

Is Open Theism Christian Theism?

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Introduction: Overview of the issues and summary of Open Theism.

Currently, in North American evangelicalism, there is a controversy regarding the nature of God and divine providence. The 1970's witnessed the beginning of a prolonged reassessment of certain traditional divine attributes by some prominent evangelical philosophers. They reformulated, or even rejected, attributes such as impassibility and timelessness. In the 1980's Clark Pinnock and a few evangelical theologians began to publicly criticize some of these same attributes of God. Since the publication of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* in 1994, the debate has increased in intensity. Some defenders of "evangelical orthodoxy" have sought to discredit this position through the use of caustic rhetoric, labeling the view "Socinianism," making charges of "heresy," accusations that we are "creating God in the image of man," and even a crusade in the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist General Conference to rewrite the doctrinal statement of the denominations in order to exclude this position.¹ Why this strong reaction? What is so dangerous and threatening about this view of the divine nature? A recent editorial in *Christianity Today* highlighted this controversy and requested that classical theists and open theists begin a constructive dialogue.

To explore these issues and engage in dialogue I will first summarize the nature of God according to the openness perspective. Following this, the accusations against the view

¹ See the reviews of the book in *Christianity Today*, (Jan. 9, 1995): 30-5; Robert Strimple, "What Does God Know?" in ed. John Armstrong, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Moody Press, 1996); Norman Geisler,

will be examined; particularly the charge that it is not “classical theism.” This will lead to a discussion clarifying the definition of classical theism, distinguishing it from other varieties of theism. It is hoped that this will provide a consistent nomenclature for the discussion surrounding the different versions of theism. Finally, I will conclude with a number of observations regarding the debate, most importantly, that Openness is Christian Theism. Hopefully, this paper will help clarify the terminology and the categories so that this debate can move forward in a constructive way.

A. The character and attributes of God according to Openness.

The Open view arises out of the longstanding stream of the tradition which affirms libertarian freedom, conditional election, that our prayers can affect God, and utilizes the freewill defense. Hence, it finds much agreement with the early fathers, Eastern Orthodoxy, the Arminian and Wesleyan traditions, as well as proponents of simple foreknowledge. The openness model is an attempt to provide a more biblically faithful, rationally coherent, and practically satisfying account of God and the divine-human relationship from within this tradition.

What is Openness theology? To begin, the *triune* God of love has, in *almighty* power, created all that is and is *sovereign* over all. In *freedom* God decided to create beings capable of experiencing the triune love. God loves us and desires for us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with the triune godhead as well as our fellow creatures. In creating us the divine intention was that we would come to experience the triune love and respond to it with love of our own and freely come to collaborate with God towards the achievement of God's goals. Second, God has, in *sovereign freedom*, decided to make some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions. God establishes a project and elicits our free collaboration in it. Hence, there is conditionality in God for God truly

Creating God in the Image of Man? (Bethany, 1997); *Modern Reformation* (Sept. 1999); and the Baptist General Conference website.

responds to what we do. God genuinely interacts and enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us. Third, the only *wise* God has chosen to exercise general rather than meticulous providence, allowing space for us to operate and for God to be creative and resourceful in working with us. God has sovereignly chosen not to control every detail that happens in our lives. Fourth, God has granted us the libertarian freedom necessary for a truly personal relationship of love to develop. Despite the fact that we have abused our freedom by turning away from the divine love, God remains *faithful* to his intentions for creation. Finally, the *omniscient* God knows all that is logically possible to know. God knows the past and present with exhaustive definite knowledge and knows the future as partly definite and partly indefinite. God's knowledge of the future contains knowledge of what God has decided to bring about unilaterally (that which is definite), knowledge of possibilities (that which is indefinite) and those events which are determined to occur (e. g. an asteroid hitting a planet).

