

An Analysis of Open Theism

By W. Gary Crampton, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Solomon has told us that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9). Certainly there is a sense in which this is true in the theological arena as it is in other areas. The orthodox view of the doctrine of God (“theology proper”) has always had its opponents. According to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 4), the Bible teaches that “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”¹ The orthodox Christian church has held this view for two millennia; yet, there have always been those who have rejected the orthodox position. One recent example is that of “open theism,”² which is well represented in *The Openness of God*,³ wherein we find the teaching of several well-known advocates of this view. For the open theist, God is not infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His wisdom nor in His power. He does not have exhaustive foreknowledge, nor does He sovereignly control all things in His creation. Neither does the open theist believe that God is immutable, because He does change depending on the actions of His creatures. Due to His “openness,” God is capable of making mistakes. Surely this reflects on God’s holiness, as it does regarding the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and truth.

Obviously, this is a serious departure from the Christian faith. As with all things, challenges to Christian theism need to be analyzed by the teaching of Scripture, which is God’s inspired, infallible, inerrant Word. This article is written to attempt this very thing. We will see, as stated by Alan Cairns, that open theism is little more than “the old liberal rejection of biblical theism running under the flag of evangelicalism.” It is a theology that is “yet another manifestation of the world’s oldest philosophy of depraved minds, man’s attempt to make God in his own image.”⁴

As noted, open theists have serious differences with orthodox Christianity. John Frame writes: “Open theists teach that God is not above time, that He does not know the future exhaustively, that He sometimes makes mistakes and changes His plans, and therefore that He is in some ways dependent on the world” (NOG, 11). This is not an exaggeration. In the words of the open theists themselves, God is a “risk taker” deity.⁵ All things are “possible” with God, but not all things are certain.⁶ He (or She)⁷ is a God of “unbounded love.”⁸ This view of God assures us that He would not punish anyone with eternal torment; non-believers will finally be annihilated.⁹ In this “new model,” God does not control all

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1. All citations from the Westminster Standards are from *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994). Scripture quotations are from the New King James version.

2. According to John Frame, it is likely that the first use of the phrase “open theism” comes from Richard Rice’s *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will*, published in 1980; John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2001) 17n. Hereafter NOG.

3. Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994). Hereafter OG.

4. Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast, Ireland: Ambassador Productions, 2002) 314–315. Hereafter DTT.

5. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

6. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000).

7. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

8. Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994). Open theists generally elevate “love” as God’s chief attribute (OG, 18–22).

9. Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” *Four Views of Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 135–166.

history by His immutable decree and providence; rather, He is open to the ways of man in history.” “The course of history ... is the combined result of what God and His creatures decide to do. “God’s will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too.” There are some things that God is ignorant of, so that He is even sometimes frustrated by things that occur. There is a sense in which He is restricted by His creatures. But “if Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B.” The God of the Bible, it is alleged, leaves the future open to the ways of men working with God. This means that man is “free” in the libertarian sense of freedom. His choices are not foreordained by God, and neither are they determined or caused by anything else; they are “free” choices¹⁰ (OG, 15–16, 26–35, 53–57, 101–104, 113–115, 121–124, 136–137).

CHURCH HISTORY AND OPEN THEISM

How long has open theism existed?¹¹ We have already said that in theology as in other disciplines, there is really nothing new under the sun. Heterodoxy of all stripes has been around for millennia. Some open theists affirm that the God of traditional orthodox Christianity has similarities to the gods of Greek philosophy, and that Greek philosophy had a profound effect on the teaching of the early church fathers (OG, 60–80). Is this true? It is not. In actuality, it is the god of open theism that most resembles the gods of the Greeks. Plato’s Demiurge bears no resemblance to the God of the Bible. He is not the creator of the universe, nor is sovereign over it; rather, the Demiurge of Plato’s philosophical

system is subject to the universal Forms and operates as a finite deity (if divine at all). Then too, Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, although eternal, is an impersonal god, who moves the universe, not by sovereignly causing the many finite beings to move, but by means of attracting them. This is somewhat similar to the open theist view of divine causation and intervention in the universe. In fact, a study of Greek philosophy will show that the great majority of gods were finite in nature, and far removed in essence from the triune God of Holy Scripture.

