OPEN THOUGHTS ON OPEN THEISM

IAIN D. CAMPBELL, BACK FREE CHURCH, ISLE OF LEWIS

The Evangelical Theological Society – a scholarly fraternity of (mostly North American) biblical scholars, all committed to the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture – will this year take a critical vote on whether to exclude two of its members, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders. The debate, the early stages of which polarized opinion at the 2002 annual meeting of the Society, focuses on whether or not open theism,[1] a theological perspective popularized by the writings of Pinnock and Sanders, is compatible with biblical inerrancy. While the two scholars in question raise concerns about dividing the society and about the political agenda being played out,[2] others have been more vocal in their opposition, labelling open theism as 'gross heresy'.[3] Clearly, lines are being drawn: for some, new views of God are brokering a new reformation within evangelicalism; for others, they represent the very antithesis of the evangel.

A QUESTION OF DEFINITIONS

One thing is certain: the issue is not peripheral. It touches on the very heart of our faith, because eternal life is to *know* God (John 17:3). If our ideas about God are wrong, then much else will also be wrong. R. C. Sproul is exactly right: 'our understanding of God determines our entire theology. When the orthodox doctrine of God goes, nothing can be more systemic. If our doctrine of God is heretical, then our entire belief system will be ground into dust by this heresy.'[4]

The traditional view of God is reflected in such theologies as that of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which answers the question 'What is

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1 For a convenient introduction to open theism, see C. Pinnock *et. al.*, *The Openness of God: A biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God*, Downers Grove, 1994, or log onto www.opentheism.org

2 See the news report 'Closing the door on open theists?', *Christianity Today* (January 2003), p. 24.

3 R. C. Sproul Jr, 'His Ways, Our Ways', *Tabletalk* 27, No. 2 (2003), p. 2.

4 R. C. Sproul, 'Tolerating the Intolerable', *Tabletalk* 27, No. 2 (2003), p. 5.

God?' in the following manner: 'God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth' (Question 4). And when asked 'What are the decrees of God?', the Catechism replies: 'The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass' (Question 7). These definitions are further explicated in systematic theologies such as those of Charles Hodge,[5] Louis Berkhof,[6] Wayne Grudem[7] and Robert Reymond,[8] and bequeath a view of God as a sovereign, all-powerful and all-knowing God, who sees ends from beginnings, and who has foreordained both ends and the means to them. Thus Scottish evangelicalism has inherited a powerful tradition of theology which emphasises that God is totally in control of our lives, ruling over and over-ruling the world. We have been taught that he works all things towards a pre-determined end, and that his ways are 'unsearchable' and 'past finding out'. The confessional position of much of our theism is articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, of which Professor John Murray said that 'in no creedal statement has the doctrine of God's sovereign and immutable decrees been stated in more forthright terms. There can be no question as to meaning and intent. Equivocal dialectic has no place.'[9] The thesis of the Confession, Murray argues, is simply this: 'that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass and that, therefore, the ultimate destinies of men and angels are immutably foreordained'.[10] This, Murray continues, includes the foreordination of sin, although couched in language that clarifies that God is neither the author nor the approver of sin.

But open theists are raising serious questions about where this theology came from. They are questioning whether, in fact, this is the God of the Bible at all, and suggesting that these concepts of God owe more to the abstractions of philosophy than to the teaching of the Bible. Open theism appeals to certain passages of Scripture to demonstrate that there are some things (including the future) which God does not know, and that he has

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5 *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Eerdmans reprint (Grand Rapids, 1995), esp. chapter 5, pp. 366-441.

6 *Systematic Theology* (London, 1959), esp. chapters 5-7, pp. 52-81.

7 *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, 1994), esp. chapters 11-13, pp. 156-225.

8 *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, 1998), esp. chapter 7, pp. 153-204.

9 J. Murray, 'The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith', *Collected Writings*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh, 1982), p. 248.

10 Murray, 'Theology', p. 249.

not, in fact, ordained 'whatsoever comes to pass'. It argues that the God of the Bible takes risks by co-operating with us in his designs, goals and purposes.

One of the leading proponents of this view is Clark Pinnock, who said in a 1998 interview, 'I along with others have sensed the need for a better theological articulation of our dynamic relationship with God.'[11] In order to understand the appeal of the openness perspective, it is worth quoting at length from Clark Pinnock's interview:

> ...God sovereignly grants human beings significant freedom, because he wants relationships of love with them. In such relationships, at least in the human realm, either party may welcome or refuse them. We may choose to cooperate with God or work against his will for our lives. God has chosen to enter into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us which allow God to affect us and also let us affect God. As co-labourers with God, we are invited to bring the future into being together along with him. The openness model of God is a variation of what is often called 'free-will theism', and I think it makes better sense both of the Bible and of our walk with God.
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> The problem with the 'old' model in its Thomist or Calvinist versions has to do with the fact that it emerged out of a synthesis of the Bible and Greek philosophy. Several (but not all) of its features are unscriptural and inappropriately dependent on Hellenistic thinking. Categories like God's impassibility, timelessness, immutability, exhaustive omniscience are badly skewed. They give the impression that God is immobile and reminds one uncomfortably of Aristotle's unmoved mover. It makes God look a lot like a metaphysical iceberg....
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> We need to reflect more the awesome tenderness of God in bending down to us and making himself vulnerable within the relationship with us... I hope we will not be too stubborn to make reforms in our thinking according to God's word.[12]

