. Openness theologians privilege the Cappadocian over the Augustinian model of the Trinity. Their tendency to accept social trinitarianism is driven, at least in part, by their conviction that the medieval doctrine of divine simplicity cannot be profitably retrieved for today. And they certainly are relational theists who understand the dynamic give-and-take as central not only to the intra-trinitarian life of God but also to God's relationship to the world and to free creatures. When it comes to God's knowledge of the future, then, their conclusion that the future is open comes as no surprise. Only a genuinely open future is able to preserve the dynamic nature of the God-world relationship.[17]

*Divine omnipotence*

The conceptual frameworks undergirding either the doctrines of divine simplicity or social trinitarianism do, as we have seen, have consequences for understanding the attributes of God, at least as traditionally conceived. The doctrines of divine aseity, immutability, omnipotence, and necessity, etc., seem to hang together, and to conceive of their doing so remains the task of philosophical rather than biblical theology. In this sub-section, I want to pursue this line of inquiry further, specifically with regard to the omnipotence of God.

The Bible clearly witnesses to an almighty God who has the power over all things and for whom nothing is impossible. This 'nothing,' however, has been qualified both morally and logically in the classical theist scheme of things. As good, God cannot do evil; as the source of rationality, God cannot do something irrational, like make square circles or rocks so big that they cannot be lifted even by God. Positively stated, God has the power to bring about all logical possibilities consistent with the divine nature and will. God therefore unilaterally intervenes (better: acts) in the world to bring about the divine purposes, both proximately and eschatologically. The alternative scenario is unthinkable in the classical scheme of things because of the unambiguous eschatological message of the Bible. If God is not omnipotent then the divine will can be frustrated and biblical eschatology cannot be guaranteed.

I will return to the question of creaturely freedom below. At this point, however, I want to connect the question of divine omnipotence with divine omniscience. Given the classical assumptions for the moment, God's exhaustive knowledge (even of things which are future to temporal beings) both follows from and sustains the doctrine of divine omnipotence. In the former case, how can God not know (or foreknow, from a

17 I realize that the statements in this paragraph can be challenged on a number of fronts. But see the underlying relational metaphysics and social doctrines of God in the work of Gregory Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-polar Theism towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*.

creaturely perspective) what God has eternally chosen to do (or will do, from a creaturely perspective)? In the latter case, how can God not bring about (eternally from the divine perspective, but temporally from the point of view of creatures) what God has eternally known—i.e., decided upon or willed? The doctrine of divine simplicity guarantees that there will be no discrepancy between what God knows and what God does. To say that God does not know the future of free creatures is to say that God may not be able to bring about what God wishes. It would also require that God's plans for the future of free agents be adjustable, allowing God to respond appropriately and in a timely manner to the dizzying number of temporal developments. But if in fact this is the case, then the assurance the Bible gives with regard to God's eschatological plans is apparently misleading.

And, unsurprisingly so, one of the most sustained objections classical theists posit against open theists lies precisely on this score: that open theology cannot logically or theologically guarantee the eschatological plan revealed in scripture since God's power to bring about such ends is limited by what creatures choose to do.[18] Open theists, however, respond along a number of lines, two of which I will mention here.[19] First, the doctrine of omnipotence itself has been revised in conformity to the moral vision of human beings and the laws of logic. Why should the doctrine of omniscience be exempt from revision when demanded by similar moral and logical considerations? Second, why should the doctrine of omniscience follow the doctrine of omnipotence in the face of obvious conceptual difficulties? Why not the other way around? Better yet, why not revise both in order to present a doctrine of divine attributes consistent with the plurality of the biblical witness with regard to what God both does and knows?[20]

### *The meaning of divine freedom*

This last point of the open theist response is a call for conceptual clarity and systemic consistency. I believe that both classical and openness theologians believe their systems to be internally coherent even while they deny that of the other side. At the same time, however, it is precisely because both systems are

18 See Steven C. Roy, 'God as Omnicompetent Responder? Questions about the Grounds of Eschatological Confidence in Free Will Theism', unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Danvers, Massachusetts, 17-19 November 1999, and Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000).

