

Open Theism – An Introductory Presentation

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Open Theism Outline

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Introduction

In recent decades there have been many theologians and biblical scholars who have begun to question the validity of many of the traditional doctrines of God. Specifically, these doctrines surround God's immutability, impassibility, and other notions that suggest God is static and unchanging. The grounds for this challenge seem to come from two different areas. The first is found within the biblical text. Open Theists and those sympathetic to their viewpoint believe that the Scriptures present a future that is open and genuinely affected by the free will choices of human beings. God, in turn, as an active participant in the unfolding narrative of history, acts and reacts to humanity and is himself, in certain respects, subject to experiencing change.

As it will be seen, the issues raised by Open Theism in questioning the traditional formations of the doctrine of God are exposing many philosophical presuppositions that are foundational to the theological discussion. Even the task of biblical interpretation does not escape the long reach of philosophy. So, at every level the theologian is now forced to not only argue on a sort of "neutral" biblical grounds, but to discuss the philosophical presuppositions that are foundational to that hermeneutical task itself. In fact, the idea that discussion can take place on any philosophically neutral playing field is becoming noticeably out of vogue.

As a result three general areas of Open Theism will be presented. The first is the biblical and hermeneutical foundations of Open Theism. Here the approach to anthropomorphism and metaphor will be explored to understand the significant shift in interpretation that Open Theists take in viewing the biblical data. Second, the philosophical foundations will be scrutinized. The nature of human free will and the nature of time will be explored to understand the important issues that are coloring the lenses of theologians (of both sides) as they approach the doctrine of God. Thirdly, we will review three existential arguments. Open Theists see a tension in traditional theology that has tended to dichotomize theology from practical concerns. In short, Open Theism, it is claimed, is simply more livable.

Finally, there are two things to note before we proceed. First, this paper is an examination of the works of the Open Theist proponents, themselves. It does not explore the numerous responses to Open Theism by their opponents and critics. Second, there is a deliberate absence of discussion on Process philosophers and theologians such as Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, etc. The purpose of this paper is to examine Open Theism in light of its own advocates and proponents. The influence of Process thought on Open Theism is a topic for another study, as is the responses of the opponents of Open Theism. The goal of this paper is to research Open Theism on its own terms in the words of its own advocates and to offer limited commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of the position. Rather, it is hoped that this study will identify the key issues of the Open Theist position, and that this will, in turn, facilitate constructive dialogue.

The Biblical Foundations of Open Theism

Introduction to the Open Theism hermeneutic

One of the primary criticisms leveled at Open Theists is the charge that the open view advocates are driven by philosophical theory rather than biblical truth. The concern is that openness theologians start with philosophy at the outset and then, in the process of doing philosophy, come to the open view and then simply read the already developed openness theology into the Scriptures. While criticisms of this nature are not entirely without warrant, the above caricature is not a fair representation of the writings and works of open theologians. Indeed, upon analysis of their views, it is clear that Open Theists do not simply have a philosophical axe to grind; rather, they have a clear hermeneutical development and seek to build a theology upon their understanding of what the Scriptures say. In fact, most, if not all, major advocates of Open Theism explicitly acknowledge that their viewpoints are developed based upon the biblical data, and that even apart from philosophical considerations they see a clear motif of openness developed in Scripture. In addition, some openness theologians have reversed the criticism of traditional theologians and claimed that the classical views of God were not so much biblical as they were philosophical. They purport that many of the traditional theological concepts of God such as immutability, timelessness, and omniscience were developed based upon Greek philosophical definitions of these terms. These definitions have been forced upon Christian theology and have even been the driving force behind the church's biblical hermeneutic. As a result, Open Theists posit that the church is in need of a new hermeneutical approach.

The suggestion of a new hermeneutic is based upon a literal interpretation of passages that show God *changing his mind* as well as a literal rendering of narrative Scriptures that depict an uncertain future. For example, in Exodus 32, we see God at the brink of destroying the Israelite people. Moses intercedes on behalf of the people and requests of God to "repent" and "change his mind" in regards to this plan of destruction. God grants this request, and verse 14 states, "The LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people." A traditional hermeneutic would view this passage as anthropomorphic. If a passage is anthropomorphic, then it is Scripture's way of using human terms to describe God. From a traditional view, then, we see this passage regarding Moses as a picture of a transcendent God who, in an effort to deal with Israel's sin and teach Moses and Israel something of himself, *stooped down to our level* and put emotion on display to reveal the nature and consequence of the sins of the Israelites. John Calvin speaks of anthropomorphic language as a picture of God "lispering" to his creation as a nursemaid lisps to a small child.¹ So great and lofty is the infinite God that he must, necessarily, accommodate himself to finite humanity and speak on their terms and act as though he were a human being even though he is not.

The Open Theist, it is said, does not view this language as anthropomorphic in the classical tradition. Rather, his view is more literal. So, when approaching the situation in Exodus 32, the openness theologian views the passage as a literal description of God and rejects any idea of anthropomorphism. Though this is true, it is only true to a degree. In

fact, rather than viewing all Scripture as literal and seeing *no* anthropomorphic language, John Sanders develops the idea that, in all actuality, *all* of our language used of God is anthropomorphic. For clarification let us examine this important concept.

Anthropomorphic language and metaphors

The Open Theism hermeneutic views the biblical data regarding God and his relationship to the world as being primarily anthropomorphic in nature. That is, *all* of the writing in Scripture related to God is simply man attempting to describe God in human terms. In order for finite human beings to grasp what God is like in his nature, it was necessary that the biblical writers use metaphorical language to describe God. Thus John Sanders reflects upon this situation and finds that all language, to one degree or the other, is anthropomorphic: “All the language that we employ to speak of God is human language and thus is tinged with anthropomorphism. . . . We cannot escape using human language (anthropomorphism) when speaking of God any more than we can escape it when speaking of our dogs or our computers. Human words are all we have to speak about anything.” This does not mean, of course, that all metaphors have the same value or carry the same weight in referring to God. Sanders qualifies by stating:

The term *anthropomorphism* may have a narrow or broad meaning. The narrow, and customary, sense refers to speaking of God as having human characteristics such as emotions or eyes. Anthropomorphism, however, is sometimes used more broadly in the sense that all our language about God is *human language*. When speaking of God, whether we use abstract terms such as *necessity* and *aseity* or concrete terms such as *lover* and *rock*, we are inevitably predicating properties of God that are derived from human categories.²

Clark Pinnock succinctly states, “If we lose the metaphors, we lose the self-disclosure.”³

Sanders further qualifies this line of thought by stating that “This does not mean, however, that theology is merely anthropology. Our language, anthropomorphic though it is, remains reality depicting.”⁴ In other words, to say that all language about God is anthropomorphic is not to say that we can then know nothing about who God is. We can and do gain knowledge about God through metaphors. This, of course, leads naturally to a key question: If most or all of our attempts to capture the nature of God are, to some degree, anthropomorphic (in the sense that we are using human descriptions), then what weight we are to assign to the various metaphors used of God in Scripture? We must emphasize that this is the key hermeneutical question. *We must ask how these metaphors are used and what is their purpose in a given text.* The need to carefully discriminate metaphorical language is even more pressing when we consider the wide range of metaphors that appear in Scripture. Sanders states:

Though the biblical writers criticize certain conceptions of God, they repeatedly use a wide array of anthropomorphisms for God. God is said to hear, speak, see and smell. God is faithful, wise, long-suffering and loving. God plans, chooses, acts and experiences grief and joy, sorrow and delight. God is depicted as in the familiar human roles of father, mother, husband, shepherd and king. God is also theriomorphized as lion, lamb and vulture and physiomorphized as fire, wind and fountain water.⁵

Controlling metaphors

With all of these varying metaphors jockeying for position as a descriptor of God, how does one go about assigning value to the metaphoric language used of God to develop a biblical portrait of God that is accurate? In other words, how does all of the anthropomorphic language work together to show us who God really is? At this point, it is important to reference Terence Fretheim's concept of a "controlling metaphor."⁶ "One of the more important issues here is how to determine whether a given metaphor is appropriate, is being misused, or has been exhausted... They [controlling metaphors] are able to bring coherence to a to a range of biblical thinking about God; they provide a hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole." What Fretheim is driving at here, and what the Open Theism writers echo, is that we must locate those metaphors about God that are more foundational to our understanding of God. So we now ask the hermeneutical question: *Which metaphors are fundamental to our understanding of God?* Or, to phrase the question using Fretheim's terms, *What are the controlling metaphors?* The answer to this question for the open theist varies slightly, but as one could guess, the answers center on the concept of the *openness* of God. Richard Rice in *The Openness of God* answers that the metaphorical language of *interaction* is one of the foundational controlling metaphors: "Two streams of biblical evidence support an interactive view of God's relation to the world. One consists of statements that affirm in one way or another that God is responsive to what happens in the creaturely world... The other consists of statements that indicate creaturely freedom in one way or another."⁷ Clark Pinnock states, "In terms of the Bible, the open view of God lifts up the personal nature of God. It looks at Yahweh's desire for loving relationships and covenant partnerships."⁸ Pinnock continues with his thoughts:

What we find in Scripture is a range of images designed to disclose something of God's nature. They seem to tell us that creation is a dynamic project and that God is personal and relational. Unfortunately, theologians have not often read the Bible in this way. The dynamic metaphors have often been viewed as accommodation to the human mind and not taken with full seriousness... The open view of God proposes to take biblical metaphors more seriously and thereby recover the dynamic and relational God of the gospel...⁹

Sanders, drawing upon the work of Terrence Fretheim, presents several arguments for the conclusion that *divine repentance* is a "significant controlling metaphor in the biblical narrative." The first is the pervasiveness of the metaphor. The second is that "the theme [divine repentance] cannot be dismissed as belonging to some small band of esoteric teachers. It pervades Israel's history." Thirdly, "the repentance metaphor also occurs in a wide variety of genres, including divine speech (where God says 'I repent') and creedal statements. Basic creedal affirmations call attention to what is most important for Israel's faith. Two such statements say God 'is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing' Joel 2:13. Divine repentance is included with divine grace and love as a key characteristic of God. David Allen Hubbard remarks, 'So dominant is this loyal love, so steeped in grace...and mercy...that it

encourages Yahweh to stay open to changes in his plans...God's openness to change his course of action...has (in these two passages) virtually become one of his attributes."¹⁰

At this point it is important to note that the Open Theism hermeneutic does not necessarily state at the outset a specific controlling metaphor and attempt to "prove" that this specific metaphor is the controlling metaphor of all of Scripture. Rather, it is more accurate to say that the hermeneutical efforts of Open Theists focus on showing that metaphors of God's openness to humanity are more central and pronounced in the text than are language and motifs that appear to teach that God predetermines and foreknows the future and actions of mankind. That is, *the motif of openness is so strong and predominate that it should serve as a controlling metaphor that gets more at the heart of who God is and what God is trying to accomplish with his creation.* Hence, when we encounter the passages alleging to show that God has preplanned or preprogrammed human behavior or human history, then we need to re-evaluate our interpretation in light of the motif of openness that dominates the biblical texts. Thus, the Scriptures are unfolding a plan and purpose of God, which has less to do with determining the world and more to do with a dynamic interaction with humanity.

God's primary objective is a world in which free agents love God and one another...God's most important goal in creation is for humans to enter into a personal relationship with him...He conditions what he will do and what happens in the world on the basis of whether or not his people align their hearts with his in prayer. He designed the world so that a great deal of it revolves around and hinges on our communicating with him...Therefore God designed the world not only so he will influence us but also that we might influence him.¹¹

Sanders concisely brings together these thoughts on anthropomorphism and the project of God by saying, "If God decides to disclose himself to us as a personal being who enters into relationship with us, who has purposes, emotions and desires, and who suffers with us, then we ought to rejoice in this anthropomorphic portrait and accept it as disclosing to us the very nature of God."¹² If the metaphorical language of God's openness is viewed as revealing "the very nature of God," then the theological developments of Open Theism become must more obvious. If the essence of God's nature is relational and his plan for mankind is unknown and open, then the traditional understanding of immutability is naturally viewed with suspicion by the Open Theist.

The revelatory extent of metaphors

It would be prudent at this point to raise one more distinction between the hermeneutical process of Open Theists and the traditional conceptions of God. Traditionally, theologians have tended to believe that anthropomorphic language and various metaphors that speak of God's openness do not actually reveal God *as he truly is*. Hence, there was a certain temptation to dichotomize the person of God from the revelation of God. By saying that the revealed metaphors of openness are not to reveal the real character of God, theologians would logically move to hold the position that God, as he truly is, is unknowable. It is possible to say this because since much (if not all) of our language is metaphorical, we can therefore know nothing of the true *mystery* of who God actually is.

This is something against which many Open Theists react very strongly. They insist that despite the myriad of metaphors used of God, these metaphors nonetheless reveal something of God *as he truly is*, and that God's real person and actual character is not just a mystery.

Anything we say about God, or God says to us, involves such limitations (in this strict sense of the term). If we hold that God is absolutely unlimited in an unqualified sense, then God is beyond any relationship with us and is thus unknowable. If we affirm that God is related to us, then God can be knowable but our language will express limitations. Consequently, the issue is not whether we must think of God by means of ontological and semantic limitations but which ones we shall use.

Even orthodox Christians who affirm divine revelation sometimes succumb to this same sort of problem when they claim that God had to "accommodate" himself to human language. It is commonplace for theologians to claim that biblical anthropomorphisms are "accommodations" on God's part to our limited abilities to understand. Perhaps, but how do they know this is so? Have they found out the God beyond God? Sometimes appeal is made to what any being with the title "God" must be like. God, it is claimed, is a term for which only certain properties are "fitting" (*dignum Deo*). Any God worth his salt must conform to our intuitive notions of deity or get out of the God business. Since the biblical depiction of God does not, according to some people, measure up to what is fitting for God to be, the doctrine of divine accommodation is enacted to protect the Bible from charges of falsehood.