Some evangelicals see the openness model as heralding a new reformation. Gilbert Bilezikian, in his endorsement of the 1994 IVP publication *The*

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[11] *Free Space: An Interview with Clark Pinnock*, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals Website, www.christianity.com/CC/article/0,,PTID307086|CHID559376|CIID1414060,00.html

[12] *Free Space: An Interview with Clark Pinnock.*

Openness of God, which brought open theism to the attention of the theological world, wrote:

> Almost five centuries ago, Christians thrilled at the recovery of the truth of salvation by grace that had been hijacked from them for a millennium of church history. This book throbs today with the same excitement at the rediscovery of a God infinitely greater and freer than the cold abstractions of medievally minded reductionist theologians make him to be.[13]

Bilezikian is one of the theological scholars involved in the Willow Creek Community Church and has taught at evangelical Seminaries in the United States. His is only one of several voices engaged in what John Piper calls 'a massive re-visioning of God'.[14] Calvinists are being accused of reductionism and abstraction, of turning the personal, living, powerful God of the Bible into an aggregate of abstract attributes. It is alleged that such attributes as omniscience, immutability and impassibility imprison the God of Scripture within a framework of impersonal philosophical theology, and particularly within federal Calvinism. In order to recover the personal, dynamic, relational view of the God of the Bible, we need, according to openness theology, to change our theological models and reset our theological parameters.

Clark Pinnock also delivered a paper at the 2002 ETS annual meeting, entitled 'Reconstructing Evangelical Theology: Is the Open View of God a Good Idea?', in which he gives an *apologia* for his view. Pinnock is correct to state in his paper that 'the question before us now is whether the open view of God is a proposal that can be considered evangelical'.[15] Pinnock's appeal in this paper is for Openness Theology to be given a place at the evangelical table, on the grounds that it is good to discuss new views. Pinnock makes much of the fact that 'it is not as if other evangelicals have not noticed problems in the traditional approaches'[16] – God's atemporality and unchangeableness are constantly being redefined. But Pinnock also accuses those who have attacked his position of being 'a group of sectarian

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[13] Gilbert Bilezikian, endorsement on back cover of *The Openness of God*.

[14] John Piper, 'We Took a Good Stand and Made a Bad Mistake: Reflections on the Baptist General Conference Annual Meeting, St Paul, July 5, 2000', www.desiringgod.org/library/fresh_words/2000/070500.html

[15] Clark Pinnock, 'Reconstructing Evangelical Theology: Is the Open View of God a Good Idea?', delivered at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 14-16 November, 2001.

[16] Pinnock, 'Reconstructing Evangelical Theology', p. 6.

evangelicals'; he continues: 'I have always known there was a vigorous paleo-Calvinist credalism in evangelicalism... one senses a hardening of the categories typical of fundamentalism and an excessive traditionalism.'[17] It is ironic to find open theists saying that they are simply appealing for 'Christian and academic courtesy'.[18] It is difficult to advance the debate, however, when the advocates of open theism are already accusing Calvinists of an entrenched dogmatism which refuses to be open to the mind of the Spirit. The tone of Pinnock's paper makes me very concerned for the future discussion of the topic, and for the future of evangelicalism itself.

SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR OPEN THEISM?

Open theism appeals to several passages of Scripture in support of its new view of God.

It appeals, for example, to passages which deal with *God's purposes and intentions*. The Bible contains statements such as the following: 'The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart' (Gen. 6:6), or 'So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people' (Exod. 32:14) or 'Then God saw their [the people of Nineveh's] works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it' (Jonah 3:10).

In each of these passages, the statement is made either that God was sorry for something which he had previously done, or that God changed his mind, and did not fulfil something he had previously stated as his intention. According to open theism, God's 'ultimate objectives required him to change his immediate intentions'.[19] The interaction of God with Moses, or with the Ninevites is real and personal, and the actions of Nineveh in repenting become the basis of an immediate change of intention in God.

The classical view of God, it is argued, forces a meaning on these passages which Scripture will not allow them to carry. Classical theism argues that God is immutable, and that his purposes and intentions do not change. But open theism charges classical theism with subjecting the Bible to theological 'control beliefs', such as God's immutability, and not

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[17] Pinnock, 'Reconstructing Evangelical Theology', p. 8.

[18] Gregory A. Boyd, 'Christian love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 No. 2 (2002), p. 234.

[19] *Openness of God*, p. 28.

allowing the Bible to speak for itself. If the Bible says God changed his mind, then why not accept that he responded to human initiatives and did just that – he altered his plans and changed the course of his purpose in response to the actions of men?

Secondly, open theism appeals to passages which deal with *God's actions and works*. Open theists acknowledge that there are passages in Scripture in which God can bring things about unilaterally and immediately. When he created the world, for example, God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. Yet there are other passages which emphasise that in his actions God constantly interacts with people, and interacts in time, so that we can speak of 'before' and 'after' with respect to God.

Take the case of Saul, for example. In 1 Samuel 16:1 God says to Samuel: 'How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons.' Open theism says: 'God hoped that Saul would be a good king. When Saul disappointed him, God turned elsewhere.'[20] God is open, and the future is open – God has taken a great risk by having Saul enthroned over Israel. Now God is disappointed, sorry that he ever allowed the accession of Saul, and he acts to anoint David not because he ordained David's rule, but because it is the only option available to him following the unexpected wickedness of Saul.