It is true that some of the early church fathers held to a libertarian view of freedom. Athanasius (296–373), however, corrected this errant thinking, as did Augustine (354–430), the greatest (post-apostolic) philosopher and theologian of the first millennium, after him. In his ongoing theological confrontations with Pelagius, Augustine placed the sovereignty of God at the center of salvation. This is why John Calvin (1509–1564) could refer to himself as an Augustinian thinker. In the middle ages, Thomas Aquinas taught a semi-Pelagian view of free will, but not in the libertarian sense that later Arminians and open theists have fostered. The Roman Catholic Church is more in line with Arminianism and open theism than was Aquinas.

In the 16th century, Erasmus (1466?–1536) adopted a libertarian view of free will, but he was refuted by Martin Luther (1483–1546) in his *The Bondage of the Will*.¹² John Calvin also took aim at free will theism in his *Institutes* (and elsewhere), where he wrote that “Man has now been deprived of [libertarian] freedom of choice and bound over to miserable servitude.”¹³

Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) also held to a form of libertarianism similar to that of the open theists, but, unlike the openness thinkers, he affirmed that the God of the Bible possesses exhaustive foreknowledge.¹⁴ The errors of Arminianism were corrected at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) and the later Westminster Assembly (1643–1648), where the traditional view of God was reaffirmed. In the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards wrote the most thorough refutation of free will theism ever penned in his *Freedom of the Will*,¹⁵ which will be studied below.

Interestingly, Frame claims that the real “missing link in open theism’s genealogy” is that of Socinianism (NOG, 32–36). Not only did this liberal branch of the church assert libertarianism, it also denied the exhaustive foreknowledge of God. Perhaps the reason that the open theists do not lay claim to their Socinian heritage is that the Socinians also denied the full deity of Jesus Christ, along with His substitutionary atonement, and justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ.

10. See David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

11. In this section, the present author has benefited from and utilized the writings of John Frame “Where Does Open Theism Come From” (NOG, 25–40), and I. John Hesselink, “Sovereign Grace and Human Freedom,” *Reformation and Revival Journal*, ed. John H. Armstrong, 12.2 (Spring 2003) 11–24.

12. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1976).

13. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volumes I & II, ed. John T. McNeill, trans., Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) II.2 chapter heading.

14. John Frame (NOG, 40) correctly maintains that although Arminians in their assertion of divine foreknowledge are more biblical in their theology than are the open theists, the latter are more logically consistent. The reason being that if God does indeed possess exhaustive foreknowledge, then the libertarian view of free will cannot rationally be maintained.

15. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957). Hereafter FOW.

There are many other “forms” of open theism that appear in church history. Process philosophers and theologians such as Charles Hartshorne, Alfred North Whitehead, John Cobb, and Schubert Ogden affirm a finite deity who does not possess exhaustive foreknowledge and gives man free will in the libertarian sense of the term. The same is true of the Boston Personalists, such as Borden P. Bowne and Edgar S. Brightman. In truth, however, the doctrine of open theism is first seen in the Garden of Eden: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). This is where the desire for human autonomy and libertarianism began. This is where the absolute sovereignty of God and His divine foreknowledge was first questioned. The results were lethal, and remain the same today.

OPEN THEISM AND THE BIBLE

What does the Bible say about open theism? First, orthodox Christianity teaches that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God; it “cannot be broken” (2 Tim. 3:16–17; John 10:35). Second, as taught in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.6), the Protestant view of *sola Scriptura* maintains that:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

If open theism is true (which it is not), however, we could not have any assurance that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. Why?—because the Bible teaches that God the Holy Spirit sovereignly governed the writers of sacred Scripture by putting His Word in their mouths (Deut. 18:18; Jer. 1:9) and by “moving” them along so that what they wrote was nothing other than the very Word of God (2 Pet. 1:20–21). But how can this certainly be true if God does not sovereignly control the writers of Scripture so that they wrote inerrant truth? If the human authors were free in the libertarian sense, there could be no certainty regarding the infallible, inerrant nature of biblical truth. At best, Scripture would be undependable, and at worst useless.