For instance, it was common for classical theists to maintain that God, as God could not suffer. Thus all the biblical depictions of divine grief do not refer to what God is actually like but are only divine accommodations to our finite minds. Calvin, for instance, said that God "lisps" to us as does a nursemaid to a young child.¹³

For the Open Theist, then, anthropomorphisms that point to the openness of God are not to be thought of simply as accommodations, but reveal something actual about God's nature. As a result, for the Open Theist, openness and responsiveness are an actual part of the character of God.

The Scriptural motif of openness

Where, then, is the biblical evidence for a motif of God's openness? What are the passages that underline and drive the theology of Open Theism? It is now appropriate to turn our attention to the biblical text. For this, we will examine the development of Greg Boyd in his book, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.¹⁴

God regrets

Scripture, in several places, represents God experiencing regret over what he has done or events that have transpired. In Gen. 6:6, "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." In two passages (I Sam 15:10, 35) Scripture tells us that God regretted the choice of Saul as king over Israel. To this

Boyd comments that, “Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than what we expected or hoped for when the decision was made.”¹⁵

One might present the objection that God is not wise in his dealings if he experiences regret. To this Boyd states the following:

Once we understand that the future is partly open and that humans are genuinely free, the paradox of how God could experience genuine regret over a decision he made disappears. God made a wise decision because it had the greatest possibility of yielding the best results. God’s decision wasn’t the only variable in this matter, however; there was also the variable of Saul’s will.¹⁶

God asks questions about the future

Boyd points to several references where God’s knowledge of the future doesn’t seem as certain as the classical theologian would have one believe. In Numbers 14:11 God asks Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” God asks Hosea, “How long will they [Israel] be incapable of innocence?” (Hosea 8:5 crf. I Kings 22:20). To these passages Boyd asks, “If God wonders about future issues, does this not imply that the future is to some extent unsettled?”¹⁷

The traditional interpretation of these kind of passages is to claim that God was asking a *rhetorical question*. That is, God asks a question knowing what the answer is and will be. To this Boyd responds:

Some suggest that in these verses the Lord was asking rhetorical questions, just as he had done when he asked Adam and Eve where they were (Gen. 3:8-9). This is a possible interpretation, but not a necessary one. Unlike God’s question about location in Genesis, there is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical. Moreover, the fact that the Lord continued for centuries, with much frustration, to try to get the Israelites not to “despise” him and to be “innocent” suggests that the wonder expressed in these questions was genuine. The duration of the Israelites’ stubbornness was truly an open issue.¹⁸

God confronts the Unexpected

In Isaiah 5 Israel is described as the Lord’s vineyard. God “expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes” (v. 2). God then asks, “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?” When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” (v. 4). Boyd asks, “If everything is eternally certain to God, as the classical view of foreknowledge holds, how could the Lord twice say that he ‘expected’ one thing to occur, only to have something different occur?”¹⁹

Boyd further comments on passages in the book of Jeremiah:

Several other examples of the Lord confronting the unexpected are found in Jeremiah. Beholding Israel's remarkable obstinacy, the Lord says, "I thought, 'After she has done all this she will return to me'; but she did not return" (Jer. 3:6-7)... We need to ask ourselves seriously, how could the Lord honestly say he thought Israel would turn to him if he was always certain that they would never do so? Several other passages in Jeremiah confirm this. Three times the Lord expresses shock over Israel's ungodly behavior by saying that they were doing things "which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind" (Jer. 19:5; see also 7:31; 32:35)²⁰

God gets frustrated

Boyd explains the motif of God's frustration:

The fourth aspect of the motif of future openness is that throughout Scripture we find God being frustrated as people stubbornly resist his plans for their lives... For example, several times the Lord tried to convince Moses that he could use him despite his speech impediment. Moses repeatedly refused to accept this (Exodus 4:10-15)... Another example of the Lord's frustration is found in Ezekiel, as the Lord mournfully declares the judgment he is bringing upon Israel. The Lord says, "I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it: but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them" (Ezek. 22:30-31)

This passage is one of the strongest depictions of the remarkable power and awesome responsibility of prayer. It suggests that if God could have found "anyone" to pray, judgment on the nation of Israel would have been averted. But although God tried to find someone to "stand in the breach," he found no one. This episode stands in stark contrast to the many other episodes in Scripture in which God's plan to bring judgment was reversed through the power of prayer (see Exod. 32:14; Num. 11:1-2; 14:12-20; 16:20-35; 41-48; Deut. 9:13-14, 18-20, 25; Judg. 10:13-16; 2 Sam. 24:17-25; I Kings 21:21-29; 2 Kings 13:3-5; 20:1-6; 2 Chron. 12:5-8)

In any event, it is difficult to understand how God could have sincerely "sought for" someone to intercede if he was eternally certain that there would be no one.²¹

God tests people to know their character

Another motif that Boyd presents to show that the future is not exhaustively settled is the motif of testing. The general argument is that a test cannot be a genuine test unless the outcome is uncertain. For one thing, there seems to be no point in testing if God already knows the result.

The quintessential passage on testing is Genesis 22. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Upon Abraham's successful completion of this test, God says, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son." (v. 12). Here we see that God does not say "Now *you* know that you fear God;" rather, God says "Now *I* know." Further, the use of the word "Now" implies the temporal chronology. God "now," at this point in time, has the knowledge that Abraham is faithful.

Along with this is a passage in 2 Chron. 32:31 where God tested Hezekiah “to know all that was in his heart.” Boyd asks, “If God eternally knew how Hezekiah would respond to him, God couldn’t have *really* been testing him in order to come to this knowledge. Unfortunately for the classical view, however, this is exactly what the text says.”²²

Examples of corporate testing include: Deut 8:2; 13:1-3; Judg. 2:22; and Exod. 16:4. Also, Boyd notes that sometimes the tests do not always pan out as God would have hoped. See Ps. 95:10-11 and Hebrews 3:7-10. “This raises the question as to why God strove with Israel for forty years and then for centuries after they entered the Promised Land if he was certain from the outset that they would grieve him (see Eph. 4:30). Why test someone you know will flunk – and then experience grief over the flunking – when you were certain ahead of time what would happen?”²³

God speaks in terms of what may or may not be

Another open motif that Boyd finds within Scripture is the fact that God speaks in terms of “maybes.” God does not always speak of the future in terms of settledness, but uses numerous “maybes.” One of the defining examples of this is God’s dialogue with Moses at the burning bush:

The Lord initially tells Moses that the elders will listen to his voice (Exodus 3:18). Moses apparently doesn’t hold to the classical view of divine foreknowledge, however, for he immediately asks, ‘suppose they do not believe me or listen to me?’ (Exodus 4:1)

God’s response to him suggests that God doesn’t hold to this view of foreknowledge either. He first demonstrates a miracle, ‘so that they may believe that the LORD...has appeared to you’ (4:5). Moses remains unconvinced, so the Lord performs a second miracle and comments, ‘If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign’ (4:8). How can the Lord say, ‘they may believe’? Isn’t the future behavior of the elders a matter of certainty for the Lord?²⁴

Another poignant example is Exodus 13:17, where God leads Israel along the shortest route to Canaan in order to avoid a military confrontation with the Philistines. What is God’s reason for this course of action? “If they face war they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” Says Boyd, “If we accept this language as inspired by God, doesn’t it clearly imply that God considered the *possibility*, but not the *certainty*, that the Israelites would change their minds if they faced battle?”²⁵

Other examples include Ezek. 12:3 (“Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house”), Jeremiah 26:3 (“It may be that they will listen...”), and Matt. 26:39 (“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”).