For John Sanders, such passages teach that 'God has, in sovereign freedom, decided to make some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions. God elicits our free collaboration in his plans. Hence, God can be influenced by what we do and pray for, and God truly responds to what we do. God genuinely interacts and enters into dynamic give and take relationships with us.'[21]

Thirdly, open theism appeals to passages which speak of *God's knowledge and awareness*. A classic example is the case of Abraham, to whom God said, at the point when Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son: 'Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me' (Gen. 22:12). Or one might cite the statement of God to Israel in Deuteronomy 13:3 – '...the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul'.

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[20] *The Openness of God*, p. 37.

[21] 'Does God know your next move?', *Christianity Today* (May 2001), p. 40.

Pinnock argues that for such passages 'total foreknowledge would jeopardize the genuineness of the divine-human relationship'.[22] If God really knew what Abraham would do when asked to sacrifice Isaac, or what Israel would do when confronted with tests of fidelity, then there could be no genuine personal relationship between God and man. As far as Abraham is concerned, God genuinely did not know, according to Pinnock, how he would react, and whether he truly feared God or not. God is a partner in a living, dynamic relationship with Abraham, and in order to find out whether Abraham fears God or not, God must test the depth of Abraham's commitment. Only on Mount Moriah can God truly say, '*Now* I know that you fear God.'

Similarly, God can be genuinely taken aback. Consider Jeremiah 32:35 – 'they built the high places of Baal which are in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin'. Here, it is alleged, not only did God not know what Judah would do, according to Clark Pinnock, 'God expresses frustration... God had not anticipated it.'[23]

The theological problem is to reconcile biblical statements about God knowing all things with statements which suggest that he discovers things he did not know and is frustrated with things he did not even anticipate. For open theism, as a recent writer puts it, 'Genuine human freedom and the omniscience of God can be reconciled... only when we acknowledge that there are some things that even an omniscient God cannot know'[24] (although such a God would hardly be omniscient).

This has profound implications for the whole notion of biblical prophecy. How are we to understand the predictive prophecy of Scripture in the light of the openness model which this new evangelicalism presents? Richard Rice, in his chapter on biblical perspectives in *The Openness of God* devotes several pages to discussing the phenomenon of prophecy, because he recognizes that prophecy plays a prominent role in the Bible. But he cautions us against accepting the traditional view that God predicts the future on the basis of his sovereign and exhaustive foreknowledge. He argues that prophecy is a much more complex phenomenon. Prophecy, he

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[22] *The Openness of God*, p. 122.

[23] *The Openness of God*, p. 122.

[24] P.K. Helseth, 'On Divine Ambivalence: Open Theism and the Problem of Particular Evils', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44.3 (September 2001), p. 494.

says, 'may express God's intention to do something in the future irrespective of creaturely decisions';[25] or it may express 'God's knowledge that something will happen because the necessary conditions for it have been fulfilled and nothing could conceivably prevent it';[26] or it may express 'what God intends to do *if* certain conditions obtain'.[27] Rice argues that it is necessary to explore these different facets of prophecy because 'if God knows the future exhaustively then conditional prophecies lose their integrity'.[28] Prophecy then is to be understood as God interacting as best he can with individuals and nations whose behaviour is not predictable.

The best that God can do, therefore, is to predict his own actions, but not the actions of others. Predictive prophecy is not on the basis of supreme and exhaustive foreknowledge, but is contingent upon the fulfilment of certain conditions. God knows what *may* occur, but cannot be certain of what actually *will* occur. His omniscience means that he knows the whole range of possible futures, but how the future will unfold very much depends upon our actions, choices and prayers.

In spite of the fact that open theism wishes to define prophecy very carefully, reminding us that prophecy as a phenomenon is not confined to predictive foretelling, it has to be pointed out that the prediction of the future does, in fact, loom large in biblical prophecy. As Stephen Wellum reminds us,

> There are a good number of prophecies that are neither conditional, nor mere predictions based on foresight drawn from existing trends, but prophecies that are unconditional, that convey God's intentions of what will certainly occur through the means of future human choices and actions. And it is precisely in these kinds of prophecies that God most clearly demonstrates himself to be the Lord over history (Isaiah 40-48).[29]

And the corollary of this is that biblical inerrancy is necessarily connected to the exhaustive foreknowledge of God over all events. It will not do to say that God cannot know the future because it has not yet occurred; the

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[25] *The Openness of God*, p. 51.

[26] *The Openness of God*, p. 51.

[27] *The Openness of God*, p. 51.

[28] *The Openness of God*, p. 52.

[29] S. J. Wellum, 'Divine Sovereignty – Omniscience, Inerrancy and Open Theism: An Evaluation', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 No. 2 (2002), p. 275.

Bible clearly demonstrates that God knows the future with certainty, not simply as a possibility amid a myriad other potential futures. Bruce Ware sees the openness view of a God whose foreknowledge is severely truncated as a major weakness in open theism:

> Why does open theism fail? It fails, in part, because the fulfilment of these predictions involves innumerable future free choices, none of which God could know if the openness model is assumed.... How often can one appeal to God's conjecturing as the explanation for so many of these samples that are so distant in the future? How can the specificity and accuracy be explained? The fact is, open theism excludes from God the very qualities needed to explain these features.[30]

OPEN THEISM: THE TEST OF EXPERIENCE

There is another aspect of the open theism debate: that of its pastoral implications and practical consequences. Our theology has to appeal to the Bible, and must be shaped by the statements of the Bible. But it is also practical, and a theology which cannot be applied to our personal, social or cultural lives is of little help to us.

