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Open Theism: An Arminian-Pentecostal Response

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By

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OPEN THEISM: AN ARMINIAN-PENTECOSTAL RESPONSE

Introduction

The contemporary expression of Open Theism¹ arrived on the American theological scene in 1994 with the publication of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*.² This collection of essays by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger asserted that God desires a responsive relationship with His creatures and has granted them such significant freedom that He chooses not to know what they will decide until they do so. Open Theism has caused no small furor within the ranks of the Evangelical Theological Society, which has traditionally been dominated by a more Calvinistic theological perspective. In fact, the continuation of the membership of Pinnock and Sanders will be considered at the Society's November meeting this year. This paper will look first at Open Theism and then present an Arminian-Pentecostal response.

An Overview of Open Theism

Introduction to Open Theism

John Sanders provides one of the better summaries of the position being maintained by Open Theism.³ Sanders notes that in Open Theism God is viewed as

¹ The movement is also called Presentism, Open Theism, Openness of God, and Freewill Theism. For clarity and ease of expression, this paper will try to consistently use Open Theism as the designation for the movement.

² Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders and others, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

³ John E. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 282.

loving humans, desiring that they have reciprocal relationships with each other and with Him. In so doing, humans participate in triune love, freely collaborating with the purposes of God for creation. To achieve His purpose, God sovereignly decided to make some of His actions contingent on human requests and actions; this means that there is some conditionality in God in that He truly responds to what humans do. To make room for the real response of humans, God chooses to exercise general rather than meticulous providence. Rather than ordaining every detail of the human experience, in Open Theism God is understood to have only determined the broad outlines of His plan, making room for humans to influence the particulars of the plan as they interact with Him. This clearly means that God grants human being libertarian freedom; humans always could have chosen otherwise and God learned of the human choice when it was made.

This preliminary understanding of Open Theism is expanded by Clark Pinnock to include the concept of risk.⁴ That is, God so desires that His relationships with humans be genuine and free that He allows humans to cooperate, or not, with Him and does not know what they will choose until they do. God, however, is endlessly resourceful and competent to work with whatever the human response to achieve His purposes. The future is brought into being through the interaction of human and divine responses to each other, a future that is open and marked by possibilities and potentials instead of being fixed and pre-programmed. The real perfection of God is to be seen in His relationality, not in His unchangeability. God is glorified in that He is able to enter covenant relationship with humans, allow them full freedom, and still accomplish His ultimate purpose.

⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 3-9.

Basic Arguments of Open Theism

With the very real possibility that I am not being as inclusive as I should, I suggest that there are four basic arguments that underlie Open Theism. Among the various exponents of the position there are a number of arguments and doctrinal extrapolations from them, but when they are compared they can be traced back to some common foundational assertions: (1) the traditional view of God comes from a Hellenized theology, (2) the human will is free in libertarian terms, (3) biblical metaphors must be heard to express truth, and (4) the future is open and unknowable until it comes into being.

The Hellenized View of God

The proponents of Open Theism charge that the early fathers of the Christian Church synthesized their biblical understandings of God with the Greek philosophy of their day, predominantly, but not exclusively, that of Platonism. While acknowledging that the use of some philosophy is always endemic to Gospel proclamation and apologetic efforts, the assertion is that the baggage of Greek philosophy has become so engrained in the traditional understanding of God that present believers see it as biblical when it really is a result of the synthesis. In the main, the philosophical emphasis on permanence over change has led to seeing God as beyond change, and thus, as the Open Theist understands it, also beyond relationship with the creation.⁵

There are several aspects of Greek philosophy's view of deity that have been adopted into the Christian view of God, according to Open Theism, somewhat obscuring a more correct understanding. Greek philosophy viewed God as being absolutely perfect,

⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 141.