19 For more in-depth responses to specific classical theistic charges with regard to eschatology, see John Sanders' 'The Openness of God and the Assurance of Things to Come', in David Baker, ed., *The Proceedings of the 1999 Evangelical Theological Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000).

20 This is the suggestion of the British philosophical theologian, John Lucas: '[W]e need to construe the the [sic] *omni* of omnipotence and omniscience, not in terms of some inconsistent, absolute all, but negatively, as contrasting with various forms of non-omnipotence and non-omniscience' (*The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality, and Truth* [Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1989], p. 225). Lucas, like Swinburne, also anticipates the openness position even if he is far removed confessionally and geographically from the current debate.

not fully coherent that there is a debate. The tensions within each system are evident when the doctrine of divine freedom is examined. Questions here include the following: What kind of freedom does God have? What are the constraints, if any, on the divine freedom? Is God free to change the divine mind?

The doctrine of divine freedom in classical theism follows from and supports the other divine attributes. As previously seen, God is transcendent, independent, and immutable. Yet the divine freedom is a complicated matter in the classical account. First, a distinction is made between the necessary will of God with regard to the intrinsic properties and attributes of divinity, and the accidental will of God with regard to non-essential properties and attributes. Second, God's willing should be distinguished typologically as a) the absolutely necessary willing of Godself; b) God's logically or morally necessary willing with the resulting outcomes being contingent; and c) God's free willing of contingencies. (A) means that God cannot will not to be God, while (b) means that as essentially good, God cannot will morally evil actions. At the heart of the Christian understanding of God's freedom, at least as understood in its plain sense, is (c). This leads to the classical doctrine of the freedom of God to either create or not create a (our) world. God did not have to create any world, much less this world. That is why we recognize this world to be contingent, and our existence in it as well.

The counter-question, however, is how one can truly speak of God's freedom if, in the classical account of divine simplicity and eternal creation, one cannot discern at least logical, if not ontological, moments in the divine life which mark out God's choice to create a (this) world. The assumption is that unless there is at least the moment that logically distinguishes the before and after of the exercise of the divine prerogative to create, then to speak of the divine freedom is less than sincere. The question is whether or not God really had options about creating any world—not about what kind of world to create, but whether to create at all—or perhaps to do something else. Alternatively, the question might be put this way: did God deliberate first and foremost about creating anything?[21] If God did not, then what does it mean to say God exercised choice and freedom with regard to creating this world? If God did, then two implications follow. First, a conceptual distinction is made with regard to the before and after of God's deliberation which is suggestive of an ontological (and perhaps) temporal distinction in the divine life. This requires, in turn, a re-examination of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Second, genuine deliberation certainly means God is free,

21 Bruce Reichenbach, 'Omniscience and Deliberation', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984) pp. 225-36, poses a similar question in asking whether or not God can act intentionally if omniscient. He suggests first that since not all intentional acts require deliberation, God can act intentionally without deliberating. His conclusion finally that God cannot deliberate but might speculate and even infer seems to me to be incoherent.

even to change the divine mind on 'previous' decisions. But this raises questions about God's exhaustive foreknowledge of future contingents, at least with regard to choices that God would make which are dependent on the 'previous' decisions of the divine will.

Open theism argues from the biblical strand that emphasizes God as fully personal. Such a God interacts with free creatures, in part responding to their choices and actions as appropriate and in part luring and directing their actions as appropriate. Such a God anticipates, deliberates, repents, and relents of divine intentions (Ex. 32:14, 1 Chr. 21:15, Ps. 106:45, Jer. 26:19, Amos 7:3-6) even while exercising prerogatives in relationship to the world. And, of course, if God genuinely responds to the actions of free creatures, then God knows what God will decide to do in terms of possibilities rather than actualities. But counter-counter questions arise. What is the basis of the deliberations of the God of open theism? How does God decide on what actions to take to begin with? The classical answer is that God's will is determined by God's nature. Yet the fully relational theology of open theism begs the question of whether or not God's nature can be abstracted from God's relationships, specifically with the world and with free creatures. Given the reality of the world in the openness framework, the options present to God are certainly demarcated by the world's 'otherness' either over-and-against or internal to (depending on which metaphor the open theist prefers) God.[22]