The perspective of experience is an important one in discussions over open theism. Mark Talbot, for example, in critiquing the libertarian view of human freedom which open theism requires, begins his analysis by noting that

> The open theist John Sanders and I have this in common: we have both come to our views on divine sovereignty and human freedom from reflecting on personal tragedies.[31]

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[30] B. A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: A critique of open theism* (Leicester, 2000), p. 142. More than one commentator has pointed out the inconsistency of IVP publishing both *The Openness of God* and critiques such as that of Ware. *Cf.* also the comment by R. Nicole: 'I am not so much alarmed by the book *The Openness of God* or the advocacy of such views by some who were giving signs of heterodoxy for some time as I am by the openness of InterVarsity Press and Baker Bookhouse, established to articulate and defend the evangelical faith, in publishing such works' (review of *The Openness of God* in *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole*, Fearn, 2002, p. 401).

[31] M. R. Talbot, 'True Freedom: the Liberty that Scripture portrays as worth having', in J. Piper, J. Taylor and P. K. Helseth (eds), *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Crossway, 2003), p. 77.

In the case of Sanders, the tragedy was the death of his brother; Talbot's was a personal accident. The divergent experiences led to quite different views on providence. Talbot, quoting Sanders, summarises:

> ...I have reached very different conclusions than Sanders has reached. Sanders concludes that God is not 'the ultimate cosmic explanation for each and every thing, including all the bad things we experience'. I conclude that nothing happens to us – nothing good *and nothing bad* – that is not ultimately from God.... I think that nothing takes God by surprise because he has ordered – or 'ordained' – every event from before creation.[32]

For open theism, the idea that God ordains bad things turns the God of the Bible into some kind of distant, divine animator. On the other hand Pinnock argues that 'the beauty of the open view of God and omniscience is that it takes the Bible seriously when it presents history as real drama, not a marionette show'.[33] The fact that God does not know how events will turn out is a self-imposed *kenosis* by which God significantly interacts with his creatures. But it is doubtful whether the Bible insists on divine *kenosis* with respect to bad providences at all; is it not self-evident that 'the Bible does not evidence the slightest concern regarding the problem of evil within the scope of God's sovereignty and that Scripture does not limit his providence to that which is good'?[34]

We might apply the test of experience to a theological perspective on the attack on New York on 11 September 2001. Can we articulate any divine response? What is God's mind on the events which took place in New York? Did he know what was to occur?

Open theism would say that God did not know beforehand what was to take place in New York that day. He knew that it was possible that the chain of events which culminated in the attack could work out that way; but he also knew all the possible permutations of events by which providence might have been different. The actual events which unfolded demonstrate the risk God took when he made men and women with the

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[32] Talbot, 'True Freedom', p. 79; emphasis his. He is quoting Sanders from *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (IVP, 1998), p. 9.

[33] C. Pinnock, 'There is room for us: A Reply to Bruce Ware', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 No. 2 (2002), p. 215.

[34] 'Openness of God theology criticized for effort to get God "off the hook"', report of address by the Revd Dr J. Ligon Duncan III on the providence of God, Samford University, Birmingham, AL, July 2000. In SBC News and Views (www.reformedreader.org/hsbcr/news46.htm).

power of free will and of free choice. Although God might have intervened directly to prevent the attack from happening, he values freedom over everything else, and 'he does not normally over-ride such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results'.[35] That is why he did not intervene to prevent the tragedy. Open theism would argue that God was profoundly affected by what he saw happening in America, like a disappointed father might be if his children let him down badly, and he had to re-adjust his immediate plans in the light of what happened. God continues to collaborate with us in the making of history; and he simply hopes that we will make the best possible choices.

But classic theism differs in its response to tragedy and difficult providence. First, it acknowledges the absolute sovereignty of God over each specific event. His throne is still ruling over all, setting boundaries to human behaviour and action (Job 14:5; Dan. 4:35; 5:26). Second, it acknowledges that sin is a mystery, but it is not afraid to ask the rhetorical question of Amos 3:6 – 'if there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?' It does not make God the author of sin, but it does confess, in humility and awe, that God ordains sin, permitting evil to be perpetrated that he might have all the glory by his grace. It bows before the throne that knew and ordained and allowed the events of 11 September to occur, and which alone is able to bring good out of the disaster and the chaos. It does not leave us wondering what to do next, on the grounds that history is only a sequence of events contingent upon our choices, but believes that events are determined by God in such a way that our actions are free not *although* they are ordained but precisely *because* they are ordained.

CRITIQUING OPEN THEISM

J. Ligon Duncan III states that

> The whole program of open theism is dependent upon the proposition that a god who has to deal with the same risks, uncertainties and possibilities as do we is somehow more sympathetic, accessible and credible than the old-fashioned omnipotent and omniscient God.[36]

One of the main attractions of open theism is its insistence on emphasising the personal and relational aspect of God's love. A real concern is being expressed by the proponents of this view, that too often

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[35] *The Openness of God*, p. 156.