God established a covenant with the creation, making a fundamental commitment to its well being and to seeing the project through to completion. The commitment to love his creatures and bring them into a reciprocal relationship of love is fundamental to God. Once sin enters the scene God does not jettison the covenant, but, instead, responds to this development with a strategy for redeeming the situation.² The flexibility of the divine strategies does not imply a change in the fundamental commitment, but it does mean that God reacts to contingencies, taking them into account in order to fulfill the goal of his project. God remains faithful to his original purpose even while adjusting plans to take into account the decisions of his free creatures. Moreover, God is endlessly resourceful and competent in working towards the fulfillment of his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God establishes general commitments and is free to decide some specific future actions that he will undertake. Hence, the future is partly open or indefinite and partly closed or definite. It is not the case that just anything may happen for God has acted in history to bring about events in order to

² Even supporters of simple foreknowledge have to say that God atemporally either planned ahead for this contingency or responded to it in this way once God in foreknowledge "saw," and thus "learned," sin would occur.

achieve his unchanging purpose. Graciously, however, God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the future into being.

Furthermore, God's plan is not a detailed script but a broad intention that allows for a variety of options regarding precisely how it may be reached. "The divine plan," says Jacques Maritain, "is not a scenario prepared in advance, in which free subjects would play parts and act as performers. We must purge our thought of any idea of a play written in advance."³ Some things are fixed while others are contingent. What God and people do in history matters. For example, if the Hebrew midwives had feared Pharaoh rather than God and killed all the baby boys it would be a different story than the one we have. Moses' refusal to return to Egypt prompted God to resort to plan B, allowing Aaron to do the public speaking instead of Moses; altering what God had in mind. What people do and whether they come to trust God makes a difference concerning what God does--God does not fake the story of human history.

It should be clear by now that Openness affirms general providence, not meticulous or specific sovereignty. God governs the world through general strategies that are designed for the overall good of the creatures, but God does not tightly control every decision or action. One implication of this is that God does not intend each and every instance of evil so there is gratuitous evil—evil which does not lead to a greater good. Hence, God is, for some things, a risk taker. But this risk taking is not for the sake of human freedom as though libertarian freedom was the highest intrinsic good.⁴ Instead, the risk is for the sake of love. God wants us to freely enter into a loving relationship with him in response to the divine love granted us. But since love cannot be forced, libertarian freedom is necessary as an instrumental good. Creating these sorts of conditions places great responsibility on human agents to care for one another and the creation. God has delegated certain responsibilities to us and holds us accountable in such matters as racism, evangelism, care for the poor, and stewardship of the land.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, tr. Lewis Galantiere and Gerald Phelan (New York: Random House, 1966), 116.

⁴ Here I am disagreeing with the emphasis some freewill theists place on libertarian freedom, or, at least the way they frame the issue.

All this talk of divine flexibility, adaptability, and risk taking should not be understood, however, to imply that the being of God changes. God remains unchanging in his essence, in his love, wisdom, faithful-freedom, and power, but God can and does change in his relationship towards us in regard to his thoughts, actions, and emotions. This may leave some of you wondering about God's aseity so let me address that. According to Openness, the triune God is self-sufficient and did not need to create in order to love for the trinity experiences and manifests the fullness of love.⁵ In loving freedom the triune God decides to create creatures with whom to share this *agape* love. The creation should be seen as the result of the sovereign openness of God towards others. A God who is antecedently relational and self-sufficient is free to create significant others and enter into genuine reciprocal relations with them. The triune God as both lover and beloved is free to take the gracious initiative in both creation and incarnation of opening the love of the godhead to others

In summary, the openness model highlights these attributes and actions of God: Triunity, free creator, loving, wise, faithfully free, almighty, glorious, holy and righteous, merciful and longsuffering savior who redeems us through the work of the incarnate Son, who is present and absent, responsive and interactive, planning and purposive, everlasting, and passible. In particular, Jesus is our model of God for he is the exact representation of the

⁵ This is counter to the view of process theology which maintains that a world must exist in order for God to be relational. See the critique of Gregory A. Boyd, [Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics](#) (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

divine nature and the one who has seen him knows what the Father is like (Heb 1:3; John 14:6).

B. What is so Repugnant about this Description of God?

One of the main objections has been that it is not “classical theism” or “traditional Christian theism.” The implication is that there has been only one view on these matters in the history of the church. Unfortunately, even I have helped to foster this error in my own writings speaking of “the traditional view.” However, what I meant by “traditional” was the view that affirms that God is impassible, immutable, pure act, who determines what occurs. Of course, any survey of Christian thought reveals that Christians have disagreed on these issues. Actually, there exist several traditional views. In order to clarify matters I will examine the nomenclature in order to see whether or not Openness is compatible with classical or any form of traditional theism.