Another way of posing the differences, however, is to say that two different conceptions of divine freedom are driving the classical and openness projects. The former is predicated on the freedom of God to create any world. The latter begins with the freedom of God to respond to the created order in general and to free agents more specifically. Both sides assume that what is most important about the divine freedom is what they emphasize—i.e., God's freedom to create or not, or God's freedom to genuinely interact with free creatures. The result is that classical theists are able to preserve the contingency of the world, but end up with a notion of freedom removed in some ways from common human experience (in terms of the arbitrariness of creation). On the other side, open theists are able to articulate the freedom of God in more personal terms even if the divine choices are finally constrained by the choices and actions of free creatures.

The important of defining 'free creatures'—something that has not yet been done—should be evident

22 If the 'nature' of God in the open theist framework is fully interconnected with the world's, then to say God deliberates on how to respond to the world is to say that God-in-relationship-with-the-world deliberates on how God will relate to the world—a circular notion. Gregory Boyd attempts to escape this circularity by beginning with a dispositional and social trinitarianism (*Trinity and Process*). But given the world, God's nature is intricately bound up with the world's, bringing along with that all of the attending problems that were supposedly solved by positing a primordially dispositional and social Trinity. See further my more intensive engagement and assessment of Boyd's dispositional and trinitarian theology of creation in 'Possibility and Actuality' (note 3).

from the foregoing. At the same time, the discussions of God's will and God's freedom also raises the spectre of theodicy. But both of these issues—concerning freedom and the justification of theism in the face of evil—bring with them other more strictly philosophical questions.

## III. Philosophical Presuppositions

This section is as much an effort in philosophical theology as was the preceding section. However, I am making a distinction in terms of the starting points of the discussion. In the former section, we began with theological axioms: the nature of God, of divine omnipotence, and of divine freedom. Here, we begin with problematics framed primarily by philosophical categories: the reality of evil, the nature of freedom, and the relationship between time and eternity. Granted, hermeneutical decisions and theological views both inform and undergird what one decides philosophically in these areas. But that would further prove my point: that a complex web of hermeneutical, theological and philosophical presuppositions holds both classical and open theist systems together.

### *The problem of theodicy*

The questions raised concerning the divine attributes discussed in the previous section come to a head on the issue of theodicy. Simply stated, the problem of evil arises with the conjunction of three premises:

(a) God is all powerful
(b) God is wholly good
(c) there is evil in the world

The thesis I wish to explore in what follows is that classical theists define (b) and (c) in terms of (a) while open theists define (a) in terms of (b) and (c).

Given the root metaphors operative in classical theism and its presuppositions about God's omnipotence, the reluctance of the classical theist to qualify (a) is understandable. Classical theists consider divine omnipotence non-negotiable. This leaves either (b) or (c). Now classical theists certainly do not deny (b), but they do negotiate its meaning, and they do this in ambiguous directions. Scripture itself, after all, clearly affirms God's goodness on the one hand, but also indicates that God is the author of both light and darkness (Is. 45:7) on the other. Thus God is good, but in the infinite divine goodness, wisdom, and power, God does some things which human beings misunderstand as impugning God's goodness because they are incapable of discerning the larger purposes of God. Or, God is good, but the goodness of God is manifest in two wills, a revealed will and a hidden will.[23] Or, God's goodness combined with divine omnipotence means that God is responsible for evil, but only in some weaker sense; furthermore, this is without moral culpability since God's purposes for ordaining evil differ from those who actually perpe-

23 John Piper, 'Are There Two Wills in God?' in Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 107-31.

trate evil and commit evil actions.[24] Ultimately, then, it appears that God is beyond good and evil, not in the pejorative Nietzschean sense, but in the Augustinian/Calvinist sense wherein the fallen and sinful state of human beings does not allow us to understand what goodness really is, especially when applied to God. To the age-old dilemma of philosophical ethics—is something good because God 'says' it is good, or is God good because God's actions conform with an 'external' standard of goodness?—classical theists would tend to lean in the former direction, and do so by following Paul's response to those who attempted to hold God accountable to 'external' (human) moral standards (Rom. 9:14-24).