Jeremiah 18 and the Flexible Potter

Boyd considers that the Jeremiah 18 passage may be one of the strongest examples of the motif of openness. He details the development of the text:

Many in Israel had heard that the Lord was planning on punishing her for her wickedness and had wrongly assumed that this meant “It is no use!” (Jer. 18:12). If God has prophesied against us, they reasoned, there is nothing that can be done about it. It seems that they were reading into God’s prophecy the assumption that the future was unalterable.

To correct this fatalistic thinking, the Lord directed Jeremiah to go to a potter’s house to watch a potter at work. “The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him” (v. 4). The Lord then instructed Jeremiah: “Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?...Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” (v. 6).

The Lord then continues:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it (vv. 7-10).²⁶

Boyd sees several points to be made regarding this passage. The first is that this passage demonstrates, not that God shapes and molds according to *his* will, but that God is seen in this passage as a “flexible potter” who will rework the spoiled clay. Second, Boyd urges believers to take as literal the phrases that speak of God changing his mind. Boyd, as his third point, rejects that this phrase be considered anthropomorphic: “There is simply no reason to interpret language about changeable aspects of God less literally than language about unchangeable aspects of God.”²⁷

Other Scriptural Examples of Reversed Divine Intentions

In addition to Jeremiah 18, Boyd lists several other passages that speak of the divine mind-change: Exodus 32:14; 33:1-3, 14; Deuteronomy 9:13-29; 1 Samuel 2:27-31, 1 Kings 21:21-29; 2 Chronicles 12:5-8; Jeremiah 26:2-3; Ezekiel 4:9-15; Amos 7:1-6; Jonah 3:10

Boyd concludes his hermeneutical excursion with the following observation:

Because of this philosophical presupposition [God must be unchanging in every respect], God is not allowed to say what he wants to say in Scripture. Suppose for the sake of argument, that God wanted to tell us he really *does* change his mind. How could he do so in terms clearer than he did in passages such as Jeremiah 18:8 and 10 in which he explicitly tells us, “I will change my mind”? Or suppose, for the sake of argument, that God wanted to tell us he really *does* regret certain decisions he’s made and really does experience unexpected disappointment. How could he do so in terms clearer than he did

in passages such as I Samuel 15:11 in which he explicitly tells us, “I regret that I made Saul king,” or Jeremiah 3:7 in which he tells us, “I thought...’she will return to me’; but she did not return”? It’s difficult to conceive of how God could be more explicit.²⁸

The Relationship of philosophy to hermeneutics

Perhaps it is important, at this juncture, to make an observation on the relationship of philosophy to the process of biblical interpretation. The role of philosophy is obviously crucial to the hermeneutical task and in particular our discussion regarding the openness of God. It is essential to understand that there really is no “raw data” of Scripture from which a theologian can, in an unbiased manner, simply pluck facts and then assemble them into a framework that Scripture provides. The idea that we can do the job of hermeneutics without reference to a philosophical framework is a sort of “hermeneutical empiricism.” It seems to imply a sort of hermeneutical *tabula rasa* (blank tablet) on the part of the interpreter.

The point is that the way in which we deal with the “evidence” of Scripture is, itself, conditioned by a philosophical framework; and the way in which we use the data to then continue to refine or reinforce that framework is, in itself, a philosophical viewpoint among which there are many competitors. To say that we can simply take the raw data of Scripture and allow it to construct our philosophies and theologies is itself loaded with philosophical assumptions. These include assumptions about the philosophy of language, epistemology and even metaphysics. To the biblical empiricist this fact is a paralyzing irony.

The importance of philosophy to hermeneutics becomes glaringly obvious in the discussion of Open Theism. It is simply not possible for either side to simply state that their view is “biblical,” or to point to a series of passages and claim that those passages “prove” a certain theological perspective. If a particular philosophical bias for or against the openness of God is present (which it is, to some degree, for all interpreters), then the Scriptures will seem to clearly teach that particular bias – or not teach it as the case may be. Regardless of what position one holds in the debate, philosophy is indispensable. All hermeneutical and theological endeavors, of necessity, utilize philosophical presuppositions and perspectives both in the interpretation of the Scriptures and in the formulation of theology and doctrine. Rather than attempt to approach the Scriptures with a *tabula rasa*, it seems more genuine and effective to embrace the fact that in doing theology and hermeneutics we are inevitably doing the work of philosophy. This is not less spiritual; rather, it seems to be more in line with the way God designed the human thought process.

It is important to note that we are not saying that the process of interpretation and doctrine is merely at the mercy of presuppositions, philosophical or otherwise. This would make the process meaningless and arbitrary. It is the goal of interpretation to allow the biblical text to mold and shape our framework of thought. It is imperative that Scripture expand our horizons, to use the phrase of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In this sense the process of interpretation becomes all the more crucial.

The Open Theism debate, then, is greater than a simple method of proof texting. Rather, there are many philosophical dynamics at work; as is the case in all theological and hermeneutical debates. Our philosophies and framework for thought shapes our interpretation, and in turn our interpretations shape our philosophy. This is part of the hermeneutical task. We are creatures working within a limited perspective, and we must acknowledge the realities of our position: The discussion of philosophical perspectives goes hand in hand with our interpretation. In light of this, we now turn our attention to the philosophical foundations of Open Theism.

Philosophical Foundations and Existential Relevance

Philosophical Foundations of Classical Theism

It seems that for some evangelical and conservative Christians, there is a naïve tendency to believe that traditional theology has been developed in a philosophically unbiased manner. That is, there is the thought that, while other theological systems may lean heavily on philosophical notions and conceptions, the classical doctrines, alone, are the only “biblical view;” and are not based upon any preconceived assumptions. It is thought that the biblical data can be extracted and formulated without a need to give a theological nod to philosophical constructs.

But as it was stated above, this notion is misguided—for the very simple reason that each worldview or religious system has philosophical presuppositions that under gird and secure it. And in this regard, Open Theism is no exception. However, the Open Theist would turn the charge on conservative scholarship to question the roots of the traditional understandings of God.