Moreover, we read in Deuteronomy 18:21–22 that one of the marks of a true prophet of God is that when he speaks of future events they will surely come to pass. But how can a god who does not possess exhaustive

foreknowledge accurately prophecy future events? A deity who is ignorant of the future cannot speak with authority on anything beyond the present.¹⁶ All biblical prophecy dealing with future events would necessarily be subject to error, thereby (potentially) bringing the prophets of this deity under the death penalty curse of Deuteronomy 18:20.¹⁷

If open theism is true, then, there would be no absolute and certain Word of God given to us in special revelation. And since it is true, as taught in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 3), that “the Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man,” we could not know who God is, or even if there is a god at all. Open theists are left on the horns of an insoluble dilemma. It seems that advocates of this false theology are left without a starting point for their system of doctrine, and without a starting point to tell them about God, they cannot even get started. As aptly stated by Robert Reymond, when one does away with the infallible, inerrant Word of God as his *pou sto* (“place to stand”), he eliminates the possibility of knowledge.¹⁸

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY, FOREKNOWLEDGE, AND IMMUTABILITY

According to the Bible, as taught by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (3.1–4; 5.1–4):

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

3.2 Although God knows whatsoever may or can

16. In a personal correspondence, Dr. Kenneth Talbot, president of Whitefield Theological Seminary, pointed out to the present writer that God’s exhaustive knowledge of the present is even questionable for open theists, because the god they espouse would not have immediate knowledge of the contingent actions of men.

17. Again, Dr. Talbot has correctly stated that the ignorant god of open theism could not logically condemn prophets for erring regarding the future.

18. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 111. Hereafter *NST*. When the Greek mathematician Archimedes was working with the simple machine of a lever, he said “Give me [a place] where I may stand [*pou sto*] and I will move the world.” Archimedes was asking for a base for the fulcrum of his lever which would be outside of the cosmos. “So the Bible is the Christian’s extra-cosmic base for knowledge and meaning.”

come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet has He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

3.3 By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

3.4 These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

5.1 God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

5.2 Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the First Cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

5.3 God in His ordinary providence makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.

5.4 The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who

being most holy and righteous, neither is, nor can be, the author or approver of sin.

God, for His own glory, teaches the *Confession*, infallibly and unalterably decrees all things that will ever come to pass, including the everlasting destiny of all men and angels. Yet He does so in a manner wherein He is not to be considered as the author of sin, and without in any sense violating the will of His creatures. Further, not only does God create all things in His universe, but as the eternal First Cause, He, with infallible and exhaustive foreknowledge, also providentially governs, sustains, and directs all things to their appointed end, and He does so by the use of secondary causes. God's providential control of all things in His universe includes the Fall of man and all other sins of men and angels. Yet, God so providentially works all things to the praise of His glory that He remains holy. God cannot sin. Sin is only identified with secondary causes.

Divine sovereignty is a major tenet in Reformed or Calvinistic theology. When the Calvinist speaks of divine sovereignty, he means that God is God in all His holy attributes, His works of creation, providence, and salvation. God is the First Cause of all that exists, and nothing exists that is not foreordained by Him, and thereby foreknown by Him. There are many biblical passages which teach these truths.¹⁹

If anything were to exist independently of God, it would of necessity be coequal with Him. But the Bible declares: "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?" "To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal?" (Isa. 40:18; 46:5). God has no co-equals. His will determines all things: He "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11); "Our God is in heaven; He does whatsoever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3); "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11).

Since God thinks and acts independently, all of His actions are according to His knowledge. God knows all things intuitively. He never gains knowledge.²⁰ All things which exist have been created in accordance with His sovereign plan.

Since God created all things, He first had to foreknow them before they were created. All things which exist, physical and spiritual, come from the mind of the all-knowing God. He has "declared the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'" (Isa. 46:10). All things exist to fulfill the purpose of God. "For by Him [Christ] all things were

19. Portions of this section are taken from Kenneth G. Talbot and W. Gary Crampton, *Calvinism, Hyper-Calvinism, and Arminianism* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Christian Liberty Press, 1999).