Yet this series of moves affects how one understands evil as well, and at least in two ways. First, if God ordains evil in order to achieve divine purposes which are beyond our comprehension and which demand that we trust God that those purposes are indeed best for all involved in the long run, then the 'evil' one experiences is ultimately good, at least in the sense that God is bringing about ultimately benevolent intentions through it. Second, if our fallen and sinful nature does not really allow us to understand what divine goodness really is, then neither can we truly understand what evil really is either. It turns out, then, that evil either is not or may not be so bad after all. In other words, evil's reality has been transposed such that (c) is either denied or its reality redefined.

A post-holocaust theology, however, does not allow one to deny or redefine (c) very easily, and open theists are much too sensitive to the modern experience of radical evil to be enticed by either move.[25] At the same time, open theists also do not believe that redefining (b) resolves the issue of theodicy since too many unanswered questions remain. They are fully committed to the goodness of God understood in a fairly univocal sense with human goodness since to deny this univocity raises insoluble questions about human morality and theological ethics. This conviction together with their understanding of a fully personal God derived in part from their root metaphors leads them to re-negotiate (a) instead, a move that we have already seen them willing to make. Again, it is not as if they are denying (a), but that they are re-defining it within an openness framework. God is omnipotent, but the power of God is limited not only by the divine nature and will and by logical constraints, but also by the free acts of moral agents.

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24 This is the position of the Calvinist, Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 144-70.

25 Augustine took the former route: there is no positive evil, only the privation of the good. Dualistic cosmologies take the latter route: evil is an eternal aspect of the world, therefore the theodicy question is misplaced in asking, not recognizing evil as an ultimate principle. My focus here, however, is on the classical-openness responses to this question, and if the primary literature of open theists conveys a proper sense of what is important to them, it is evident that the recognition of the reality of evil is a driving concern. See Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 168-71.

In effect, the open theist solution to the problem of evil amounts to a free will theodicy.[26] Evil exists because either God's power is limited by the power of free moral agents, or God has intentionally restricted the divine power in order to make room for creatures to act freely. Evil happens because of the intentions and actions of free moral agents—human beings and demonic spirits—over whom God has greater or lesser degrees of control, but not absolute control. The biblical language of God regretting human actions (Gen. 6:6, 1 Sam. 15:11, 35) and of demonic powers causing misery, suffering, and pain (Jn. 10:10, 1 Jn. 5:19, Rev. 12:8-17) is understood in that light. It is usually affirmed that this lack of absolute control is itself under the control of God: God may elect to and does intervene more or less directly in human and demonic affairs at any time. Further, God is infinitely wise and resourceful in terms of responding to any and every possible act of perpetrating evil against the divine will and intentions. However, in principle, God's initial creating of a world of free moral creatures leads God to respect their autonomy—thus the widespread experience of evil, pain, suffering and tragedy. Our response is to follow God's lead in Scripture and to fight against all forms of evil. Biblical passages that highlight both this ongoing war against evil, the devil and his minions, and the human obligation to participate in it are thus central to open theist theodicies.[27] In any case, open theists accept the full implications of the reality of evil and generally resolve the trilemma of theodicy by recognizing the reality of evil and preserving God's goodness, both at the expense of God's power.

So, on the one side, one begins with the power of God and then proceeds to redefine the nature of goodness and overwhelm the problem of evil with the divine majesty, glory, and sovereignty. On the other side, one begins with the goodness of God and the reality of evil, and understands the latter to be overcome in the eschatological long run by the divine wisdom, patience, and especially love. Whereas the former affirms God's explicit providential intentionality with regard to what God wants to accomplish through the creaturely experience of pain (thereby supporting the doctrine of exhaustive foreknowledge), the latter insists on God's eschatological intentionality and on the plurality of options that free creatures and God have in order to arrive at their final destination (thereby supporting the notion of the openness of the future and the corollary doctrine of divine knowledge of future possibilities

26 Thus David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 83-104.

27 The twin motifs of actions of free demonic creatures and human involvement in the cosmic war between the divine and the demonic play important roles especially in Gregory Boyd's *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), and *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

only, rather than of future actualities).