C. What is Christianity Simpliciter or Historic Christianity?

First, we should inquire about Christianity per se. How should we define “Christianity Simpliciter.” Many have used the Apostles’ Creed as a helpful summary of historic Christianity. Or, we might articulate the Christian story as follows: God creates and provides for us creatures, works through Israel to bring about the redemption of the world from sin, becomes incarnate in Jesus and makes atonement for us via the cross and resurrection, the Holy Spirit works to draw us and all of our relationships into the divine life, and the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will culminate in the

eschaton bringing about a new heaven and earth.⁶ Proponents of Openness affirm both definitions and so align themselves with Christianity Simpliciter. These definitions are based on God's activity in salvation history rather than a philosophical analysis. Put bluntly, it is about the **Christian** God, not about a generic "theism" with which Judaism, Islam, and even some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism find agreement!

D. Varieties of Traditional Theism

Nevertheless, many critics of Openness draw heavily upon philosophical rather than distinctively Christian categories so I shall examine the debate from this angle as well. A taxonomy of theisms:

1. *Theism Simpliciter* (TS): God is a personal being, worthy of worship, self-existent, the free creator (ex nihilo) of all that is not God, separate from the world (and is immaterial), sustains the world, continually active in it, perfectly good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal. This definition is from H. P. Owen, a recognized authority on the topic, and it has become commonplace in the philosophical literature.⁷ One item I would add, however, is that God can unilaterally act in and even control earthly affairs should he so desire. There are two items I would like for you to note. (1) Theism Simpliciter is not to be equated with Christianity since there is nothing in the definition regarding the person and work of Jesus. This is a generic definition of

⁶ Note, however, that no particular understanding of divine providence is associated with this view. We have to get more specific before our definition of God shapes our understanding of providence.

⁷ See his article "Theism" in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and his *Concepts of Deity* 150; see also Swinburne *Coherence of Theism*, 1). *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Mautner (Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, 1996) p. 425 defines "theism" as Owen does.

“God” affirmed by most Christians, Jews, Muslims and some Hindus. (2) Although this definition rules out process theology, deism, finite godism, it does not provide us with any particular understanding of divine providence. We have to get more specific before our definition of God impacts our understanding of providence.

2 *Classical Theism* (CT) God is *a se*, simple, immaterial, immutable, impassible, timeless, necessary, personal, pure act, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good. Charles Hartshorne appears to have coined the term, “classical theism” to designate the view of God developed by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophers.⁸ Now we have enough specificity in our definition of the divine attributes to impact our understanding of providence.

2.1 God is timeless (no before or after for God, only an eternal present).

2.2 Immutable: God does not change in any respect including thoughts, will, or emotions. The divine plan is unchanging.

2.3 Impassible: God cannot be affected by creatures. God never responds or reacts to what we do. Our prayers never affect God, rather God uses our prayers to effect what he desires to bring about through our prayers. There are no reciprocal relations between God and creatures.⁹ God is closed to us.

2.4 Specific sovereignty: Only what God specifically ordains to occur, happens and everything which happens has been specifically ordained by God to happen.

(Proponents of this view typically affirm compatibilistic freedom for humans in

⁸ Hartshorne and Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, 1953 (see also Hartshorne’s article on panentheism in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* by Eliade, 1987).

⁹ This is one of the main reasons why Donald Bloesch rejects Classical Theism. He says it cannot be “the God of the Bible.” (*God The Almighty*, p. 14)

which you are free so long as you act on your desires, but your desires are determined.)

2.5 God has a meticulous blueprint for everything that happens in history.

2.6 The divine will cannot fail or be thwarted in any detail. God never takes risks. In soteriology this leads to the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace.

2.7 God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge (EDF) because God determines what the future will be, not because God timelessly previsions the future.

