

1994-2004, an Overview of the Debate on Open Theism in Evangelicalism

Let me provide a brief overview of the history of the debate within evangelicalism. For many years the core ideas of openness had been buried in academic journals and I thought it was time to bring them to the attention of a broader public so I organized a team and we published *The Openness of God*. That the book had immediate impact is indicated by the fact that it placed eighth in the *Christianity Today* book of the year awards and that in January of 1995, *Christianity Today* reviewed the book with not just one but four reviewers.¹ The lead review asked some good questions and was generally favorable but the other three absolutely trashed the book. In a February 1998 article in *Christianity Today*, Tom Oden wrote: “The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected. . . .”² John Piper, a prominent pastor in the Baptist General Conference, used Oden’s heresy comment to argue that Greg Boyd, a professor of theology at Bethel College in Saint Paul and pastor in the BGC, should be fired from the college and his pastoral credentials revoked. A great deal of time and energy was spent in this attempt. A board of inquiry was formed that ultimately found Boyd within the boundaries of BGC doctrine. At the 1999 and 2000 annual meetings of the BGC resolutions were introduced to remove Boyd but they failed.

The Calvinist critics of openness had some success in the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1999 they introduced a resolution on divine foreknowledge that the delegates approved to include as a revision to the *Baptist Faith and Standard*. In 2000 the SBC approved the following: God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. However, these changes were not ratified by a number of state conventions, most notably the Texas convention, which is the largest. After the 1999 resolution in the SBC a February 7, 2000 editorial in *Christianity Today* titled “God vs. God” exhorted the critics of open theism to continue to debate rather than seek political means to squelch it. Evangelical critics of open theism were outraged at the editorial, questioning whether *Christianity Today* could be trusted any longer.

When the evangelical publishers, Baker and InterVarsity Presses, decided to publish more books by open theists, accusations were made that such presses could no longer be trusted to produce only works fit for evangelical consumption. One high-profile critic, who has several books published with Baker, threatened to withdraw all his books if Baker went ahead with its plans to publish a book by an open theist. They published the book. This provoked the neo-fundamentalist magazine, *World*, to publish a scathing attack on open theism and Baker Books. Virulent and inaccurate critiques of openness appeared in the September 1999 issue of *Modern Reformation* with the theme: “God in Our Image” and in the March 2001 issue of *Christianity Today* titled “God at Risk.”

However, in May and June of 2001 *Christianity Today* published a series of e-mail exchanges on openness between Chris Hall and me titled “Does God Know Your Next Move?” This finally allowed a proponent of openness to explain the position to a large

¹ Also, it is now in its twelfth printing indicating that it continues to have an impact.

² *Christianity Today*, (February 2, 1998): p. 46.

evangelical readership. The editors at the magazine must be given credit for allowing this theological debate to continue in the face of intense pressure to cut it off at the knees.

Other critiques of openness appeared in the winter 2002 edition of *Contact*, the news magazine of Gordon-Conwell Seminary and in the March 2003 issue of *Moody* magazine.

In 2001 some pastors in the denomination that owns Huntington College organized an attempt to have me removed from the college. Over a two year period I faced a board of inquiry and expended a tremendous amount of energy coping with the numerous political maneuvers of my opponents.

During this time opponents of openness worked to get open theists expelled from membership in the Evangelical Theological Society (a predominately Calvinistic, conservative evangelical, group that desires to speak for all evangelicalism). At the 2000 annual meeting the Executive Committee announced that the theme for the following year, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries" would include an examination of open theism. At the 2001 meeting over three dozen papers were read on openness. At an ad hoc business meeting the majority of the membership endorsed the following resolution: "We believe the Bible *clearly teaches* (emphasis mine) that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future, including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents." The June 2002 issue of the journal of the society was dedicated to a discussion of open theism.

At the 2002 meeting Roger Nicole, one of the founding members of the society, formally charged Clark Pinnock and me with violating the doctrinal statement of the society by our denial that God possessed exhaustive definite foreknowledge. He charged that this implied that we denied the truth of scripture. The members voted to have the Executive Committee hold a formal hearing, which was done in October of 2003. The Committee decided that Pinnock was not guilty of the charge but that I was. The reason centered on the truth value of statements about the future actions of free creatures. I said they are only probabilities, not certainties. For them, any biblical statement about the future must be true in the sense that it is a certain fact to occur. It seems to me that such a view presupposes the stasis theory of time which open theists reject. Pinnock was exonerated because when asked about his stand on this matter he replied that he did not know much about such philosophical intricacies. Shortly before the 2003 annual meeting the faculty of the Southern Baptist seminaries passed resolutions against open theism. At the November ETS meeting a lengthy special business meeting was held. The "heavy hitters" of the Southern Baptists showed up and spoke strongly against open theism. The vote of the membership was 67% to retain Pinnock while 63% voted to remove me. However, this fell short of the required two-thirds needed for expulsion. I think the vote represents the fact that Executive Committee voted for Pinnock and against me due to the philosophical issues. One way to read this vote is that 1/3 of the members voted to expel us no matter what the recommendation of the Executive Committee was, another third voted to keep us no matter what the recommendation of the Executive Committee was, and the final third were swing votes that went with the recommendation of the Executive Committee. Hence, the ETS is very split on the matter.

Clearly, open theism has become a hot topic within evangelicalism. I am aware of nineteen books from evangelical publishers alone, dozens of journal articles, and over seventy conference papers. That open theism has struck a raw nerve with neoevangelical Calvinists can be seen in the titles of the books against open theism: *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, *The Battle for God*, *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, *God's Lesser Glory: the Diminished God of Open Theism*, *No Other God*, and, from one of my former professors, *Creating God in the Image of Man*.

At the end of his 1995 review of *The Openness of God* in *Christianity Today*, Roger Olson asked whether American evangelicals have “come of age enough to avoid heresy charges and breast-beating jeremiads in response to a new doctrinal proposal that is so conscientiously based on biblical reflection rather than on rebellious accommodation to modern thought? This may be the test.” Ten years later, I wonder how Professor Olson would score the test.

Why is OT so threatening to some evangelicals?

1. Why have Calvinist evangelicals reacted so strongly? Why the brouhaha?
 - 1.1 Open theists have presented the most acute criticism of, and alternative to, meticulous providence (theological determinism) in quite some time. Open theism has raised some extremely important points about Classical theism such as the inability of the God of Classical theism to respond to what we do or be affected by our prayers. Open theists have exposed these drawbacks and the proponents of meticulous providence know that their model simply will not sell in, for instance, many evangelical circles. It is no surprise that virtually all of the railing accusations and virulent rhetoric have come from proponents of meticulous providence.
 - 1.2 The hermeneutical issues raised in the debate have undermined the sense of certainty that some evangelicals desire to obtain in handling scripture. This leads to a crisis of authority. Who is right? How do we settle what is correct? Who has the right to determine what is acceptable for evangelicals to believe? This is the issue of “control” over institutions and whose theological legacy will be continued. This is why, in my opinion, this theological discussion is so politicized.
 - 1.3 For some, it seems to undermine their confidence in divine providence.