[36] J. Ligon Duncan, 'Our Only Comfort in Life and Death: A Pastor's Perspective', *Tabletalk* 27, No 2 (2003), p. 53.

we consider God in the abstract, using terminology which fails to do justice to the biblical portrayal of God. It is easy to talk in terms of infinity, impassibility, immutability *etc.*, and be left with an impersonal deity. The biblical emphasis is far more on the personal portrayal of God – God as Father, Husband, Judge, Shepherd, for example – and our theology and pulpit presentation must do justice to these personal portraits.

But open theism has little room for any of the traditional elements of theology proper, and its critique of historical theism insists that these elements are a hindrance to a dynamic relationship with God. Yet even a classic exposition of historical theism, such as Herman Bavinck's *The Doctrine of God*, decries the view that traditional classifications of God's attributes are incompatible with a relational view of God: 'We must not suppose... that... Dogmatics is rendered a dry, scholastic study, without practical value. On the contrary, the more it meditates on him, the knowledge of whom is its only content, so much the more is it transformed into worship and adoration.... Indeed, the knowledge of God in Christ is life itself.'[37]

Some readers of Bavinck's *Doctrine of God* may conclude that his is, in fact, a 'dry, scholastic study'. Yet his caveat is still an important one. Beginning with Scripture, and its presentation of God fulfilling certain functions (such as watching, keeping, repenting) and taking on himself certain roles in relation to his people (as father, bridegroom, shepherd), does not preclude a philosophical analysis of those elements of his nature which are brought to the fore in his activity. The relational metaphors of Scripture are the scaffolding around the self-disclosure of God's innate and eternal nature. It may be that the debate between historic and open theism 'is not a disagreement over the authority of Scripture' but 'a disagreement about how Scripture should be interpreted'.[38] But if we are to take Scripture as authoritative at all, then we cannot allow an over-literalistic interpretation of some passages to blind us to the truth of others. God's repenting over Nineveh must be taken in conjunction with such statements as 1 Samuel 15:29: 'The Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For he is not a man, that He should relent.' Faced with such apparent discrepancies we have to embrace a *prima facie* principle that human characteristics ascribed to God are accommodations, and not absolutes. It

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[37] H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (tr. W. Hendriksen, Edinburgh, 1977), p. 14.

[38] R. E. Olson, 'A Brief Analysis of the "Openness of God" Theology', paper delivered at the Baptist General Conference, June 2000, www.baptistgeneral.org/4know/analysis.htm

seems to me that the flaw of openness theology is that it interprets absolute truths about God in the light of passages where analogical language is used by way of accommodation. The result is a relativising of God, and a consequent diminishing of his glory:

> This god is man writ large... full of so many of our weaknesses, but worse because he is not one of us but is touted to be God. His glory will be tarnished so fully that his appearance will evoke pity and mistrust, not devotion, awe, wonder, amazement, fear, respect and honour. God's glory and our good, tied as they necessarily are in open theism to an unknowable and unpredictable future and to the use of our freedom over which God has no control, cannot survive when the dark side of our freedom prevails.[39]

I offer the following points of critique in the remainder of this paper.

Open Theism is inaccurate in its presentation of Calvinism

According to John Sanders, writing on 'Historical Considerations' in *The Openness of God*, Calvin's doctrine of predestination 'effectively denies any sort of mutual relationship between God and his creatures. It is all a one-way street, or, better, a novel in which the characters do exactly what the novelist decides.'[40] This caricature of Calvinistic theology, such as that of the Westminster Confession of Faith, cannot, however, bear scrutiny. Three brief statements of the Confession's theology can demonstrate this.

Conf. 3.1:

> God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

Open theism accuses Calvinism of holding a fatalistic position, and argues that if we wish to do justice to freedom of will we must move away from the concept of a God whose knowledge and foreordination of all things is total and comprehensive. But the position of the Confession is otherwise: it is that God's foreordination does *not* violate the freedom of our will; and

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[39] Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, p. 225.

[40] *The Openness of God*, pp. 89-90.

in fact that it establishes our freedom and the secondary causes which lie behind events in the world. Only on this basis can you grant God's absolute sovereignty *and* respect the way the world operates. Our freedom, our choices, our actions – these are not removed by the doctrine of foreordination, but are established. Similarly our responses to the gospel are free responses which are not any less free because of election or predestination; predestination is what establishes our free responses to the claims of Christ on our lives.

Conf. 3.8:

> The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in his word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence and abundant consolation, to all that sincerely obey the Gospel.

Here the Confession reminds us of the practical nature of God's decree, particularly the decree of predestination. It warns us against a careless and imprudent handling of the doctrine. It tells us that because of God's decree we can have assurance and we will the more be led to admire and worship God. Election is a doctrine full of mystery and profundity, but it remains a practical and a wonderful doctrine for those who love the Lord. The Confession strikes the note of warm relational communion between the sovereign God and his people, between an eternal decree of predestination and a response of worship on the part of those who believe.

Conf. 12.1:

> All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption; by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as by a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.