thus denying any possibility of change or need. From the perspective of such perfection any change would have to be away from perfection, a possibility that simply could not be allowed. The very essence of God was understood to be beyond any possibility of expression or description in human language and thought. The existence of deity was described as being eternal, which meant existence beyond the impact of the passing of moments and the categories of past, present, and future. The deity of Greek philosophy was self-sufficient and impassible; deity has no need of anything outside of itself and is incapable of feelings. Deity is all-powerful, all-knowing, and so orders the creation that nothing happens that is not within the providential plan and purpose. All of this brief overview of the Greek philosophical picture of deity flows from the beginning point—deity is absolutely perfect.⁶ Open Theism maintains that this Greek description of deity fails to grasp the biblical revelation, which is of a relational and risk-taking God.⁷

Freedom of the Will

The second foundational argument made in Open Theism is that human beings have libertarian freedom. To begin to understand the import of this assertion, it can be noted that there are two basic approaches to the freedom of the human will—compatibilist freedom and libertarian freedom.⁸ William Hasker, an Open Theist philosopher, defines the two options so as to show the line of distinction between the two

⁶ John E. Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God*, Pinnock, Clark H (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 60-72.

⁷ For a more complete explanation of the way in which Open Theism sees the influence of Greek philosophy on the traditional doctrine of God, see Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 72-91.

⁸ The debate regarding the freedom of the will is far more complex than this very simple reduction to two options. However, the use of the two large categories is helpful in getting at the Open Theist position in contrast with that of both Calvinism and Arminianism. For that reason, it is used here. See William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, Pinnock, Clark H (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 136-137.

and set up the argument for the Open Theist usage of libertarian freedom. Compatibilist freedom, which attempts to show that human freedom and determinism are compatible, means that “an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is true that the agent can perform the action if she decides to perform it and she can refrain from the action if she decides not to perform it.” While the power to perform the given action is limited by the will of the person, the will of the person is not totally free; forces, both obvious and not so obvious, determine the choice to be made. Among those influences, in theological compatibilism, is the action of the Almighty God working within the person to direct choices according to His plan. So, while the humans possess what could be called outer freedom, they do not possess true inner freedom because of the working of God within to assure that what is done is what He chooses.

By contrast, as Hasker defines it, in libertarian freedom “an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.” This would mean that there is nothing in the world, either outside of or within the agent, which inhibits the performance of the agent’s power. The agent possesses both inner and outer freedom to choose which act to perform. It is this approach to human freedom that Open Theism espouses.⁹

The espousal of libertarian human freedom by Open Theism is based upon several concerns.¹⁰ That God Himself possesses libertarian freedom provides the ground for the

⁹ It should be noted that in general Arminianism, too, espouses libertarian freedom. The difference will be the degree of God’s knowledge about the choices that come from such freedom. In Open Theism God does not know before what such choices will be; in Arminianism, God does know (but His knowledge is not causative).

¹⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 220-224.

same kind of freedom in human beings. God chooses to allow humans libertarian freedom so that genuine loving relationships can be created. Only if humans respond voluntarily, genuinely being able to choose otherwise, can there be loving relationships between themselves and God and among themselves. To elicit such relationships with and among humans, God granted freedom.¹¹ Human beings think that they have exactly this kind of freedom—they sense that they could have chosen otherwise. Such a perception, to be rational, must be real. Open Theists also argue that for moral responsibility to be true, humans must be free to choose the actions that they pursue. For the freedom to obey God to be real and worthy of reward, the freedom to disobey with its reward of punishment must also be a viable option.¹² That the biblical record is of God's opposition to and mourning over human failure and sin points to the reality that humans could choose other than God wished and, according to Open Theism, that God was not aware of what the humans would choose until they did so.

Biblical Metaphors

The proper means by which to understand the biblical metaphors, especially those in reference to God, is a point of distinction for Open Theism. The traditional approach to the metaphors about God's feelings, body part, etc., is that those really do not reflect what God is because they conflict with the larger understanding of God. For example, the metaphor of God changing His mind usually is explained away because of the prior commitment to the unchanging nature of God. This approach is not acceptable to Open Theism.

¹¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 126.

¹² Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 38.