This view has been widely held by some of the most important thinkers in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many critics of the Openness of God claim that it is incompatible with Classical Theism and so cannot be Christian because they equate Christianity with Classical Theism. Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Seminary, claims that open theism rejects the very foundation of Christianity.¹⁰ What is the foundation of Christianity? Mohler, Geisler, and John Piper claim that the Christian faith is built on a particular view of God known as “Classical theism.” It is commonly asserted that “all” orthodox Christians have affirmed this view of God. There are three errors here, however. (1) Classical Theism cannot be equated with Christianity for there is nothing distinctively Christian about it (some Jews and Muslims affirm it as well). (2) As we have seen, Openness affirms Christianity Simpliciter which is far older, historically, than Classical Theism. Since Classical Theism developed in the centuries after Christ, it cannot be the foundation of Christianity. This is a very troubling move on the part of these esteemed evangelicals for they are supplanting Christ with philosophy. (3) Classical Theism is

¹⁰ Mohler, “The Eclipse of God at Century’s End: Evangelicals Attempt Theology Without Theism,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 10.

often depicted as “the” traditional view of God but it is not since there are other traditional views of God within each of these religions. I now turn to a major tradition that is incompatible with Classical Theism as well.

3. *Freewill Theism* (FT) also called *Relational Theism*. This longstanding traditional view affirms all of theism simpliciter: God is a personal being, worthy of worship, self-existent, the free creator (ex nihilo) of all that is not God, separate from the world (and is immaterial), sustains the world, continually active in it, perfectly good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal. Moreover, it even includes some of the attributes of classical theism. However, it modifies or even rejects several key attributes such as immutability, pure actuality, and impassibility. Freewill theists affirm that humans have libertarian freedom, that God can be affected by creatures, and that God enters into genuine give-and-take relations with us. It is called relational theism because God enters into genuinely reciprocal relations with us. Consequently, Freewill Theism cannot be equated with Classical Theism. This position has been held by many Jewish, Christian, Islamic and even some Hindu thinkers. It is at least as old, if not older, than Classical Theism.

Freewill theism divides into two subsets:

3.1 *Standard Freewill Theism* (SFT). As the name implies, it affirms all of Freewill Theism. It retains some of the terms of classical theism such as timelessness but it affirms libertarian freedom (the ability to do otherwise than you did) and that God is affected by creatures. In Christianity, this view has been affirmed by many of

the early fathers, the Eastern Orthodox church, Arminians, Wesleyans, and Pentecostals.

3.11 God is timeless (an eternal present for God).

3.12 Immutable: the character of God does not change, but God can change in will, thoughts and emotions.

3.13 Impassible: God can be affected by creatures. God responds or reacts to what we do. This is especially seen the doctrine of conditional election.¹¹ Moreover, our prayers may affect God.

3.14 General sovereignty. God ordains the rules of the game and allows for human freewill (libertarian freedom).

3.15 Some SFT's affirm a blueprint, but maintain that God is not causing all to happen.

3.16 The divine will can be thwarted. God takes risks.

3.17 God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge (EDF) because God timelessly sees all that will happen. God does not determine all things to happen, yet, the future is completely definite.

3.2 *Open Freewill Theism or Openness of God (OG)*: this version of freewill theism also affirms theism simpliciter and libertarian freedom, but unlike traditional freewill theism it rejects timelessness and exhaustive definite foreknowledge.

3.21 God is everlasting: even God has a before and an after. Time is real for God.

¹¹ It should be noted that some proponents of this view rejected the idea that God had emotions. Nonetheless, they believed that God does respond to us.

- 3.22 Agrees with the SFT regarding immutability, impassibility, and general sovereignty.
- 3.23 God does not have a blueprint for our lives. God does guide, but God wants a mutual, give-and-take relationship.
- 3.24 Some aspects of the divine will can be thwarted. God takes risks.
- 3.25 God does not have EDF. Rather, “presentism” where God knows all the past and present and that part of the future which is determined. Some of the future is definite and some is indefinite (yet to be decided).

Although openness is in the same stream of the tradition as SFT, it sees certain problems in SFT. Openness may be seen as an attempt to clear the freewill theistic river of some snags and boulders to allow the river to flow more smoothly. In light of the foregoing definitions it is clear that Openness does not meet the criteria for being classified as Classical Theism. This is not a big deal, however, since no variety of Freewill Theism is a member of Classical Theism. There is a family squabble between Open Theism and Standard Freewill Theism regarding two divine attributes (eternality and EDF), but Openness is certainly a subset of Freewill Theism and is thus a member of Theism Simpliciter. Even more importantly Openness affirms **Christianity** Simpliciter! It upholds the historic Christianity represented in the Apostles’ Creed. In theological terms the taxonomy is:

Christianity Simpliciter (divides into two main traditions)

1. “Augustinian/Calvinistic” tradition

2. The Freewill Tradition (two types)

2.1 “Arminianism”

2.2 Openness of God

Following the philosophical analysis of the divine attributes the taxonomy is:

Theism Simpliciter (divides into two main types)

1. Classical theism

2. Freewill Theism (two types)

2.1 Standard Freewill Theism

2.2 Openness of God

E. Comparison of the Attributes.

A chart of the differences between Classical Theism and the two forms of Freewill Theism regarding the divine attributes and providence.

Classical Theism (“Calvinism”) <u>All-Determining</u>	Freewill Theism (Both open & standard forms. <u>Not All-Determining</u>)
Self-Sufficient—Does not need any world and creates ex nihilo	Self-Sufficient—Does not need any world and creates ex nihilo
<i>Aseity</i> : God as absolutely unconditioned (incapable of being conditioned according to some)	<i>Aseity</i> (God cannot be forced to be conditioned by creatures, but can so choose. Yet, creation does not add to God’s being)
<i>Simplicity</i> (though some reject it)	<i>Simplicity</i> (reject it)
<i>Pure actuality</i>	<i>Pure actuality</i> (reject it)
Immaterial	Immaterial
<i>Immutability</i> (God never changes in any respect: will, thoughts, or emotions)	Immutability (The being of God does not change, but God can change in his will, thoughts and emotions.
<i>Impassibility</i> (God is not affected by creatures in any respect. God does not respond. God is closed to the world)	<i>Impassibility</i> (Reject since God sovereignly chooses to be affected by and open to creatures. God suffers, experiences joy, and responds)
<i>Eternality</i> (as timeless)	<i>Eternality</i> as either: (1) timeless = SFT (2) everlasting= OG
Necessary Being	Necessary Being
Omnipresent	Omnipresent
Personal	Personal
Wholly Good	Wholly Good
Omnipotence (all that is logically possible to do consonant with the divine nature)	Omnipotence (all that is logically possible to do consonant with the divine nature)
Omniscience (knows all that is logically possible to know)	Omniscience (knows all that is logically possible to know)
<i>Foreknowledge</i> . Eternally Definite Foreknowledge [EDF] of all future events. God knows the future because God determines the future→ <i>no future events are contingent</i> . None of God’s knowledge is dependent upon creatures.	<i>Foreknowledge</i> . Two main views, both of which affirm that <i>some future events are contingent</i> and that God’s knowledge of us is based on what creatures do. (1) EDF by timeless knowing of future <i>contingent</i> events = SFT; (2) Presentism = OG (knows all past, present, and that future which is determined. Future is both definite & indefinite)
Applications to the Christian Life	
<i>Providence is Meticulous</i> (God controls every single detail, the divine will is never thwarted. God takes no risks)	<i>Providence is General</i> (God chooses not to control everything so the divine will can, for some things, be thwarted. God takes risks)
<i>Compatibilistic Freedom</i> (act on your desires)	<i>Libertarian Freedom</i> (free to do otherwise)
<i>Election by decree</i> , unconditional. God chooses certain people for redemption without concern for anything in the individual.	<i>Election</i> based, in part, on our decision: (1) SFT = God timelessly foreknows our choice, election is based on foreknowledge. (2) OG = Corporate election
<i>Evil is planned</i> by God for some good purpose.	<i>Evil was not planned</i> by God but permitted.
<i>Future</i> is completely determined/definite	<i>Future</i> is partly determined and partly open
<i>Petitionary prayer</i> never changes God’s will. There is no impetratory prayer	<i>Petitionary prayer</i> may change God’s will. There is impetratory prayer.