It is impossible to argue, in the light of such a passage, that traditional theism leaves no room for, and does no justice to, the relationship which

God has with his people through Christ. The Confession is replete with references to such a relationship. Clark Pinnock writes of the open view of God that 'instead of locating God above and beyond history, it stresses God's activity in history, responding to events as they happen, in order to accomplish his purposes'.[41] But the Calvinism of Westminster wants to emphasize that it is precisely the God who is *over* history who has invaded history. Far from being abstract and impersonal, the God who decrees, elects and predestinates is the God whom we call 'Father'. Richard Rice's statement that 'traditional theism seeks to safeguard God's transcendence by denying divine sensitivity'[42] is a simplistic misrepresentation. If that is the reason why we now need to embrace open theism, then someone has been misinformed. As Michael Horton puts it:

> If Calvinism represented even in broad terms the description given to it especially by Pinnock, it could hardly have unleashed the energies for dynamic Christian action in missions, social compassion, education and the arts, vocation and countless other enterprises which it has in fact unleashed. Many of us fail to recognize Reformed theology in his polemical descriptions of it.[43]

Open Theism is inadequate in its doctrine of the atonement

It is interesting that in *The Openness of God*, Clark Pinnock, in his chapter on 'Systematic Theology', deals with the Trinity, creation, God's transcendence and immanence, God's power, immutability, impassibility, eternity and knowledge, but says nothing about the atonement. The open model for understanding God wishes to review God's attributes in the interests of a more relational understanding. Yet there can be no relationship with God without reconciliation, and no reconciliation without atonement.

However, if we ask the question, 'Did God know that the cross was going to happen?', open theism would have to say: 'Only as a possibility. It might never have taken place, and until it took place it was part of an unknowable future; but since it happened, God made the most of it.' In open theism, providence is a big risk, and God is the ultimate chess player, who is constantly thinking out strategies, depending on the moves men

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41 *The Openness of God*, p. 125.

42 *The Openness of God*, p. 43.

43 M. S. Horton, 'Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method', *Beyond the Bounds*, p. 233.

make. For open theism, there is no divine purpose for specific events.[44] Gregory Boyd argues that it demeans God's sovereignty to suggest otherwise, since it requires *more* authority and sovereignty for God to grant meaningful freedom to his creatures. 'It takes a truly self-confident, sovereign God to make himself vulnerable.'[45] But if this is so, and if no specific divine purpose is attached to the events which do take place in providence, then no specific purpose was attached to the cross. It simply happened, and God had to turn the actions of men into a benevolent result.

One important passage in this connection is Acts 2:23, from Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost: '[Jesus], being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified and put to death.' According to Peter, the cross was no mere possibility, and no risk. It was ordained and appointed by God as the sole means of salvation; yet the acts by which the events were shaped were all free acts. Because the human agents acted freely, the agents are culpable; because God ordained the events sovereignly, the actions are efficacious. The ignorance and blindness which characterised the perpetrators of the cross do not detract from their freedom, only from their innocence.

The implications of open theism for the doctrine of the atonement are astounding. In spite of Pinnock's insistence that he is merely re-interpreting the manner of God's knowledge and working in the world, and in spite of the emphasis on grace which is evident in the literature, open theism nevertheless leaves too much open, including the possibility that Christ might never have died for us at all. There never was, apparently, a divine purpose to save sinners from all eternity, only a smart outwitting of the powers of darkness.

But as far as the atonement is concerned, the debate has just begun. Rice goes so far as to say:

> Many Christian scholars now perceive the suffering of Calvary not as something Jesus offers to God on human behalf, still less as something God inflicts on Jesus (instead of on other human beings), but as the activity of God himself.[46]

This, however, evacuates of meaning the biblical passages which speak of Christ as priest, offering a sacrifice, and of Christ as being made a curse for

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[44] See Helseth, 'On Divine Ambivalence', p. 509.

[45] Quoted in Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, p. 221.

[46] *The Openness of God*, p. 45.

us. It also ignores the import of passages which see atonement and reconciliation grounded in an act of imputation and of divine determinism. The logical implication of open theism is that the cross was an arbitrary act; does this mean that contemporary evangelicalism is going to have to fight for piacular, substitutionary atonement?

Open Theism is inconsistent in its interpretation of the Bible

Open theism insists that we read the Bible literally, free from theological 'control beliefs'. It will not do, its advocates tell us, to read passages like 'God repented' as if they taught that 'God did not, of course, literally repent'.

But in practice, this leaves us with an unworkable hermeneutic. Richard Rice, in *The Openness of God*, wants to make a distinction between passages which speak of God having physical features (*e.g.* arms, hands, mouth, face), which he says are rightly construed as symbolic,[47] and passages which speak of God's feelings. To argue that the former passages are anthropomorphisms is correct, he says; but to say that the latter are anthropopathic, in which human emotions are ascribed to God, is evidence of a 'popular and entrenched idea that God lies utterly beyond the reach of creaturely experience'.[48]

It is difficult not to accuse Rice of exercising control beliefs here and being as inconsistent as those with whom he is arguing. But more fundamental still is the fact that the Bible consistently uses language which, on the surface at least, appears paradoxical. The God who says in Genesis 3:9, 'Adam, where are you?' is the same God who knows where each one of us is all of the time (Ps. 139:1-7). In relating to human experience, God reveals himself to us in metaphors which have an analogy to our experience, but which never constitute the whole reality about God. This *analogical* use of language is not an attempt to impose a control theology on the biblical narrative: it is actually a signal that the God who is beyond finite experience nonetheless relates to our human condition. An ignorant God, subjected to the constraints and vulnerability of his own passions, hardly accords with the supreme deity of the Bible.