20. It is noted here that the fact that God's knowledge is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, means that He does not think sequentially. He does not have a succession of ideas as men do. He does, however, have an idea of successive thought, because He has so decreed that men think this way. Open theists, on the other hand, do teach that God thinks sequentially (OG, 133, 194).

created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him" (Col. 1:16).

Notice is made of the way Scripture speaks of the all-inclusive nature of God's will being the final or ultimate cause of all that comes to pass:

Of creation and providence: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created" (Rev. 4:11).

Of the civil magistrate (and by reasoning *à fortiori*, all persons): "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1).

Of the sufferings of Christ: "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23).

Of election and reprobation: "And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.' What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.... Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens" (Rom. 9:10–16, 18). "The LORD has made all things for Himself, yes even the wicked for the day of doom" (Prov. 16:4).²¹

Of sin and evil: "I [God] form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity [evil]; I the LORD, do all these things" (Isa. 45:7). "If there is calamity [evil] in the city, will not the LORD have done it?" (Amos 3:6).

Of the good actions of men: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Of the wicked actions of men: "The LORD has made all things for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom" (Prov. 16:4).

Of withholding saving grace from the non-elect: "At that time Jesus answered and said, 'I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hid-

den these things [salvific, gospel grace] from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight" (Matt. 11:25–26).

Of regeneration: "Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word and truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18).

Of the means as well as the ends in salvation: "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13). "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

Of the suffering of believers: "For it is better if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil" (1 Pet. 3:17).

Of the duration of man's life: "Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You; You have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass" (Job 14:5). "For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep [died], was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption" (Acts 13:36). "Your [God's] eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them."

The place of man's habitation: "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (Acts 17:26).

Of the most minute details in life: "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will" (Matt. 10:29).

Of seemingly contingent events: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov. 16:33).

Of the destiny of nations: "And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings" (Dan. 2:21). "Behold, the nations [to God] are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the balance" (Isa. 40:15).

Some critics of Reformed and Calvinistic theology assert that the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is harsh and stoic, but this is not the case. The God of the Bible always acts in accordance with His attributes, which

21. Note that these verses teach that God's love is not "unbounded." He loves the elect, but He hates the non-elect; see also Psalm 5:5–6: "You [God] hate all workers of iniquity.... The LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man"; and Psalm 11:5: "The wicked and the one who loves violence His [God's] soul hates."

are perfect in every respect. In other words, God only does that which is perfect. It is impossible for Him to do otherwise. However, what is perfect in the eyes of God often meets with disapproval by man. This is one of the many problems with the open theists.

One of God's attributes is holiness. The biblical words used for holiness, in the original languages of the Old and New Testaments, refer, not only to His purity, but also to His being "set apart." God is distinct from all His creation. This is what makes Him holy.

We must also remember that because God always acts according to His attributes, that He can never deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). He is motivated by holiness in everything that He does. Hence, every activity of God in His creation is the epitome of perfection: "The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!' ... The twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him ... saying: 'You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created'" (Rev. 4:8-11).

Further, God does all things for His own glory: "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another"; "Everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory"; "I will not give My glory to another" (Isa. 42:8; 43:7; 48:11). God has "predestinated us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:5-6). "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). This is in direct contradistinction to open theism, which as Bruce Ware has correctly said, gives us a "diminished god," of "lesser glory."²²

The doctrine of God's immutability goes hand in hand with His sovereignty. God is unchangeable: "For I am the LORD, I do not change" (Mal. 3:6); "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). The eternal purposes of the triune God expressed in His decrees cannot ever be altered (Isa. 14:27; 46:9-10; Job 42:2). If God could change His mind or His plans, He would not

be infinitely wise in His works of creation and providence. How could a sovereign God, who has eternally foreordained all things that will come to pass, have His decrees altered by a creature: man? What kind of a god would this be? Surely this not the God of Christianity: "I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it" (Eccles. 3:14). The triune God of Holy Scripture is absolutely sovereign; He brooks no competition; "He does not give an accounting of any of His words" (Job 33:13). His decrees, which determine all things are: founded upon wisdom (Eph. 3:9-11), eternal (Ps. 33:11), completely efficacious (Prov. 19:21), unchangeable (Job 23:13), and all inclusive (Eph. 1:11).