E. Conclusions.

1. The Openness of God conceives of God as a tripersonal being who is essentially related, with no need to create any world, but who freely created a world in which humans are capable of experiencing the divine love and reciprocating that love. God is open to us. This God has acted in history, demonstrating his love, holiness, wisdom, faithfulness, resourcefulness, almightiness, patience, and perseverance.
2. Both Open and Standard Freewill Theisms are forms of the Freewill Theistic tradition and so affirm Theism Simpliciter. Moreover, both affirm the historic Christianity Simpliciter as exemplified in the Apostles' Creed, for instance. Consequently, Openness is within "traditional Christian Theism."
3. Classical Theism and Freewill Theism both affirm Theism Simpliciter as well as the trinity, incarnation and redemption in Jesus. Thus, Classic Theism has much in common with the Openness of God—a fact often downplayed. To his credit, Norman Geisler, acknowledges that open theism affirms many of the "essential attributes of God" along with classical theism "including infinity, necessity, ontological independence, transcendence, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence" and so it should be placed within the "broad spectrum of theism as opposed to panentheism (process theology)."¹²
4. A serious error occurs when evangelical critics of Openness equate Classical Theism with Christianity Simpliciter. When this is done, it is obvious that Open Theism

cannot be classified as Christian theism. However, what the critics fail to notice is that, by making this equation, they also exclude all forms of Freewill Theism, including Arminianism, from the category “Christian theism.” That is, Classical Theism does not include the extremely large freewill theistic tradition. Though Geisler first classifies Open Theism within the “broad spectrum of theism,” he later says that Open Theism is a significant departure from “classical theism” and “traditional Christian theology” implying that openness theology is in disagreement with pretty much the entire Christian tradition. In fact, he says Open Theism does not “fit comfortably in the theistic category” after all since it denies “God’s immutability, eternity, simplicity, and pure actuality.”¹³ What Geisler gives with his right hand he takes back with his left. Unfortunately, he fails to see that his criteria would also disqualify all forms of freewill theism including Arminianism since it cannot affirm immutability, simplicity, and pure actuality in the way Geisler defines them. In fact, traditional Arminianism fits most of the criteria for what Geisler calls “Neotheism.”¹⁴

We are now in position to see what some evangelical critics of Open Theism are doing: equivocating on the term “Classical Theism.” They begin by equating the terms Classical Theism and Theism Simpliciter. Thus, their initial definition of “Classical Theism” is extremely general so that it includes just about all Western theists including “Arminians” or freewill theists and supposedly excluding Open Theists. They have a large umbrella sheltering just about everyone except Open Theists from the rain. However, they later

¹² Geisler, *Creating God*, 12 and 73.

¹³ Geisler, *Creating God*, 73-4.

modify the definition of Classical Theism to the more precise one involving divine simplicity, timeless, immutability, and impassibility (strongly defined). However, this tactic has now been exposed and we can see that their umbrella is actually far too small to include Arminians or the entire tradition of Freewill Theism, thus leaving a very large segment of historical Christian theism out in the rain! When classical theism is defined in precise terms then clearly Openness is not Classical Theism. But then, neither is Arminianism Classical Theism and if Classical Theism is equated with “Christianity,” then Arminians are not Christian! What Geisler and others should do is follow the lead of Michael Horton and R. K. McGreggor Wright who candidly exclude all Freewill Theists, (which includes the Eastern Orthodox, Arminians, Wesleyans, and Pentecostals), from genuine Christianity.

5. Well then, why do not all of the critics of Openness draw this conclusion? Because they confuse yet another issue. The two forms of Freewill Theism, Openness and Standard, agree on all the divine attributes except for two: (a) eternity and (b) foreknowledge. Whereas SFT defines divine eternity as timelessness, Openness understands it to be everlastingness. Both Openness and SFT affirm omniscience, God knows everything that can be known, but they disagree over exactly what of the future can be known. Whereas SFT affirms that God knows the future contingent actions of libertarianly free beings, Openness denies this, affirming presentism instead. SFT affirms that God possesses exhaustive definite foreknowledge (EDF) of

¹⁴ Geisler, *Creating God*, 76-7.

all contingent events while Openness claims that though some of the future is definite, some of the future is indefinite or undetermined.

5.1 If Openness and SFT differ only on these two attributes, why the strong reaction to openness from the evangelical Classical Theists? Some are upset by our denial of impassibility and strong immutability. But then, they should be equally upset at SFT since it denies these as well. Though our critics sometimes decry our rejection of timelessness, most often it is our rejection of EDF which receives the brunt of their caustic rhetoric.

5.2 However, if one wants to use EDF to exclude Openness from Christianity Simpliciter, then one is going to have to establish that EDF is one of the core doctrines of the Christian faith! There are several major problems with doing this, however.