Open Theism is indiscriminate in its use of christological categories

I am thinking here of two elements of openness theology: first, that the incarnation represented a change in God, and, secondly, that *kenosis* is intrinsic to the nature of God.

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[47] *The Openness of God*, p. 34.

[48] *The Openness of God*, p. 34.

Rice seeks to develop the logic of the incarnation. What does it mean for us that the incarnate Jesus is the revelation of God? For Rice it means that all of Jesus' experiences are God's experiences – his ignorance is God's ignorance, his suffering is God's suffering, his relations with men are God's relations with men. It shows that God 'requires the cooperation of human agents'.[49] Pinnock goes further. In his exposition of open theism he says that the Son of God *surrendered* 'the divine glory in order to become a human being.... What a mystery – God wanting to be loved by us and willing to make himself vulnerable.'[50] For Pinnock, the Logos is the totality of God. But this is hardly the Bible's presentation. God (the Father) loved the world and gave his Son. There was personal transaction at the heart of covenant salvation. God did not abandon his glory in the hope that the world would fall in love with him; he gave his Son because he loved the world, so that the world would be saved through him (John 3:17). The incarnation was an enfleshment of the Second Person, but involved no change in God.

More serious, in my view, is the attempt to read back from the *kenosis* of Christ into the sovereign acts of God in history. *Kenosis* is 'self-emptying'; but as Philippians 2 makes clear, Christ abandoned none of his glory when he became man. He was emptied not by the loss of his deity, but by the assumption of our humanity. The 'emptying' of which Paul speaks is clearly metaphorical, as the King James Version translation correctly recognised by translating 'he made himself of no reputation'. Open theism not only wants to interpret the *kenosis* literally, but to read it back into the act of creation. God, according to Pinnock, empties himself of omnipotence the moment he creates the world and allows it to exist alongside himself. He empties himself of eternity by creating a temporal world. He empties himself of omniscience by relating to his creation and collaborating with men in the making of the future. Pinnock and others may see this as a logical extension of incarnational theology, but it is an example of open theism exercising its own control belief on theology, since nowhere in the Bible is such *kenosis* attributed to God; creation is not an emptying of God in any sense, and the incarnation is a self-degradation only of the Son, not of the Father and not of the Holy Spirit.

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[49] *The Openness of God*, p. 44.

[50] Clark Pinnock, 'Reconstructing Evangelical Theology', p. 3.

Open Theism is quite wrong to urge the substitution of legal categories with family categories

According to Clark Pinnock, the model at the heart of the gospel is the prodigal Son model, in which love constrains the prodigal to return to his father.[51] The son in the parable has choices – whether to stay with the pigs or return home. Open theism offers, it is alleged, a more dynamic model with which to interpret the gospel in the light of biblical teaching:

> In the old model, God is a monarch whose will is always carried out. It is a harsh and negative model, you know, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God'. The newer model stresses more the love of God and his dynamic relationship with people which puts more significance on human action than the older view, which tends to be kind of fatalistic.[52]

There are several things which must be said in response to this. First, the returning prodigal is one part of a three-part parable which Jesus told in Luke 15 to illustrate what it meant that he was receiving sinners. In the first story, a shepherd seeks a lost sheep; in the second, a woman seeks a lost coin. In neither case does the lost object make any choice to return. The emphasis falls solely on the choice of the shepherd and the woman. We cannot decontextualise one element in the story and make that the model for our interpretation of the atonement and the evangel.

But in addition to this there is the whole question of our freedom; is the parable of the prodigal son the last word on our human condition? What about the insistence of Jesus to the religious leaders of his day that 'no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him' (John 6:44)? The drawing power of the Father is the only thing that can overcome the innate rebellion against God which leaves us powerless to respond to Christ. In a state of sin we are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), and neither able nor willing to please God: 'the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God *neither indeed can be*' (Rom. 8:7). In the light of this teaching, no decision to return to God is ever within the capability of man until God first draws him by grace. But this does not mean that we come to Christ against our will: our decisions are free. The decision to reject Christ is a free decision, contingent upon the blinding

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[51] On this, see the discussion between Clark Pinnock and Morton Smith (moderated by Greg Koukl) at www.christianity.com/CC/article/0,,PTID307086|CHID559376|CIID1412798,00.html

[52] Discussion between Pinnock and Smith (see n. 51).

power of sin in human life, while the decision to accept Christ is a free decision, contingent upon the liberating power of grace in the soul.

It is quite impossible for us to view the matter of sin and grace apart from a legal context. God relates to us in a fatherly manner, but he also relates to us through law. If we are sinners, it is because we have broken God's law; 'sin is not imputed where there is no law' (Rom. 5:13). If we are guilty, it is not simply because we have offended our heavenly Father, but because, having broken the holy and righteous (objective) standards of his law, we are exposed to his just wrath and condemnation. And if we commit sin, we are its slaves (John 8:34), bound by the chains of our rebellion and our enmity.