God decrees all things that will ever come to pass for His own sovereign good purposes and glory (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 11:36). But He likewise does so in order that men will learn to fear Him: "I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him" (Eccles. 3:14).

The sovereignty of God is foundational to Christian theism. If this tenet is removed by the false doctrine of any other system of thought (such as open theism), then the whole of biblical Christianity will fall with it. If the God of the Bible is not absolutely sovereign, He is no God at all. Loraine Boettner wrote:

God created this world in which we find ourselves, He owns it, and He is running it according to His own sovereign good pleasure. God has lost none of His power, and it is highly dishonoring to Him to suppose that He is struggling along with the human race, doing the best He can to persuade men to do right, but unable to accomplish His eternal, unchangeable, holy, wise, and sovereign purpose.²³

When we speak of God's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable wisdom, as per the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 4) quoted earlier, it is important to understand that we are necessarily referring to His omniscience. There are a number of passages in the Bible which teach us that God is omniscient. In Acts 15:18 we read: "Known to God from eternity are all His works." 1 John 3:20 asserts that God "knows all things." Job 37:16 states that God "is perfect in knowledge" (See also Ps. 139:1-6). In Isaiah 41:21-29 God distinguishes between Himself and the false deities in that He foreknows and foretells the future. God's knowledge of all things past, present, and future, is all-comprehensive; it is eternally intuited. This being so, the future is rendered certain.²⁴

22. Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000).

23. Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Faith* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1983) 4.

24. Open theists deny that God is eternal in the sense of being an a-temporal or supra-temporal Deity. If he were supra-temporal,

When libertarian free will advocates turn to Scripture to deny the absolute sovereignty of God (as per the Reformed and Calvinistic view of sovereignty), and to support their position that God is neither immutable nor impassible, and that He does not possess exhaustive foreknowledge, they will normally adduce those passages in the Bible where God is said to repent, relent, or change His mind (e.g., Gen. 6:5–6; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; Jon. 3:10; 4:2), or where He is said to learn something (e.g., Gen. 22:12). Too, these free will thinkers will turn to passages where God is said to suffer or grieve, e.g., Hosea 11:8–9 and Jeremiah 31:20 (*OG*, 22–35, 53–57, 117–119, 121–124).

Traditional orthodox Christianity explains, first of all, that if God is eternal, then it would be logically absurd to say that His essential nature (i.e., God's "essence") can change. Eternality demands immutability. But second, the traditional view maintains that the verses which speak of God's repenting (or relenting), or changing His mind, or suffering, are anthropomorphic and/or anthropopathic statements. Anthropomorphic language is a figure of speech wherein God is represented under human form to help us better understand some particular divine attribute. For example, when the Bible refers to God's eyes (2 Chron. 16:9), it speaks of His knowledge; when the Bible speaks of God's wings (Ps. 91:4), it has to do with His protection of His people; and when we read of God's face (Ps. 27:8–9), we are being told about His presence.

Anthropopathic statements are a form of anthropomorphic language and are used similarly, wherein human feelings are attributed to God. God, being pure Spirit (John 4:24), does not "have flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39) as humans do. And being an unchangeable Being, He cannot suffer harm nor experience involuntary actions (i.e., involuntary emotions). In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (2:1), God is "without body, parts, or passions."

So when the Bible speaks of God as changing His mind, as Cairns maintains, we are to understand it as "the exercise of God's unchanging moral perfections in relation to changes in the creatures with whom He is dealing," as per Jeremiah 18:7–8: "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent [change My mind] of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it" (*DTT*, 315; see also Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.12–14). In the same way, when the Bible speaks about God suffering or grieving, we are to understand this as having to do, not with His eternal, unchange-

able, essential will, but with His intentional will based on the response of certain persons or entities. For instance, when the Bible speaks of God's being grieved (Eph. 4:30), it is an anthropopathic statement telling us that God has compassion or concern for certain persons or things. It is His eternal, unchangeable nature to be compassionate.