5.2.1 EDF has never been part of any ecumenical creed or council. On what basis are we to place EDF as one of the core doctrines upon which Christianity stands or falls?

5.2.2 Though both Classical Theism and Standard Freewill Theism affirm EDF, they do so for very different reasons. In Classical Theism God knows the future because God determines the future—there is no contingency in God. For SFT, God knows the future because God “sees” what will happen—there is genuine conditionality in God. Divine conditionality is the watershed issue in this debate, not EDF.

5.2.3 Finally, if God's EDF is based upon either simple foreknowledge or timeless knowledge, then foreknowledge is useless for providence. SFT affirms timeless foreknowledge of our future actions in order for God to use this knowledge for providential control. For example, it is thought that if God foresees that I'm going to marry Alisha which will result in a horrible marriage, then God can take the appropriate steps to bring it about that he guides me to actually marry Beatrice instead. But this "solution" does not work at all! According to simple foreknowledge or timeless knowledge, God has only true knowledge of our future; what God "foresees" is the **actual** world—which events will actually occur in history. If God foresees what will actually occur, then God cannot bring it about that these events fail to occur since that would render his timeless knowledge false. If what God foresees is what actually happens—that I marry Alisha and have a horrible marriage—then God is powerless to stop it. The traditional Arminian understanding of foreknowledge is simply **useless** for divine providence.

5.3 Given this, the evangelical options regarding divine omniscience narrow to three: (a) the Determinism of Classical Theism where God has EDF because God determines the future; (b) Molinism or Middle Knowledge where God knows what we would do in any given situation ("counterfactuals of freedom") in all feasible worlds. Once God chooses to create one of those worlds, then God knows what will actually occur in

this world; (c) Presentism, God exhaustively knows the past, present, and that part of the future which is determined.

6. One problem, committed by some Classical as well as Standard Freewill Theists, arises from the “pick and choose” method of affirming certain divine attributes of Classical Theism while rejecting others. For instance, when timelessness and unconditionedness are affirmed, but impassibility and immutability are rejected. However, esteemed Classical Theists such as Aquinas and Calvin clearly saw that the attributes of Classical Theism are a package deal. It is like a knit sweater, you cannot just have part of the sweater. Moreover, if you pull on one of the threads the sweater it begins to unravel. Begin tugging on impassibility, for instance, and God’s absolute unconditionedness unravels with it. Give up unconditionedness and immutability disappears along with timelessness. It is inconsistent to affirm some of these while rejecting others because the sweater simply falls apart. Geisler, John Piper, and J. I. Packer, for instance, are being inconsistent when they affirm the attributes of Classical Theism and also hold that God has feelings, is affected by our prayers, or that God can change his mind. Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff is correct that if God genuinely *responds* to us, then God is neither metaphysically immutable nor impassible; and if not immutable and impassible, then not timeless.¹⁵ Divine timelessness is simply incompatible with divine possibility and a responding God. Evangelical Classical Theists should clearly communicate that our prayers never affect God in any way and that God does not have feelings. However, since such

¹⁵ Wolterstorff, “Does God Suffer?” *Modern Reformation* (September, 1999): 45-7.

assertions run against the grain of much evangelical piety, it is not surprising that they draw back from the logical implications of their view.

7. On the contemporary scene, there are three options for evangelical understandings of Providence. (A) The Augustinian/Calvinism with its all-determining God of Classical Theism who is not affected by our prayers and actions; who determines all that comes to pass (including sin and evil—for a greater good). (B) Molinism which attempts to combine libertarian freedom with divine control. (C) Freewill Theism with its God who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with creatures. Presently, there is an ongoing family squabble within Freewill Theism. Proponents of Openness believe that Standard Freewill Theism has some logical inconsistencies (e. g. affirming timelessness while denying impassibility). At the least, nobody has satisfactorily explained the metaphysics of a timeless God being affected by creatures. If SFT is actually useless regarding providence, then the options for evangelical views of providence are: Classical Theism, Molinism and the Openness of God. Since I believe that the Bible teaches that God is affected by us, responds to our prayers, enters into reciprocal relations of love with us, sometimes switches to plan B, and even changes his mind occasionally, Open Theism is the only game in town.