

The God Who Doesn't Know (part one)

Peter Ditzel

Any view that minimizes or reduces God's "God-ness," including his absolute sovereignty over his creation, appeals directly, though subtly, to our sinful hearts.

Scott Oliphint, "Most Moved Mediator," Themelios 30 (2004): 39

There's a pretty good chance you've never heard of open theism. On the other hand, there's a very good chance that you've been exposed to, and possibly even influenced by, its teachings. And those teachings can be dangerous to your spiritual health. If you get nothing else out of this article, I want you to know that open theism lowers God in order to raise man. It is essentially a man-centered religion dressed in semi-Christian garb.

Put simply and briefly, open theism asserts man's free will by limiting God's foreknowledge. It posits a God who does not know the choices you will make in life but who knows all of the possible choices there are. Open theism has been charged with having a God who is not omniscient because He doesn't know the future. Its proponents answer that God knows the past and the present as realities, and that He also knows the future but only as possibilities and not realities because it does not yet exist. My answer to this is that it is equivocating over the meaning of knowing the future. To know the future merely as myriad possibilities, only some of which will come to pass, is not really knowing the future.

This leads to many theological and philosophical questions that even open theists disagree over. For example, if God knows possibilities only as possibilities, how can chaos be avoided? But if God has certain ends in mind—for example, the saving of a people in Christ and the victory of His kingdom—then does He limit the possible choices so that the future is not really so open after all? And if the latter is true, is He not then limiting man's free will, which is the very thing that open theism tries to avoid? In this article, I'm going to concentrate on giving you a bit of historical background, explaining open theism, and telling you who today's proponents are. Then, I'm going to refute open theism from Scripture and point out the subtle and dangerous ways it has crept into Christian thinking.

Copyright © 2013 wordofhisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact. Unless otherwise noted, Bible references are from the *World English Bible* (WEB).

An analogy that might help us understand open theism is to liken everything—the physical and spiritual universe that God has created—to a complex, interactive video game. Unlike a human-created video game, however, God has not just made the game, given it to us, and walked off (that would be a kind of Deism). In this video game, God remains engaged and interacts with us. Like in the video games we are familiar with, we are faced with many choices, and the game doesn't know which choices we will make. But the creator of the game has thought out every possible choice and designed those choices into the game so that when you make your choice the game instantly responds. So, in open theism, God does not know what choices you will make in life, but He knows all of the possible choices there are and instantly responds to the choices you actually make to eventually bring about what He wants. This is the way that open theism tries to reconcile God's omniscience and sovereignty with man's free will. But open theists admit that their model of God means that the outcome of even divine decisions can be uncertain. So maybe God won't bring about what He wants. And to complicate matters further, there are other players in the game: not only the rest of the entire human race, but also the devil and his cohorts.

It sounds like an exciting game, but does this model of God—a God who does not know what choices you will make but who knows all of the possible choices as merely possibilities—fit with what the Bible tells us about God?

A Few Highlights of the History of Open Theism

Open theism has been around for a very long time. Around A.D. 321, the philosopher Calcidius translated Plato's *Timaeus* from Greek into Latin. He included his own commentary in which he espoused an open view of God. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Lelio Socinus (or Sozzini) promoted a set of doctrines that his nephew, Faustus Socinus (or Fausto Sozzini) would later expand on. These teachings came to be called Socinianism. The Polish Brethren, who taught these beliefs, summarized them in their Racovian Catechism. This article is not the place to counter the many unbiblical teachings of Socinianism, but I want to mention that one of them was, in summary, that God only knows necessary truths (what will surely come to pass) as truth, but He does not know contingent truths (what might or might not come to pass) as truths but as contingencies (possibilities). The Socinians taught this to assert man's free will against the Calvinist teaching of God's absolute sovereignty.