Open Theism acknowledges that all human language about God is anthropomorphic. It is impossible for us to speak about God any other way, precisely because the only language we have is human and the effort to capture the divine with human language demands the use of metaphor and images.¹³ However, that metaphorical language must be taken seriously because it is “reality depicting.” It does far more than merely speak of some figurative understanding of a divine act or characteristic, it reveals reality. While they do not tell us the whole story, they do tell us the truth about the relationship between God and the world. Thus, they cannot be dismissed as mere analogy with no truth content, nor can they be taken too literally.¹⁴ In that the biblical metaphors are revelatory they do tell us what God is like, although they do not provide equivalent comparisons between divine and human features. The biblical metaphor of the anger of God must be taken seriously, noting that God does feel something like, but not exactly equivalent to, the anger that humans know. To say that God changes His mind must be seen as revealing an aspect of God’s relationship with humans, although it would not demean Him by reducing Him to the variableness of humans.

Understanding the Future

The last foundational argument of Open Theism is the way they see the future. The more traditional understanding of the future, based on the eternality, or timelessness, of God, is that the future already exists, at least in God’s perspective. Although human beings are time bound and are limited to the present, with memories of the past, God is above such limitations and sees what is future to humans as though it were present.

¹³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 15-16, 19-26.

¹⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 61.

Similarly, He sees the past as present, because such categories as past, present, and future do not apply to His existence. Viewing God in this way certainly means that He knows the future because it is present to Him.

Open Theism takes a different approach, asserting that the future does not exist until it arrives. The future is a category that even God must reckon with; it is that which will be but is not until the choices and decisions of free human beings create it. Thus, God cannot know the future because it is not anything that can be known. Open Theism does not see this as a limitation in God's knowledge, because He knows everything that can be known. When the future does arrive, as it will through the interaction between humans and God, He will be the first to know about it.

We should not pass by this point without noting that for Open Theism God does have general plans for the fulfillment of His ultimate purposes for the creation. An important part of that larger plan of God was to create a world in which humans have true freedom, evidenced by God opting not to know what they would choose before they did. Thus, many specific details of the ultimate plan of God for the creation are being worked out in the ongoing interaction between Himself and human beings. In that interaction God is constantly at work to bring about His ultimate goal; for Open Theism, the realization of God's final destiny is not in doubt.

Biblical Support for Open Theism

There are numerous specific passages to which Open Theism appeals to support its view of God and His knowledge; we will mention a few of the more important of

them.¹⁵ In Genesis 6:5-8 the pathos of God over the fall into sin of humans is declared in stark terms that seem to indicate that He had not anticipated this result and now regrets that He had created humans. God determines to take the responsibility for the poor results and to destroy the creation and start over with Noah's family. In Genesis 18:16-32 Abraham negotiates with God over the future of Sodom after learning that God has come down to learn, as though He did not know previously, the truth about the city's depravity. As the negotiation progresses God changes His mind about the number of righteous persons required to constitute the reason for sparing the city from total destruction.

The testing of Abraham's faith, in regard to the sacrifice of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), provides knowledge about the true nature of Abraham's trust in God that was not available to God prior to the test. The failure of Israel at Sinai in the making of golden calves as objects of worship evoked from God the exasperated decision to completely destroy the nation and start over with Moses (Exodus 32:1-14). However, the intercessory ministry of Moses on behalf of the people of Israel caused God to change His mind. This apparent changing of God's mind in regard to Israel's sinning is repeated several more times in the historical books of the Old Testament (cf. Numbers 11:1-2, 10; 14:11-35; 16:20-35, 41-48).

Saul, the first choice of God to become the king over Israel, proved to be a dismal failure, a fact that Open Theists see as surprising to God and forcing Him to make another choice for the leadership of His people (1 Samuel 13:13; 15:10-11, 35). Later in Israel's history, King Hezekiah received a word from God through Isaiah that his death

¹⁵ For a more inclusive explanation of the biblical argument for Open Theism see Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 55-85; Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, Pinnock, Clark H (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 22-46; and, John E. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, 39-139.

was imminent. Because of Hezekiah's cry for God's mercy, God relented and sent Isaiah back with another message that promised more years of life and service to the godly king (2 Kings 20:1-6).