In the classical framework, then, issues of theodicy are secondary at best—as is everything else—to issues of theology, and that of divine power, more specifically: evil is not what it seems to be after all. In open theism, however, issues of theodicy are said to shed light on issues of theology: the reality of evil requires a rethinking of the divine nature and attributes, specifically that of divine power. What then accounts for the shift proposed by open theism? Could it be that modernity has sensitized many—at least open theists—to the irredeemable and apparently wasteful features of the cosmic processes and of human experience? Yet the move toward a free will theodicy on the part of open theists confronts us again with the question of the meaning of freedom. We can no longer avoid grappling with what freedom is assumed to be.

### *The meaning of creaturely freedom*

The problem of foreknowledge and freedom goes somewhat like this:

(a) God knows all things—past, present, future

(b) If God knows the future, then the future is determined

(c) If the future is determined, then my future acts are predetermined

(d) If my future acts are predetermined, then I am not truly free or responsible for them

(e) Yet I am judged for my sin and incur the penalty of God's wrath.

Theoretically, one could resolve the problem by denying either any of the four premises, or the conclusion.[28] My focus, however, is on the classical-open theist controversy. I see the former as redefining (c) and the latter as redefining (a).

Classical theists have perennially responded to this well-known dilemma by analysing what it means to be 'determined' or 'predetermined.' The goal has always been to steer between Scylla of arbitrariness and the Charybdis of fatalism. These extremes mark out the limits beyond which we should not trespass in attempting to understand the dilemma of freedom and determinism with regard to human beings. On the one hand, various intentions, motives, and influences (i.e., genetic, environmental, social, political, economic, religious) constrain human actions; this means they are therefore not purely arbitrary. On the other hand, humans are held morally responsible for their actions; this means that they are therefore not irrevocably fated in what they do. In short, all actions are both determined in various ways and yet issue forth in personal responsibility. The key to the classical response lies in the distinction between two conceptions of freedom: what is called *compatibilism* and what is called *libertarianism*.

Compatibilism affirms that human freedom is congruous with determinisms of various sorts, including divine determinism. It has also been called soft determinism or the liberty

28 Denying (e), the conclusion, leads to universalism, and is therefore not a live evangelical option. (D) is practically non-negotiable in the light of moral and socio-political considerations. Considerations pertaining to (b) are better addressed in the context of discussing the relationship between time and eternity (next sub-section).

of spontaneity whereby one is free from external hindrances and makes decisions congruent with the self's wishes. In this case, the combination of one's previous dispositions with the various options presented by the situation determines what the person decides to do. Human freedom is secured, however, because we do what we want to do, even if our options are determined secondarily by external and especially internal causes, desires, and the like, but ultimately by God in the sense that even the options which present themselves to us have been providentially arranged through the divine oversight.[29] Libertarianism, on the other hand, is also known as the liberty of indifference or the freedom of self-determinism. Emphasis is placed here on the person's capacity to override dispositional factors and situational constraints, at least in part.[30] Classical theists affirm that the latter notions are incoherent. It makes no sense to say that human beings make decisions completely apart from their dispositions. And, if dispositional factors are operative, even minimally so, then one's actions are determined at least to that extent. It therefore comes as no surprise that classical theists understand biblical texts that refer to human freedom in a compatibilist sense rather than a libertarian sense. Since all human actions are dispositional, and since the various situations that human beings find themselves are not randomly derived but providentially arranged by God, the conclusion must be that human actions are determined in at least those senses without undermining responsibility and accountability.

Open theists again respond, 'Not so fast.' What do responsibility and accountability mean if dispositional factors—most, if not all of which are beyond the agent's control—fully determine human actions? How does one take the biblical warnings and exhortations seriously if human agents are unable, finally, to exercise greater or lesser degrees of self-determination? A decision can be free and morally accountable if and only if the agent has genuine choices, options and alternatives, and could have decided otherwise. In this framework, God's intentions and actions are certainly a factor in what a person decides to do, as are that person's intrinsic make-up and other extrinsic factors to that person's history and situation calling for decision. However, none of these either separately or even together requires or predetermines, in either strong or weak senses, the final outcome. The decision finally rests with the agent's capacity to make free and responsible choices. If our decisions were predetermined

29 Compatibilism has a long and illustrious theological pedigree, stretching from Augustine through Luther and Calvin. Contemporary advocates of compatibilism who have weighed in on the open theism debate include Schreiner and Ware, eds., *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*; John M. Frame, *No Other God : A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 2001), esp. 119-42; and, John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations in Evangelical Theology 2 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), esp. pp. 677-734.