The specific issue that Open Theists raise is whether or not the classical views of the concept of “perfection” are adequate. Why is it that perfection is defined in terms of impassibility, immutability, timelessness, etc.? Is change a sign of imperfection? And why is not flexibility and openness not considered of greater value than the inability to react and respond? The answer, says the Open Theist, can be found by retracing the roots of these definitions back thousands of years to the influence of Greek philosophy upon the definition of the terms used to define the doctrines of God’s perfection. Says Pinnock,

Greek thinkers offered the early Christian theologians a worldview in which the divine could be seen as the unifying principle. This was no small gift, though it exacted a considerable price. It set up a tension between Greek and biblical ideals of perfection, requiring theologians to reconcile the incomparable God of the Bible, ever responding to changing circumstance and passionately involved in history, with something like the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, a God completely sufficient unto himself. The exact relation between ancient Greek philosophy and conventional theism is certainly complex, but one does not have to be an expert to sense the significant struggle to align these two orientations.²⁹

Pinnock also points out that theological *definitions* that classical theologians often take for granted have been affected by this influence.

It is tempting to think of God abstractly as a perfect being and then smuggle in assumptions of what ‘perfect’ entails. Does a perfect being suffer or not? Is a perfect being timeless or not? We may ascribe to God attributes of greatness as we conceive them and miss what God is actually telling us in his word.

To a degree, we have allowed the doctrine of God to be accommodated to aspects of the ancient philosophical horizon that has introduced nuances, which do not serve the biblical witness, into the definitions of God’s attributes.³⁰

John Sanders echoes these points, also noting that the church fathers did not “sell out” to Greek philosophy. Sanders makes the observation, in agreement with Pinnock, that the Greek philosophical influence was not such a horrible thing:

Despite different attitudes taken by the church fathers toward philosophy, the influence of Greek philosophical notions of God is pervasive, even among those who “repudiate” philosophy. The fathers had several noble reasons for making use of Greek thought. As they sought to overthrow the gods of paganism, they found in philosophy some helpful critiques of the polytheistic gods. Moreover, they desired to show that the God of biblical history was the universal God rather than a tribal deity, that this God was compatible with the best thinking of their day and that the Christian God was the fulfillment of the God sought by the philosophers...In seeking to accomplish these objectives, the early fathers did not sell out to Hellenism, but they did, on certain key points, use it to both defend and explain the Christian concept of God to their contemporaries.³¹

One reason why such “philosophizing” of Christian doctrine is not a bad thing is because theologians are, of necessity, philosophers. In fact, all of us, regardless of whether we acknowledge the fact, are forming our worldview based upon certain philosophical foundations. For better or worse, this is a fact of human existence and thought. Simply because we are “biblical” in our presuppositions does not mean that we philosophize any less. As a result, it is certainly legitimate to examine, analyze, and criticize the traditional definitions of perfection as they apply to God. Likewise, it is also appropriate to analyze some of the philosophical foundations of the openness theologians. And this is the next task.

The philosophy of human free will

The first philosophical foundation to consider regards the status of human beings, specifically, the issue of free will. One of the most foundational aspects of Open Theism is its belief in the libertarian free will of human beings. Most theologians hold to some form of free will, but libertarians hold to specific conditions that they believe make free will legitimate. First, libertarians believe in incompatibilism. Incompatibilism, as the name implies, is the belief that free will is incompatible with determinism.

What is determinism?

“We can define determinism as the view that for every event that happens, there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could have happened. For every event that happens, its happening was caused or necessitated by prior factors such that given these prior factors, the event in question had to occur.”³² Standing against this view is the libertarian assertion that it is the person himself who initiates and is the ultimate cause of an action, rather than the person being the result of a chain of causal conditions. “For libertarians, the real issue is not whether we are free to do what we want, but whether we are free to want in the first place. In other words, a free act is one in which the agent is ultimately the originating source of the act itself. Freedom requires that we have the categorical ability to act, or at least, to will to act.”³³

The libertarian interpretation of free will also holds that to be free a person must be able to act or refrain from acting. “Many libertarians claim that the libertarian notion of categorical ability is that of a dual ability (or control): If one has the ability to exert his power to do (or will to do) *A*, one also has the ability to refrain from exerting his power to do (or will to do) *A*.”³⁴ In other words, if a person is faced with a choice to eat an Oreo cookie or not, then that choice is free only if the person has the ability to eat the cookie or to refrain from eating.

By way of summary then, determinism hold that all events are determined as part of a causal chain of events and influences. Libertarianism, in contrast, holds that the individual is the ultimate originator of his actions. Even though there may be many forces acting upon a person (desires, psychological and social conditioning, addictions, etc.), libertarians believe that human beings are actually free and hence retain the ability to actually choose one thing or the other.

A sort of middle ground to this discussion is the compatibilist. Compatibilists are sometimes referred to as “Soft Determinists” because they believe that events and choices are determined. However, as the name suggests, they believe that free will is still *compatible* with determinism. The version of free will that they hold is simply a weaker version of free will than the libertarian. In a very general sense, a compatibilist believes that all that is necessary for a choice to be free is that it is the product of the person’s desires. So, if Sam wants to go to the movies on Saturday night – and chooses to do so - then his going to the movies is a free will action simply because it is the consequence of his desire to go. Sam’s choice to go to the movies may have been predestined or determined months, years or even centuries beforehand – yet for the compatibilist his decision was still free.

This, of course, does not fly for the Libertarian. For the Libertarian a choice is *either* determined *or* it is free; there is no middle ground. To say that a choice is both determined (predestined) and at the same time free is a contradiction and an incoherent notion. This “either-or” position is crucial to understanding the libertarian notion of freedom.

The above sketch of libertarian free will, determinism and compatibilism is true only in a general sense. As with any philosophical position, there is debate within the respective viewpoints as to the details of each position. Therefore, not all open theists would hold to absolutely all aspects of the definition of libertarian free will outlined above. But this provides a general sense of one of the major philosophical underpinnings of Open Theism; and *libertarian free will is foundational to openness theology*. It is, indeed, difficult to overstate the significance that this philosophical construct has upon the theological system as a whole. In reviewing the hermeneutic of the Open Theist, it is very obvious that what is at work is an “either-or” position on freedom. That is, *either* God is determining these events and choices, *or* they are free acts over which God has no control. There is no middle ground in the discussion and no compatibilist-type position is available in the view of the major advocates of Open Theism.

Open Theism Arguments for LFW

It is appropriate, at this point, to examine some of the reasons that Open Theists, themselves, provide for holding to a libertarian view of human freedom. In *The God Who Risks*, Sanders objects to the compatibilist account of free will:

...if compatibilism is true, then God can guarantee everything that happens by determining what the remote cause will be. At this point the charge is usually made that this would make God the author of sin...Scripture speaks of God’s grieving over sin, changing his mind, responding to what humans do and entering into genuine dialogue and reciprocal relations. If compatibilism is true, then such language is nullified. It makes no sense to speak of God’s grieving over sin if God so controls things that he determines what the human desires shall be.³⁵

Sanders continues in defending the libertarian account of free will:

If the language of Scripture is taken seriously, then another view of human freedom must be affirmed. The libertarian or incompatibilist view holds that “an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.”³⁶

Sanders then outlines three rather typical defenses of the libertarian concept of free will: “Various arguments are put forward in support of this view of freedom. The most common line of reasoning claims that libertarian freedom must be assumed if (1) we are to have genuine loving relationships, (2) our thought is to be rational or (3) we are to be held morally responsible for good and evil in a way that really makes a difference.”³⁷