Open theism, in its denial of the imputation of Adam's sin to us,[53] strikes at the very heart of the New Testament gospel. If Adam's sin, corruption and guilt are not imputed to us, then Romans 5:12ff. makes no sense. And the parallel/contrast between the first Adam and the last breaks down entirely. To say that I am guilty because of Adam's sin is not to allege that I am punished for what someone else did. It is to say that, as the covenant head of the human family, Adam's disobedience left mankind corrupt in nature and liable to death. Otherwise, why do we sin at all? But more than this, if we deny the relationship between ourselves and Adam – that we are fallen in him, and that we are justly culpable before God – then we must also deny the relationship between ourselves and Christ. We cannot be restored and accepted in the last Adam if we are not fallen and condemned in the first:

> When we seek to discover the specific character of the union which will ground the imputation of Adam's first sin we find it to be that same kind of union as is analogous to the union that exists between Christ and his people and on the basis of which his righteousness is theirs unto justification and eternal life.... Solidarity was constituted by divine

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[53] '**Moderator:** Dr Pinnock, do you hold that there is no imputation of guilt to the human race for Adam's sin?

Pinnock: Yes, I would certainly deny that doctrine.... The Bible clearly teaches 'The soul that sinneth shall surely die'. We are guilty because of our sins, not because of the sins of others. The only thing that Adam put into our condition is that we are corrupt on account of what he did. And what we do in that context is become sexual, guilt producing sinners. The idea of Adam's sin being imputed to us is very difficult to accept' (Discussion between Pinnock and Smith, n. 51).

> institution and the solidarity is of such a nature that the sin of Adam devolves upon all naturally procreated posterity.[54]

To insist on the rejection of legal categories as adequate for our evangelism and the presentation of the gospel is ruinous. We could not know sin apart from the law (Rom. 7:7); and apart from the complex of guilt, condemnation and death which sin involves there could be no reason for the cross. And, consequently, the open theist dismissal of imputation means that all meaning is evacuated from the atoning death of Christ. What does it mean that he was made sin for us, if legal categories are denied? To suggest that we must substitute a familial model for the legal one is to say, at last, that our choice is sufficient. The stark reality is that open theism hardly requires the atonement which Calvary provides.

Open Theism is insistent in polarising doctrines which we must hold together

For open theism, the choice is between a God of power or a God of love, a God who wants control or a God who wants involvement. Pinnock states: 'Open theists rejoice in the freedom to understand God, not as an indifferent metaphysical iceberg or solitary narcissistic being who suffers from his own completeness, but as a free and creative trinitarian person.'[55] The traditional view does not, however, regard God either as indifferent or solitary; nor is he a singular 'trinitarian person' but a trinity of Persons.

There is no reason to suppose that a God of absolute power cannot be related to creatures of time and space. A God who says, 'I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please' (Isa. 46:10) may also accommodate himself, in personal relations, to the children of men whose experience of knowing is gradual and piecemeal. A God who knows the future can be truly involved in present personal relations. A God who foreordains all things can also foreordain free-will choices as means for the accomplishing of his purposes. Indeed, the Bible is the revelation of such a God.

CONCLUSION

The pillar around which open theism is built is the supposition that since the future has not yet occurred, and is dependent upon our actions in the

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[54] J. Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids, 1959), p. 41.

[55] Pinnock, 'Reconstructing Evangelical Theology', p. 3.

present, it is therefore unreal and unknowable, even by God. But, as Charles Hodge puts it, 'To deny foreknowledge to God... is to destroy the very idea of God.'[56] It is to place God's ways, thoughts and knowledge on precisely the same plane as ours, whereas they are certainly not so. In the traditional Calvinist view of God, God's transcendent power and glory, infused with all the superlative attributes which we ascribe him, has never turned him into an isolationist being, and has never threatened his relations with us. Indeed, the glory that belongs to God as the Triune God of Scripture is that he has entered into covenant with us, in order to relate to us. It is a mystery that a God craving for our love and collaborating with us in the creation of the future could conceivably be greater than the personal, sovereign God of the Bible, who says to us in covenant, 'I will be God for you.'

Jonathan Edwards has a detailed discussion of God's decrees in chapter 3 of his 'Remarks on Important Theological Controversies' (*Works*, vol. 2). At the close of the chapter, Edwards states:

> I wish the reader to consider the unreasonableness of rejecting plain revelations, because [*i.e.* on the grounds that] they are puzzling to our reason. There is no greater difficulty attending this doctrine than the contrary, nor so great. So that though the doctrine of the decrees be mysterious, and attended with difficulties, yet the opposite doctrine is in itself more mysterious, and attended with greater difficulties, and with contradictions to reason more evident, to one who thoroughly considers things; so that, even if the Scripture had made no revelation of it, we should have had reason to believe it. But since the Scripture is so abundant in declaring it, the unreasonableness of rejecting it appears the more glaring.[57]

That is as much the case with the open theism of our day as it was with the Arminianism of Edwards' day. If the biblical doctrine of the God of historical theism is mysterious, the opposite doctrine of an open God is even more so, and the difficulties in relating to him as a God of sovereign comfort and overruling majesty greater still. The Westminster Confession of Faith reminds us of the need for special care in our handling of the doctrine of predestination; the difficulties in presenting it, and the dangers in misrepresenting it are, however, no reason to look instead towards another kind of God with another kind of knowledge. To do so, as John

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[56] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Abridged Edition, ed. E. N. Gross, Baker, 1988), p. 318.

[57] Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 543.

Piper puts it, is 'theologically ruinous, dishonouring to God, belittling to Christ, and pastorally hurtful'.[58] The emergence of open theism calls for evangelical watchfulness and increased faithfulness to the scriptural presentation of the sovereign God who will give his glory to no other.

[58] John Piper, 'Grounds for Dismay: the Error and Injury of Open Theism', *Beyond the Bounds*, p. 384.