Other passages that refer to the will or desire of God being thwarted in some sense (e.g., Ezek. 33:11) have to do with God's preceptive will, not His unalterable decretive will. The main verse dealing with this subject is Deuteronomy 29:29, where we read: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." In this verse Moses distinguishes between God's eternal, decretive will (the "secret things") and God's preceptive will ("those things which are revealed"). The decretive will (God's decrees) determines what must happen; the preceptive will (God's commands) is the law which men are obliged to obey. The decretive will is hidden in the mind of God; it is absolute and determined by Him alone; it is not for man to know unless God is pleased to reveal it. The preceptive will, on the other hand, is revealed in Scripture. It is that will of God for man by which he is to live. It is for us and our children to know and practice. Man is held accountable for the preceptive will, not the decretive will. Man cannot disobey or thwart God's decretive will (cf. Job 42:2; Isa. 46:9–10), but he can and does disobey and thereby thwart God's commandments.

Hence, when in Ezekiel 33:11 God says "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live," we are to understand that this has to do with God's preceptive will, i.e., the gospel call for men to turn from their sins to Jesus Christ. This gospel call goes out to all men who come under the preaching of the gospel. Many, however, reject this call, and perish in their sins. In the words of Christ, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14). As taught in the *Westminster Confession* (10:4): "Others, not

then He could not know what takes place in temporal history, i.e., He could not know the events of present time (*OG*, 119–121). The traditional response to this is that God is eternal in the sense of being a-temporal or supra-temporal, but He is also omnipresent at every moment of time. God is both transcendent over time and immanent (i.e., omnipresent) in time. As stated in Isaiah 57:15: "For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and with him who has a contrite and humble spirit.'" And in Jeremiah 23:23–24 we read: "Am I a God near at hand," says the LORD, "and not a God afar off?... Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD."

elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved.”

Finally, when open theism claims that God’s death in the Person of Christ assures us that God can change,²⁵ they have once again involved themselves in a logical fallacy. If God is eternal, He cannot die; He cannot suffer; He is necessarily impassible. As explained by the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 21), the second Person of the Godhead, “being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one Person, forever.” Jesus Christ is one Person with two natures: one fully divine and one fully human. On the cross, it is the human nature which dies, not the divine. It is the God-man, Jesus Christ who suffers and dies, but He does so as touching His human nature, because the divine nature cannot possibly die.²⁶

HUMAN FREE WILL

Regarding the free will of man, the Bible, according to the *Westminster Confession* (9.1–5), teaches:

God has endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil.

Man, in his state of innocence, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good, and well pleasing to God; but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

When God converts a sinner and translates him into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage under sin; and by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but does also will that which is evil.

The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.

One of the difficulties in studying the doctrine of free will is that it is so often misunderstood. The question is often posed, *If God has decreed all things that will ever come to pass, thereby necessitating their occurrence, how can man possess a free will?* As we have seen, it is indeed true that God, the First Cause of all things, has decreed all that will ever occur, but we have also seen that He decrees them to take place by means of second causes. God’s eternal decree does not violate the will of the creature or take away his liberty; rather, it establishes the fact that what men do they do freely, in accordance with their own will. God has decreed that it will occur in this way. Robert Reymond explains:

Reformed theology [i.e., biblical Christianity] does not deny that men have wills (that is, choosing minds) or that men exercise their wills countless times a day. To the contrary, Reformed theology happily affirms both of these propositions. What Reformed theology denies is that man’s will is ever free from God’s decree, his own intellections, limitations, parental training, habits, and (in this life) the power of sin. In sum, there is no such thing as the *liberty of indifference*; that is, no one’s will is an island unto itself, undetermined or unaffected by anything (*NST*, 373).

What the Westminster divines are teaching regarding the doctrine of free will is that, although man is never free from God’s eternal decree, which determines all things, nevertheless, God has given man the natural ability to make choices “freely.” Man’s choices are not determined by inanimate forces, nor by “any absolute necessity of nature.” Man is not a machine; he is a free moral agent.