The teaching surfaced again in the eighteenth century in the writings of Samuel Fancourt and Andrew Ramsey. In the early nineteenth century, Bible commentator Adam Clarke wrote in his commentary on Acts 2:47 (<http://www.study-light.org/com/acc/view.cgi?bk=43&ch=2>):

And it would be as absurd to say that he foreknows a thing to be absolutely certain which in his own eternal counsel he has made contingent. By absolutely certain, I mean a thing which must be, in that order, time, place, and form in which Divine wisdom has ordained it to be; and that it can be no otherwise than this infinite counsel has ordained. By contingent, I mean such things as the infinite wisdom of God has thought proper to poise on the possibility of being or not being, leaving it to the will of intelligent beings to turn the scale. Or, contingencies are such possibilities, amid the succession of events, as the infinite wisdom of God has left to the will of intelligent beings to determine whether any such event shall take place or not.

The teaching became quite popular in the nineteenth century, but it was not until 1980 that Seventh-day Adventist theologian, Richard Rice (not to be confused with the late Worldwide Church of God evangelist of the same name), coined the term "open theism" in his book *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville, TN: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 1980). Neo-evangelical scholar Clark Pinnock later became so enamored with the book that he had it reprinted and asked Rice to be one of the contributors to a book he was putting together called *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994). The other contributors were theologian John E. Sanders, and philosophers William Hasker and David Basinger.

I think it will help you to understand open theism if I give you a few notable quotes from this book:

God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too. Thus history is a combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.

Richard Rice, 15-16

Instead of perceiving the entire course of human existence in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires.

Richard Rice, 16

We maintain, rather, that God possesses only what has come to be called "present knowledge." God, we acknowledge, does know all that has occurred in the past and is occurring now.... But since we believe that God can only know what can be known and that what humans will freely to do in the future cannot be known beforehand, we believe that God can never know with certainty what will happen in any context involving freedom of choice.... Accordingly, we must acknowledge that divine guidance, from our perspective, cannot be considered a means of discovering exactly what will be best in the long run—as a means of discovering the very best long-term option.

David Basinger, 163

However, since God does not necessarily know exactly what will happen in the future, it is always possible that even that which God in his unparalleled wisdom believes to be the best course of action at any given time may not produce the anticipated results in the long run. For example, given that God may not know exactly what the state of the economy will be over the next five years, it is possible that what God in his wisdom believes at present to be the best course of study for a student may not be an option that will allow her after graduation to pursue the profession for which she has prepared.... it is always possible that what will occur as the result of following God's specific will at any time will not be exactly what even God envisioned....

David Basinger, 165

Probably the most vocal proponent of open theism is now Gregory A. Boyd. In 2010, SuperScholar (<http://www.superscholar.org/features/20-most-influential-christian-scholars/>) listed Boyd, right along with the pope, as one of the twenty most influential Christian scholars in the world. Boyd is a theologian and Senior Pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is also the author of *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 2000). In this book, he states,

God determines whatever he sees fit and leaves as much of the future open to possibilities as he sees fit. The God of the possible creates the "Choose Your Own Adventure" structure of world history and of our lives within which the possibilities of human free choice are actualized

44

...future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them.

120

We might imagine God as something like an infinitely intelligent chess player.

127

Does Open Theism Stand Up to Scripture?

Open theism has, I believe, rightly been criticized for starting with man to determine who God is. For example, one open theist argument is based on the way people supposedly perceive prayer. The Theopedia article (http://www.theopedia.com/Open_theism) summarizing this line of reasoning states, "People pray expecting that God will answer their prayers not that the outcome was predetermined and therefore meaningless to pray. Therefore Open Theists argue that Christians in practice treat God as if He will respond to them and act themselves as if their moral choices are real and have real impact."

In other words, the reasoning goes like this: A person is supposed to pray. In his prayer, he is hoping to convince God to do something. Thus, for prayer to have meaning, God must be a God who can change based on our prayers.

As I read the literature written by open theists, I get the impression that this argument about prayer was, for at least some of them, the starting point that led them to open theism. They could not figure out why we should pray if God has already predetermined everything. Gregory Boyd comments, "If everything is eternally settled ahead of time either in the will or the mind of God, as the blueprint model of providence holds, then it is difficult to explain the urgency and efficacy that Scripture attributes to prayer" (Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001] 230).