Sanders then continues by adding his own perspective of the argument:

In addition to these arguments I would add two more. First, if God did not intend sin but has always stood in fundamental opposition to it, then something like libertarian freedom must be affirmed. According to compatibilism God could have changed Adam’s desire so that he never wanted to sin and so that he never would have sinned. But God did not do this, so God must have wanted him to sin. The libertarian, on the other hand, can maintain that God did not want Adam to sin but would not control his decision due to his

faithfulness to the rules of the game God sovereignly established. Second, libertarian freedom must be presupposed in order to make sense of God's grieving over sin and entering into genuine dialogue with us. If we can truly affect the divine life, then we must be capable of doing other than what God specifically intends. Moreover, if humans have libertarian freedom, then it makes sense for the apostle James to say that we do not have because we do not ask in prayer (Jas 4:2). For these reasons, I affirm libertarian freedom.³⁸

Clark Pinnock also echoes these arguments:

According to the Bible, it was not only possible for God to create a world with significantly free finite agents. God actually did exactly that. This is apparent from two central biblical assertions about human beings: (1) they are historical agents who can respond to God in love; and (2) they are sinners who have deliberately rejected God's plan for them. Neither assertion would make sense unless we posit the gift of freedom in the strong sense.

...Certainly our rebellion is proof that our actions are not determined but significantly free....The idea of moral responsibility requires us to believe that actions are not determined either internally or externally.

...It makes no sense to say that we act freely if we are in fact doing what God from eternity predestined us to do. Both reason and the Bible find no sense in that proposition.

An important implication of this strong definition of freedom is that reality is to an extent open and not closed. It means that genuine novelty can appear in history which cannot be predicted even by God. If the creature has been given the ability to decide how some things will turn out, then it cannot be known infallibly ahead of time how they will turn out. It implies that the future is really open and not available to exhaustive foreknowledge even on the part of God. It is plain that the biblical doctrine of creaturely freedom requires us to reconsider the conventional view of the omniscience of God.³⁹

In sum, then, it is clear that the Open Theist sees a distinct contradiction in stating that human choices can be both free and determined. These theologians see a definite "either-or" conception at work: Either man is determined, or he is free. Never the twain shall meet. And, because the Open Theist sees man as first and foremost a free being, he cannot accept the assertion that man is also a determined being.

The last point made above by Pinnock ("*reality is to an extent open and not closed*") moves us from the concept of free will to the greater discussion of the nature of reality. Is the future open and therefore, by definition, unknowable to God? And, is God actually present and existing within time or does he, in some way, transcend time?

An open universe

Of equal importance to the Open Theist, on par with the concept of libertarian freedom, is the view of reality that the future is open and that God is a participator in the unfolding history of the universe. This is the view that God is not "eternal" in the traditional sense

of being timeless, but rather that God is “everlasting” – that his days will never end. God is temporal and is a part of the process of time.

In the book *God & Time* (a representation of various views of the nature of time and God’s relationship to the spacio-temporal universe), Nicholas Wolterstorff defends the view that God is temporal.⁴⁰ Wolterstorff begins by pointing out that God is revealed to us in narrative form. That is, Scripture presents to us a view of God as being within history, whose words and actions take place within the temporal world. As a result, Wolterstorff’s first move is to say that since Scripture presents God as operating within time, the burden of proof remains on those who would say that God is a temporal. And this is a key point: “Whether or not we should take Scripture as literally true in its representation of God as having a narratable history depends, I said, on whether we have good reasons for not so taking it; the burden of proof, for Christians lies on those who think it should not be so taken.”⁴¹

From a biblical standpoint, then, the Open Theist points to the narrative text and sees this as reality depicting: God is temporal. Philosophically speaking, the discussion must begin by understanding that there are, essentially, two different theories of time: A-Series and B-Series. The second theory of time, the B-Series, is the theory of time most familiar to most conservative evangelicals. The B-Series philosopher views all of time as laid out upon a linear sequence and all events as existing, as it were, simultaneously. God can then stand aloof, from a God’s-eye-view, and see all of the events of time spread out before him. This is also known as the “static” view of time because the events of history, in a sense, exist all at once and can be viewed by God who is a temporal and transcends space and time.

In contrast to this is the A-Series of time. On this view, there is no such thing as a linear expanse of time whereby God can sit back and view all of history, from beginning to end. Rather, each event takes place – each moment transpires – and following the occurrence of the event, the event is gone. This is also known as the “dynamic” view of time because events do not simply *hang in time*; events occur and then are non-existent. On this view, there is no God’s-eye-view from which a person can see one event, say the crucifixion of Christ in A.D. 33, and simultaneously view the Smith’s Thanksgiving dinner on November 25, 2004. The crucifixion happened and then was completed. Similarly, the Smith’s Thanksgiving dinner has not yet occurred and cannot, therefore, be seen until the event actually transpires. And, as in the case of the crucifixion, once the event has occurred, it is completed and does not hang in time.

We can also view the B-Series/A-Series positions in terms of points of time. According to the B-Series, there are many points of time that are laid out on a static line and are observable to God. On the A-Series of time, each point occurs and is final.

Another example is to think of time in term of television viewing. The B-Series view of time is similar to browsing through a newspaper or television magazine and seeing all of the show of a particular day laid spread out across the page. If I view such a layout, I can see all the shows that will air on CBS over the course of the entire day. I can see that the

local news will occur at 6:30 p.m. and that the Evening News with Dan Rather will immediately follow at 7:00 p.m. I have, in a sense, a bird's-eye-view of the programs that occur. This is how time is viewed from a B-Series perspective. All events are spread out along a line whereby each can be viewed; events literally hang in time.

Contra this position is that time is more like we are actually watching CBS throughout the day. We see each *moment* of a program and when that moment is completed, then it is finished and we are now viewing the next moment. Hence, we can watch our local newscaster close the program, followed by a series of commercials, followed by Dan Rather introducing the network news for the evening, followed by a recap of the major events, etc., etc. The point is that once the moment of the close of the local news is completed, we cannot view it again as we could on the B-Series view. The moment is gone and does not hang in space for God to view.

Once these views are understood, the implications as they apply to God become obvious. According to the B-Series of time, God is a temporal; that is, he is transcendent of space and time. If the A-Series theorist is correct, then God must be a participator within time if he is to touch time at all. That is, God must be present at and within each moment as it occurs.⁴²

The philosophical arguments for and against the A-Series and B-Series of time are multiple and complex and somewhat beyond the scope of an introductory paper on Open Theism. The argument for the theologian, however, involves more than philosophical speculation, though such speculation is a necessary and indispensable aspect of this discussion. Returning to Wolterstorff again, "When it comes to nonevents I propose that we take whether or not something has a history as the determinant of whether or not it is in time."⁴³ Wolterstorff then reviews the earlier point that the biblical material presents a God of history, a God active and involved in the unfolding of events. The Scriptures bring to us a God who experiences a succession of moments across an unfolding narrative of history. And, hence, the conclusion is that God is, in some sense, temporal. God's revelation is in the narrative and, as such, the burden of proof on this issue remains on those who would view God as a temporal and reality as static.