30 For recent arguments for libertarianism, see John Thorp, *Free Will: A Defence against Neurophysiological Determinism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), and Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

then moral responsibility is a sham. The biblical injunctions, admonitions, exhortations and warnings themselves presume libertarian freedom, and such freedom is confirmed in the biblical narratives of God's relationships with human beings. Passages that appear to support compatibilist notions of freedom need to be understood in light of libertarian intuitions.

The result, obviously, is that classical theists understand the future as pre-determined in various respects while open theists emphasize the future as comprised of open possibilities. In the former case, God obviously knows the future in all the ways in which it is pre-determined while in the latter, God obviously knows the future as a realm of possibilities rather than as a realm of pre-determined actualities. Of course, open theists affirm that with regard to the eschatological picture, God has pre-determined various outcomes, and thus knows them as such. Yet God does not and will not override the libertarian freedom of moral agents in the process of accomplishing God's eschatological intentions. My point here is that how one understands human freedom predisposes one to interpret the biblical passages pertinent to the doctrine of God's knowledge of the future in one or another direction.

### *God's relationship to time, and eternity*

All along, the question concerning the relationship between time and eternity on the one hand, and between God, time and eternity on the other has been percolating underneath our discussion. Having addressed this issue more completely elsewhere, let me very quickly identify the complexities of the questions involved.[31] First, is time's flow ultimately real or might it be illusory (neo-Platonism), perhaps being a product of the psyche (Augustine), or perhaps understood best in relationship to movement (Aristotle), space (Newton), or earlier-than and later-than relationships (McTaggart's B-series)? Second, what is the nature of eternity? Is it the endless duration of time's flow (Heraclitus)? Is it best conceived as the basket containing time (Plato)? Is it the togetherness or simultaneity of time's past, present, and future (Boethius)? Third, what is God's relationship to time and eternity? Is God eternal, timeless, and the creator of time (Augustine)? Is God timeless and yet, mysteriously, subject to duration but not succession (Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzman)? Is God eternal in some ways and temporal or related to time in other ways (Alan Padgett)? Was God timeless prior to the creation of the world and temporal since the creation (William Lane Craig)? Or, perhaps God is everlasting and endures through all moments of time (process theism and perhaps Nicholas Wolterstorff)?[32] Finally, and here we come to an important question, what is the status of the future? Is it determined by past and present, and if so, in what ways or to what degrees? Is it a realm of actualities (classical theism),

31 See my 'Divine Knowledge and Relation to Time', (note 2). See also a recent issue A recent issue of *Philosophia Cristi*, Series 2, 2:1 (2000) also includes a slate of articles representing diverse viewpoints of the relationship of God to time.

32 On these alternative positions, see Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

possibilities (open theism), or perhaps even probabilities (Gregory Boyd)?

These and many other models of time, of eternity, of eternity's relationship to time, of God's relationship to eternity and time, and of the future have derived from extra-biblical considerations since the Bible itself is ambiguous about these notions. The disciplines of cosmology and physics, in particular, inform one's philosophical intuitions on this matter. And, how one answers the question of God's relationship to time predisposes one in either a classical or open theist direction, not only in terms of one's overall theological vision but also in terms of the doctrine of divine omniscience more specifically. Classical theists, of course, follow Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas in assuming God to be eternal in the sense of being either timeless or above time, and the divine action(s) as eternal with temporal effects. Open theists do not believe these notions to be coherent. Instead, they understand God as everlasting (sempiternal or enduring endlessly) through time and omnipresent through space.[33] Rather than attempt to untangle the knots surrounding this set of questions, however, let me tease out the implications of the classical and openness intuitions with regard to God, time and eternity with regard to three other somewhat practical issues: that of God as personal, the nature of biblical prophecy, and how one understands prayer.