We will see the Bible's answer to it as we examine the Scriptures below. But the problem with this argument is that it starts with man's

assumptions about prayer. Such questions about prayer are no reason to make such a giant step as saying that our understanding about God is wrong. It is far more likely that our understanding of the purpose of prayer is wrong. Thus, starting with human experience, open theists seem to be then going to Scripture to make it fit their experience. This, of course, is backwards. Instead of changing our understanding of God based on our experience, we need to start with Scripture.

While open theists often use philosophical arguments to support their beliefs, it would be a misrepresentation to say that they do not also cite Scripture. Whether they understand and use it correctly is another matter. I cannot, in an article like this, individually address each of the passages they say supports their cause. But looking into a few of them will help us to see the flawed thinking that open theists use to interpret the Bible. Since this same bad reasoning finds its way into their interpretation of each of the passages they reference, once we've addressed a few of them, we will have learned how to respond to any of the others.

2 Kings 20: Greg Boyd refers to 2 Kings 20 as pivotal to his coming to open theism. In verse 1, we read, "In those days Hezekiah was sick and dying. Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, 'the LORD says, "Set your house in order; for you will die, and not live.'"" We then read that Hezekiah prayed and wept bitterly. Then, in verses 5 and 6, the Bible tells us, "Turn back, and tell Hezekiah the prince of my people, Thus says Yahweh, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears: behold, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of Yahweh. I will add to your days fifteen years; and I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for my own sake, and for my servant David's sake."

Are we to conclude from these verses, as open theists do, that God truly changed His mind? Are we to understand that God was so definite in what He originally told Isaiah to say, "you will die, and not live," because He did not know Hezekiah would repent? Did God not determine Hezekiah's repentance from eternity, but instead have to react in time to this unexpected turn of events, as open theists say? Even putting God's eternal determination and foreknowledge out of it for a moment, I must wonder why the open theists do not realize that they have painted a picture here of a God who is more dull-witted than the average human. Are we to believe that God spoke definitely about Hezekiah dying because He was so obtuse that He didn't even consider the *possibility* that Hezekiah would repent? Now, I'm not saying that the open theists accuse God of being stupid, but they inadvertently imply it. How could God not even have considered the possibility that

Hezekiah would repent? Obviously, the open theists do not have the proper explanation for God's telling Hezekiah that he would "die, and not live."

The most natural understanding that perfectly explains this Scripture is that God's statement, "you will die, and not live," hinged upon a condition, and it was a condition that God knew full-well that Hezekiah would meet. In fact, God had Isaiah say these words to Hezekiah to bring about that condition, and God had no intention of actually killing the king. Of course, the condition was repentance. God, through Isaiah, was telling Hezekiah that his disease was malignant. Its ordinary outcome would be death. This was the logical extension of Hezekiah's disease at the time Isaiah came to him. This is clear in the parallel account in 2 Chronicles 32:24: "In those days Hezekiah was terminally ill, and he prayed to the LORD; and he spoke to him, and gave him a sign." But that logical extension—the natural end of Hezekiah's illness—was closed; it was not a reality because God had decreed in eternity that the reality would be the king's repentance and healing.

Hezekiah understood that God did not mean there was no recourse. Hezekiah had a problem with pride. God knew that the way to get his attention was to give him a terminal illness and then tell him so. This is not expressing a limitation in God's knowledge, nor is it a lie. The illness was deadly. It would have been fatal if Hezekiah hadn't turned to God for healing. And God knew all along that the king would do this and that He would heal him. God's statement to Hezekiah was a statement of the fact of his illness and was conditional and God knew that the king's meeting the condition was not just a possibility. It was a sure thing. Hezekiah repented, and God healed him.

By the way, if, as the open theists assert, God knows the future only as possibilities, how could He have accurately pinpointed to Hezekiah that he would live fifteen more years (2 Kings 20:6)? If God didn't even know the future well enough to know Hezekiah would repent, how could He know that Hezekiah would live fifteen years? If open theists were consistent, they would have to admit that, according to their view of God, all He could have said was that Hezekiah might possibly live another fifteen years. I should also point out that Hezekiah's heir, Manasseh, was born during this fifteen year period, and Manasseh appears in Jesus Christ's legal pedigree (Matthew 1:10). God had no intention of letting Hezekiah die before producing his heir.

In the second part, I'll finish with some more Scripture and discuss the danger of open theism. -PD