Regardless of whether one agrees with Wolterstorff and Open Theists on the nature of reality and God's relationship to it, Wolterstorff's final point in his article is enlightening to all: "What one says about God's relation to time involves a very great deal of the rest of one's theology."⁴⁴ In fact, many Open Theists will claim that the argument about the openness of God is really less an argument about the nature of God as it is an argument about the nature of reality. They would argue that if one views reality from the perspective of libertarian free will and an open future, then God is not less omniscient because he does not have exhaustive foreknowledge. According to the Open Theist, *God cannot exhaustively know the future because the future is partially open*. Further, if events transpire in an A-Series view of time, then God will necessarily be temporal in order to have genuine interaction with temporal human beings.

John Sanders comments, "...there is considerable debate regarding the nature of 'reality' (specifically, whether the future is real) and whether there may be propositions that God knows at one time but not another. That is, Christian philosophers disagree about the nature of omniscience, not about whether or not God is omniscient."⁴⁵

Relationship of philosophy to theology

Having reviewed the above philosophical underpinnings of the Open Theist, an evangelical of today might be tempted to dismiss the openness theology on grounds that it is philosophically driven rather than "biblical." Theology must be based upon the Bible, so the argument goes, not upon philosophical theories or presuppositions. Philosophy is subordinate to the biblical text and good theology is theology that is "grounded in the Word." But it seems clear that this kind of reaction is misguided and represents a fundamental misunderstanding of both the theological and hermeneutical task.

The argument that "theology must be Biblical, not philosophical" carries with it several assumptions. The most fundamental assumption is that the task of Biblical interpretation can be accomplished without philosophical considerations. As was discussed above, this "Hermeneutical Empiricism" is a somewhat fallacious concept. We must bring a preconceived philosophical framework to our interpretation and to our theological formations. There is simply no other way to form beliefs other than on the basis of philosophical presuppositions already in place.

It is for this reason that it seems most effective to embrace the philosophical pursuit as an indispensable aspect of doing theology. For example, when a theologian recognizes that he has a particular view of human free will, then he can more objectively evaluate how this preconception influences his theology and to what extent the biblical motifs fall in line with these conceptions or seem to negate them. Further, if a theologian views time from a B-Series perspective, then it will be less imperative to view God as temporal and, argues the Open Theist, a person may be more likely to view God as detached and personally aloof.

Regardless of one's theological viewpoint, there are philosophical presuppositions that are informing this perspective. It is important to take note of these and understand which presuppositions one wishes to hold with a tight fist and which philosophical conceptions have been formed as a result of tradition and not as the result of serious contemplation and biblical information. And so it seems that embracing philosophy, rather than viewing it suspiciously, is a great asset to the theologian. Philosophical perspectives exist on all sides of the issues we are discussing.

Existential Arguments and the Problem of Evil

We now turn to what is, perhaps, the most compelling argument of all, and that is the existential argument. For most Christians it is deeply troubling to begin to consider the possibility that the evil in the world might be a part of God's plan. To ponder that the

most horrific acts done by the most depraved individuals might actually be God's will is, in some ways, simply repulsive. In fact, the idea that God might be behind all of the horror we see and experience may be more terrible than the horror itself. And this is, of course, the traditional problem of evil that Christian philosophers, clergy and even the youngest of believers have been wrestling with for ages. There is a deep existential struggle between what a believer *knows* about God and how he *feels* about God's will for the world. Pinnock summarizes this tension:

If God's sovereignty extended to all things it would extend to evil too and even sin. Despite efforts to blame creaturely agents for their part in it, God's power is so decisive that it is difficult to think of God as good. It casts a shadow over God's character. It makes God inscrutable because he simply does what he pleases and we have to submit.⁴⁶

The answer, according to Open Theists, is to abandon the traditional views of God that result in such existential struggles. It should be no surprise, having erred in our view of God, that we would arrive at a point where we feel a deep rift between our theology and our emotions. So, rather than viewing the world as a preordained plan in which everything works according to the foreordained will of God, the Open Theist tends to view the world as a battleground in which God, together with mankind, is deeply involved in the struggle to rid the universe of evil. Pinnock continues:

In fact, God does not control the world completely. God works alongside and even against creaturely agents who have a degree of influence. There is no all-determinative power that steers everything. We are caught up in a real warfare and should not be surprised by evil. Evil was not a problem in the New Testament; it was an enemy that they expected to overcome by the power of God. They did not try to explain evil based on the false problematic of exhaustive sovereignty, they set about defeating it.⁴⁷

While God may just simply snap his fingers and rid the world of evil, in the view of Open Theists, this would necessarily eliminate the free will of humankind. God chose to grant the freedom of the will and, having granted it, allowed for the possibility of all kinds of atrocities.

Real Relationships

Along with the problem of evil comes the question of the genuine nature of relationships. Can God be said to have a *real* relationship with human beings if people are not free to either accept or reject this relationship? How could the love that a person has for God be genuine if God preordained that love?

Further, for a relationship to be genuine, it is normative that both parties undergo change as a result of that relationship. Terrence Fretheim points out this fact by stating, "To be affected and to interact genuinely does not mean some imperfection in God. In fact, it should be said that not to be able genuinely to respond or interact, not to be open and vulnerable, or refusing to change are in fact signs of imperfection."⁴⁸

This follows the general line of thought that for God to touch his creation he, himself, cannot remain untouched. For God to reach down and relate with finite creatures, in a meaningful way, God will, in some sense, change as well. Fretheim does qualify this idea by making it clear that God does not change *in the same way that humanity changes*. “In all of this, it is important to say that God changes *as God*, not as the creatures.”⁴⁹

The essential thrust of this point, then, is that for a relationship to be real, man must be free to either accept or reject God and that God has not, therefore, preordained who will love him and respond to the gift of salvation. God, in response to the loving relationship with mankind, will in some way experience a change.

Living and Praying to Affect the Future

Theology should not simply be a theoretical enterprise with little or no effect upon living. Rather, theology that is genuinely believed will have a very practical effect. In commenting upon this aspect of Open Theism Clark Pinnock comments, “Ideas have consequences and beliefs affect behavior. It is important, therefore, that doctrines are credible in practical terms as well as biblically and rationally sound. They ought to have the ring of truth and make a difference to life.”⁵⁰

With this in mind the Open Theist argues that his viewpoint provides a more practical guide to living. People live as though the future were, indeed, open and as though God does respond to humanity and that our actions do in fact affect the future. “One of the strengths of the open view is that people see the way it makes sense of their lives and are drawn to it. It is hard to refute on the existential level.”⁵¹

Hence, the argument is that the theology of Open Theism is more *consistent* with the way we as human beings live our lives. In fact, the charge is turned on the traditional theist that, in fact, they must live a life *inconsistent* with their theology. “In fact, it is difficult to live on any other basis...One is forced to live as if it [Open Theism] were true, even if one thinks it is not. If our lives make no impact on God and if what you decide makes no difference to the blueprint of history, why go on?” Pinnock describes the traditional theologies as suffering from “*the condition of existential self-contradiction*” (italics mine). “It can make prayer meaningless and evangelism unnecessary and undermine one’s will to live and act.”⁵²

Now, while some of these statements may be rather extreme (i.e. many Classical theists do not seem to suffer from a lack of will to live and act!), the point that remains is whether or not classical theists have to *live* in a way that is inconsistent with their *theology*. It is as though *theology* is confirming one thing (our future is settled and preordained, God does not change and is not affected by humanity) while *life* (we pray to change the future and seek to affect God and the world with our lives) seems to confirm another thing. This seems to be what Pinnock is driving at when he comments upon the condition of existential self-contradiction. How can the traditional theist believe one thing but live a life inconsistent with that belief?