First, Christian theism has always affirmed God as personal. Yet because of the classical conception of God's essential eternality and timelessness, it has also wrestled with what it means to say that God is personal. Our experience of personality and personhood is immersed in temporality. How can a being who is above time's flow be said to think, to remember, to anticipate, to act, to know, etc.? Are these not all discursive functions? Classical theists, have made strenuous efforts to defend the thesis that at least with regard to God as super-person, conceptuality, memory, purpose, knowledge and agency do not require temporality, and so there is no a priori reason why God cannot be personal and non-temporal.[34] Of course, open theists are not convinced that such an abstract argument does justice to the rich biblical descriptions of God as personal vis-à-vis human beings.

What about biblical prophecy? Is prophecy to be understood first and foremost as revealing either God's intentions about the future (minimally) or God's exhaustive knowledge of the future (maximally)? These have certainly been central to classical conceptions of biblical prophecy. On the other side, perhaps prophecy reveals God's response to human actions that are conditional—i.e., if you do such and such, then such and such will happen—and are meant to motivate human beings. Or, perhaps prophecy reveals God's exhaustive knowledge of past and present

33 On this, see again Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, pp.120-121.

34 See, e.g., Paul Helm, *Eternal God*, pp. 56-72. But note then that this would simply be a negative, rather than a positive, argument.

causal conditions and their implications for the future? Yet the underlying questions of whether or not God is timeless or temporal, and whether or not the future is real or not yet real, are central to how one views biblical prophecy. In classical accounts, God is timeless and sees past, present and future (our coordinates) all in the one eternal glance of the divine 'eye': the future is therefore as real as the past and can be predicted either in general or precision as God sees fit. In openness accounts, God is temporal and sees past and present exhaustively, but sees the future as a realm of possibilities (and perhaps probabilities): the future is therefore not yet real, although actualizable, and can be predicted to a greater or lesser degree of exactness in accordance with its probabilities as ascertained by God's knowledge of the past and present.[35]

Finally, what is the nature of prayer? Is prayer about our conforming our wills to God's will (the classical position)? Or is the intention of prayer to either change God's mind and/or move God's hand to alter circumstances or intervene in the processes of the world (the openness position)? Alternatively, does it make sense, as in classical Arminianism or Molinism, to say that prayer does change God's mind but only in an eternal sense and not in a temporal sense—i.e., that God has for all eternity factored foreknown prayers into the eternal decisions and acts of God which are, in turn, played out with temporal effects? Of course, whether one intuits God as timeless or temporal predisposes one toward either the classical (of which Arminianism and Molinism could be considered variants) or the openness position. If God is timeless, then God sees and hears prayers 'all at once' in the simultaneous eternity of the divine life. If God is everlasting or sempiternal, then God sees and hears prayers successively in accordance with how the divine temporality interacts with created modes of temporality.[36]

## IV. Questions instead of a Conclusion

We can now clearly see how presuppositions made in one area inform decisions made in other areas, and how the combination of these presuppositions and corollary decisions systematically underwrite the classical and openness theological frameworks. In fact, I don't even think it is appropriate to choose any one issue that has been discussed and say that is *the* starting point for either classical or openness construals. I began with the question of root metaphors, but could just as easily have begun

35 This is Peter Geach's position in *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Like Swinburne and Lucas, Geach is also a British philosopher who has anticipated openness doctrines, but whose confessional, geographic, and temporal distance from the current debate has made him a non-factor except in the footnotes of those advocating or castigating the openness vision.

36 Terrence Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), provides excellent overviews of how one's view of prayer follows from one's overall theological vision. The value of this book is that it covers not only classical and openness models of providence and prayer, but also makes distinctions within each model and includes other models such as fatalism, deism, and process theism.

with the question of time and eternity, with theodicy, or with the nature of freedom. My point is, in effect, the Wittgensteinian one that both classical and openness interpretations of the Bible are couched in an interrelated hermeneutical, theological, and philosophical system. Their claims about whether or not God has exhaustive (fore)knowledge of the future actions of free creatures cannot be assessed in isolation from that system. Each system interprets the Bible consistently and coherently within its presuppositional framework.[37] Of course, the question this raises is that of how we determine where in the system to begin.