Before the Fall, in his “state of innocence,” man had both a free moral agency and the ability “to will and to do that which is good and well pleasing to God.” As we read in Ecclesiastes 7:29: “God made man upright.” Yet, even though man was upright, he was still liable to change, and to will to do evil.

Due to the Fall, however, man is now in a spiritual state of “total depravity,” unable to do anything that pleases God (Rom. 3:9–18; 8:7–8). What man lost in the Fall is the ability to please God. Man still possesses a free moral agency, and he freely chooses whatsoever he desires to do, but he is no longer able “to will and to do that which is good and well pleasing to God.” Even though God created men in an upright condition, “they

25. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

26. Jonathan Edwards, *Our Great and Glorious God*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003) 153–154; Calvin, *Institutes*, II.12.2–3.

have sought out many schemes” (Eccles. 7:29). Men are now lost in sin and their will is disposed toward unrighteousness and inclined away from God. Men in this “state of sin,” in the words of Paul, are “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God”; the state of men is such that they are “past feeling,” they “have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness” (Eph. 4:17–19). Not only do men sin, but they do so willingly, “with greediness.”

Redeemed man, in the “state of grace,” is set free “from his natural bondage under sin,” and by the grace of God is restored with the ability “freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.” Not only does redeemed man have free moral agency, but he also has the ability to please God restored to him. This does not mean that man in the “state of grace” always freely chooses “that which is spiritually good.” On the contrary, “by reason of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly nor only will that which is good, but does also will that which is evil.” Only in the “state of glory” is redeemed man “made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone.”

These teachings are denied by open theism. God, it is alleged, does not possess exhaustive foreknowledge, and man does possess a libertarian free will. God may have, so it is claimed, a perfect knowledge of the present, but not of the future. Man’s choices, say the open theists, are completely free. They are not foreordained by God and are not determined or caused by anything else. The open theist would assert (as does the Arminian) the fact that God can call sinners to repentance and faith in Christ assumes that man has the ability to make such a choice (OG, 121–124, 162–168, 173–175). This view is sometimes referred to as “the power of contrary course.”

Jonathan Edwards responded to similar thinking in what is normally considered to be the most thorough Calvinistic refutation of free will libertarianism ever penned: *Freedom of the Will*. As he explained in this book, the idea of an uncaused, undetermined free will is a logical absurdity. Among other things, he argued that our choices are necessarily effects of a cause. An uncaused effect is not possible, because an effect by definition necessitates a cause. To assert the opposite would be to say that man makes a choice without choosing, or that he prefers something without a preference. And it simply will not do to claim, as the libertarians do, that the will determines itself. This too is irrational. Why?—because for the will to determine itself is for the will to act; thus, the act of the will whereby it determines it-

self must be an antecedent act of the will, otherwise it cannot be said to be “self-determined.” But this act too must be determined by a preceding act of the will, *ad infinitum*. Necessarily, says Edwards, there must be a first cause for the will to act; but if there is no first cause, all we have is infinite regress, so that we could never get started. Here again we have a logical impossibility (FOW, 180–216, 337–342).

Edwards also marshaled a plethora of biblical passages to show that the Bible does indeed teach, in opposition to open theism, that God foreordains all things, and is therefore the ultimate First Cause of all things (including men’s “free” choices). As God foreordains all things, He thereby foreknows all things that come to pass. The biblical view of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, of course, dispenses altogether with libertarianism; it necessitates the certainty of all future events (FOW, 239–269). Edwards’ response to present day open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge would be one of incredulity. “One would think,” commented Edwards, that “it should be wholly needless to enter on such an argument with any that profess themselves Christians” (FOW, 239).²⁷

Arminians and the open theists are fond of arguing that the deterministic necessity espoused by Reformed and Calvinistic theology does away with moral virtue (OG, 173–175). That is, if a person is “determined” to make a certain choice, thereby rendering the choice necessary, then the individual must not be held responsible for that choice. John Gerstner countered by saying: “We do not see that because God predestinates that a certain action is going to come to pass that that act must violate human freedom. We do not see that it is impossible for God to predestinate an act to come to pass by means of the deliberate choice of specific individuals.”²⁸ Jonathan Edwards would agree with Dr. Gerstner. He utilizes the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* argument to make his point. According to Edwards, if it were true that the biblical doctrine of determinism does away with moral virtue, then we would have to conclude that God Himself, who is “necessarily” and unchangeably holy, is a non-moral Being. The same could be said regarding the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, because He necessarily lived a perfectly obedient life and died a perfect atoning death (FOW, 277–294).