Pinnock goes on to explain how this relates to the doctrine of predestination:

Suppose, in particular, that God decided from eternity to save a certain number of people unconditionally and will not fail to do so whatever they do or do not do. It would be better to live as if this were not true, not only because it would make God a respecter of persons, deliberately giving to one the mercy he withholds from another, but because it subverts any motive for seeking God since the outcomes are settled, and undermines any mission to preach the gospel to every creature. If one must believe in such a doctrine, it would be advisable not to give it much thought for practical purposes. It would be better to operate on the basis of God's love for all humanity as constant and sincere, which, thankfully, most conventional theists do not.⁵³

Pinnock goes on to comment on the doctrine of immutability:

Suppose that God, as Thomas Aquinas taught, is unchangeable as a stone pillar and cannot entertain real relationships in his essential nature. Suppose that in God there are no real relations to creatures – that they may move in relation to God but God cannot move in relation to them. Since the Christian life is at the heart a personal relationship with God, it would be best to live as if this view of immutability were not the case, as I am sure Aquinas himself must have done in his life.⁵⁴

Pinnock responds to the doctrine of impassibility in a similar vein:

Suppose that God were impassible and could not be affected by what transpires in the world, as conventional theism has always said. Does this mean that God is not wounded by injustices, as Calvin said, and cannot feel our pain, as Anselm said? Is it true then that God does not grieve when we grieve and that God surveys with uninterrupted bliss what transpires in this vale of tears? This is existentially intolerable. Clearly, whatever your doctrine, it would be better to live as if impassibility were not true. Only a suffering God can help.⁵⁵

Pinnock comments on the existential impact of exhaustive foreknowledge:

Suppose that God knows the future exhaustively and that things that will happen in the future are already as settled as things that have already happened. This would mean that nothing that God might decide to do and nothing that we might decide to do could change the fact that everything is now known and decided. Surely it would be wise to ignore that belief and act as if it were not true. Practically speaking, it is wiser to think of the future as a realm of possibilities not actualities because if what will happen in detail is not a foregone conclusion, we will be more likely to take responsibility for the future and not be resigned ourselves. Whatever your doctrine, it is surely better to live as if God did not know the future exhaustively.⁵⁶

Pinnock and other Open Theists argue that their views provide a more consistent bridge between theology and real life, and that it is incorrect to put forth doctrines that force the Christian to live with an inconsistency between theology and practice. Can we live consistently with our theology if, in fact, our theology states that all things are settled even before we come to God in prayer?

Conclusion

Open Theists represent the belief that the Scriptures present a future that is open and genuinely affected by the free will choices of human beings. God, in turn, as an active participant in the unfolding narrative of history, acts and reacts to humanity and is subject to experiencing change.

As we have shown, the questions raised by Open Theists expose many philosophical presuppositions that are foundational to the theological discussion. It is difficult to find a *neutral* biblical playing field at which these opposing viewpoints can compete and discuss ideas. Rather, even the hermeneutical “data gathering” is affected by philosophical concerns. Hence, it has been a focus of this paper to present the interrelated nature of hermeneutics, philosophy, and theology.

Open Theism presents a world in which the actions and choices of human beings are free and undetermined. If God were to determine, in advance, the events and choices of humanity, then mankind would cease to be free and many of the core doctrines of Scripture, it is believed, would be compromised. In addition, to claim that the events of this world and the actions of human beings are predetermined would make much of the biblical narrative unintelligible. The Open Theists believe the Scriptures present a clear motif of openness, which has not been, to this point, properly addressed and emphasized by the traditional theological camps.

Open Theists also assert that an existential struggle has developed in the lives of believers who, on the one hand, believe that God hates evil, but on the other see that God has preordained all the pain and wickedness in this world. This is as a result of a failure to correctly understand the nature of reality and the motif of openness in the Scriptures. This, claims the Open Theists, is simply wrong and is inconsistent with how Christians actually live their lives. An open view of God and reality will prove a much more livable theology as much of what we do as creatures is done to actually affect the person of God and the future unfolding narratives of our lives. Open Theism, it is claimed, is simply more livable.

Notes

- ¹ Calvin *Institutes* 1.13.1.
- ² John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1998) pp. 19, 22-23.
- ³ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Baker Academic, 2001) p. 63.
- ⁴ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 23.
- ⁵ *Ibid* p. 23.
- ⁶ Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia, Penn: Fortress Press, 1984) p. 11.
- ⁷ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, by Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InnerVarsity Press, 1994) p. 15.
- ⁸ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 25.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p. 60.
- ¹⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p.21. Also see Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, p. 6.
- ¹¹ Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame: Moving beyond pat answers to the problem of evil* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2003) pp. 129-130.
- ¹² Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 38.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 32-33.
- ¹⁴ Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: An Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000) p. 53-87.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 55.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 57.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 59.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 59-60.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 60-61.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 62-63.
- ²² *Ibid*, p. 64.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 66.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 67.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 69.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 75-76.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 77.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 86-87.
- ²⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, pp. 65-66.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 67, 73.
- ³¹ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 141.
- ³² J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 268.
- ³³ *Ibid*, p. 271.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 272.
- ³⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 221.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 221 Here Sanders is citing William Hasker “Philosophical Perspective” in *The Openness of God* pp. 136-37

³⁷ Ibid, p. 221.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 221-222.

³⁹ Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge" in D. Basinger and R. Basinger (eds.), *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), pp. 147-150.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality" in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001) pp. 187-213.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 193.

⁴² Not all A-Series Theorists hold that God could not have foreknowledge, however. According to some who hold to the A view, such as William Lane Craig, God can foreknow all the events of mankind, not because he actually sees them spread out in a linear fashion via the B-Series view. Rather, God has foreknowledge because he "sees" the events in his mind. Also, Craig and others like Alan Padgett (See *God and Time*) believe that even though God is temporal and present within an A-Series of time, they also seek to preserve some sense in which God is transcendent. This is an ambitious and often rather abstract project, but shows the desire of Craig and others to preserve the transcendence of God.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 203.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 213.

⁴⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 194.

⁴⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 177.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 177.

⁴⁸ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God – A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10 no. 1, 1988, p. 63.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 63.

⁵⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 153.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 154.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 154-55.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 156.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 156-57.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 157.