The further question of what an evangelical commitment to the priority of Scripture means also appears. I have highlighted in this paper only select issues, but even this non-comprehensive discussion identifies the range of historical and contemporary methods that inform and underwrite—both consistently and inconsistently—attempts to articulate a coherent doctrine of God's knowledge of the future. Theological method, I propose, proceeds more along the lines of the Wesleyan quadrilateral than it does the Reformers' *sola Scriptura* in that while both classical and open theists claim evangelical commitments to Scripture, factors extraneous to the Bible itself determines how one reads and interprets the biblical text, both with regard to one's overall theological vision in general and with regard to the doctrine of divine omniscience in particular.[38] I realize that I have made extremely broad generalizations throughout this paper. However, I also believe that the cumulative weight of my argument is significant with regard to the question of theological method both of doctrinal and speculative theology.

The present classical-openness debate on divine omniscience brings a final complex of questions to our consciousness. Granted, some open theists deny that this is a debate about divine omniscience, preferring instead to frame this as a debate about the nature of the future—i.e., God knows with certainly all there is to know, which is about the past and present, and God knows the future according to its mode of reality as possibility rather than actuality. Yet the latter move certainly implicates the doctrine of omniscience. So, this raises the question about whether or not there is a hierarchy of doctrines about God, and if so, where the specific doctrine of God's knowledge of the future approximates in that hierarchy. Is the doctrine of divine omniscience a central doctrine of Christian faith, or does it better fit Luther's category of *adiaphora*?

37 This, I think, is Nicholas Wolterstorff's point that the classical doctrines of God stand and fall together: removal of any one plank—omniscience, in this case—is impossible in isolation and actually occurs simultaneously amidst the overhauling of the entire system; cf. Wolterstorff, 'Interview with Nicholas P. Wolterstorff: Does God Suffer?' *Modern Reformation* 8:5 (1999) pp. 45-47.

38 For more on how I understand the Wesleyan quadrilateral, see my 'The Demise of Foundationalism and the Retention of Truth: What Evangelicals Can Learn from C. S. Peirce,' *Christian Scholar's Review* 29:3 (Spring 2000):563-88, esp. pp. 579-88.

What are the criteria by which we evaluate the centrality of doctrines to Christian faith, and who formulates such criteria? Does not the investigation conducted here show that even one's criteriology can never be purely or objectively biblical? Or, to ask the underlying question, does the close connectedness between omniscience, omnipotence, etc., with the classical Platonic ontology of hierarchies itself make a difference in how one understands doctrinal categorization—i.e., are or should doctrines be categorized as hierarchical with those higher up being more central to Christian faith than those lower down?

On this, as with the other questions, agreement on the answer does not appear to be soon forthcoming. The 'blessing' of open theism, if one could call it that, is that it has motivated a fresh study of both the Bible and of these many related issues—and this has also been admitted by classical theists. Open theists themselves consider their own initial work as part of a long term research programme directed at revisiting traditional doctrines defined within a classical or Hellenistic framework. Should not this research programme be allowed to run its course? Some classical theists do not believe it should, or that if it does, it should not be allowed to proceed as an acceptable activity within the boundaries of evangelical orthodoxy. There has therefore been some movement to exclude open theism from evangelicalism, and prevent advocates of open theism from being members of the (largely North American) Evangelical Theological Society (ETS).[39] To do so would be a mistake, in my estimation, not because I hold to the open view. Rather, as I have argued here, the doctrine of God's foreknowledge emerges not from a straightforward reading of Scripture (as some classical theists want to claim), but from a complex interplay of hermeneutical, theological, and philosophical presuppositions. If the argument has any merit whatsoever, then the evangelical world in general and the ETS in particular should take Gamaliel's advice—'Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God' (Acts 5:38-39, NIV)—and allow the debate to proceed.

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39 The debate has only intensified during the last two years, as evidenced by the large number of papers devoted to arguing against the open view at the most recent meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado, November 2001. For a snapshot of where the debate is at the end of the calendar year 2001, see Douglas Wilson, ed., *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001); Clark H. Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); and James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001). And, of course, we can still expect volume three of Gregory Boyd's warfare theodicy from InterVarsity Press within the next two or three years to keep the debate afloat: *The Myth of the Blueprint* (tentative title).