27. For more on this, see C. Samuel Storms, “Open Theism in the Hands of an Angry Puritan,” in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003) 114–130.

28. John H. Gerstner, *Primitive Theology*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996) 190.

In his doctrinal study on *Original Sin*, Jonathan Edwards averred that if the idea of libertarian free will were to be established, it would vitiate biblical Christianity. He wrote:

I stand ready to confess to the aforementioned modern divines [libertarian free will thinkers], if they can maintain their peculiar notion of freedom, consisting in the self-determining power of the will, as necessary to moral agency, and can thoroughly establish it in opposition to the arguments lying against it, then they have an impregnable castle, to which they may repair, and remain invincible, in all the controversies they have with the reformed divines, concerning original sin, the sovereignty of grace, election, redemption, conversion, the efficacious operation of the Holy Spirit, the nature of saving faith, perseverance of the saints, and other principles of the like kind.²⁹

Thanks be to God that neither the “modern divines” of Edwards’ day nor the heterodox thinkers of our day are correct. Rather, they are in great theological error. They are propagating a false and fatal doctrine, which cannot possibly be supported by the Word of God; it can lead only to apostasy. The god of open theism is an impotent and “diminished god” of “lesser glory.”

What, then, is the biblical relationship between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility? Edwards wrote:

In efficacious grace we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some, and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what He produces, *viz.*, our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors. We are, in different respects, wholly passive, and wholly active.

In the Scriptures the same things are represented as from God and from us. God is said to convert, and men are said to convert and turn. God makes a new heart, and we are commanded to circumcise our own hearts; not merely because we must use the means in order to the effect, but the effect itself is our act and our duty. These things are agreeable to that text, “God works in you both to will and to do.”³⁰

God holds man accountable to his duty, not necessarily to his ability.³¹ Man is responsible to God as His image bearer, but he is unable to come to God apart from God’s sovereign grace. Salvation is not a 50%–50% relationship (as per Arminianism and Open Theism), said Edwards; neither is it a 100%–0% relationship (as in hyper-Calvinism). Rather, it is a relationship wherein man is totally dependent on God’s sovereign grace, while man is involved. This is precisely what Jesus taught in John 6:37: “All that the Father gives Me *will come to Me*, and the *one who comes to Me* I will by no means cast out.” Those who come to Christ will be saved, but they are not able to come to Christ, as Jesus went on to teach, unless the Father “draws them”: “No one can come to Me unless *the Father who sent Me draws him*” (John 6:44; emphasis added). It is also the position expressed by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (7:3):

Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, *requiring of them* faith in Him that they may be saved, and *promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe* (emphasis added).

CONCLUSION

We conclude this article with the words of John Frame, who well summarizes the heterodoxy of free will open theism as follows:

They have denied God’s sovereign lordship over His creation. They have denied His rule over time and His unchangeable eternal purpose. They have denied His exhaustive knowledge of the future. All for what? They have done all this to make their theology consistent with libertarian freedom—an incoherent, unbiblical speculation that denies divine sovereignty and destroys what

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29. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 3, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970) 376. For more on this see C. Samuel Storms, “The Will: Fettered Yet Free (Freedom of the Will),” in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004) 201–220.

30. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986) 2.557.

31. In Proverbs 16:4–5, we read that God “has made all things for Himself, even the wicked for the day of doom,” yet at the same time we are told that “everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD,” and that “none will go unpunished.” And in Acts 2:22–23 we read that “by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God” Jesus Christ was “delivered” to be crucified; yet, it was by the “lawless hands” of guilty men that He was “put to death.”