These, and other, biblical passages are interpreted by Open Theism to show that God does not know the choices and decisions of human beings until they make them. Often, then, He is forced to change His mind and plans to work with the decisions of the creature. Frequently the emotional side of God is clearly seen in His disappointment with the unforeseen choices of the creation.

An Arminian-Pentecostal Response

Introduction

Arminian theology provides the best way to reconcile the tension between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the human will, which is at the heart of the question of the extent of the knowledge of God. The Arminian tradition dates back at least to the teaching of James Arminius in the late sixteenth century and continues to be expressed in the contemporary church, especially in the Wesleyan and Pentecostal traditions. I will quickly survey the major doctrinal assertions of Arminianism, discuss the tension between the knowledge of God and human freedom, and consider the nature of the knowledge of God, especially as it has to do with the future. The paper will conclude with some preliminary thoughts about the utility of the Arminian approach in the life of the believer.

Doctrinal Assertions of Arminianism

The major tenets of Arminianism are very much within the classical theological tradition of the Church. There are some aspects of the Arminian theology that need to be

highlighted here to support the contention that this view best answers the question of how much God knows.¹⁶ For Arminians God is sovereign; that is God is the absolute monarch of the created universe and is free to act as He wills and in accord with His own nature. God only needs to be true to Himself and cannot be conditioned by any other considerations. Nothing outside of Himself limits or controls Him.

God's choice to create personal beings and give them a limited freedom to act in co-relationship with Him did not violate His sovereignty. He exercises His sovereignty to create such beings and to respond to them out of His own nature and character. That is, He chooses to allow the creatures freedom and to respond to that. When the free creatures fell into sin, He bound Himself, because of His nature, to them to become their redeemer.¹⁷ His sovereignty is such that He can limit Himself in ways that no force outside of Himself can, and can allow His free creatures to disappoint Him and fail to meet His expectations for them. God always achieves His intentions, but not always His desires. For example, He desires that all come to repentance and fellowship with Himself; that desire is not realized. His intention, however, to create moral beings who can accept His grace is realized.

God is creator and preserver of all that exists outside of Himself. The power of God is so great that nothing in the world He has created is out of control, although it may appear to us that it is. He is a personal being who experiences will, thought, and feeling. He certainly responds emotionally and volitionally to the decisions and actions of human

¹⁶ See Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2002), 21-23, 35-56. Picirilli, a Free-Will Baptist, argues that the Arminian view of God is important to understanding the expression of His omniscience.

¹⁷ Jack W. Cottrell, "The Nature of Divine Sovereignty," in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, Pinnock, Clark H (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 106-113. Cottrell asserts that the Calvinist view of God's sovereignty is deterministic, while the Arminian view is that God exercises sovereign control, more forcefully in general terms and less so in more specific terms.

beings, although we must be careful not to demand that His experience is exactly the same as ours. The God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is by no means impassive.

God is above time and space, but operates knowingly within them. This is one of the most intriguing aspects of our limited understanding of God. Traditionally the Church has affirmed that God is both transcendent and immanent, and by this has acknowledged that God is both above the time-space world in which we live and that He is fully capable of working within that situation. While not limited to the succession of moments, as are we, He is cognizant of such and able to work within it. After all, He created the world to operate in this manner and chose to become incarnate in Jesus to live and manifest Himself to us in this time-space world.

God does not change, and He changes. The older means of making this affirmation is to call God immutable, a concept that still has great value. Arminians note that God's essential being and purposes do not change; however, because He has created moral beings He chooses to respond to them in ways that can be described as changing. The people of Nineveh repented and God did not send the judgment predicted by Jonah. The question that is important to this paper is whether God knew before the Ninevites repented that they would repent. Arminianism asserts that because of His omniscience God did know.

An important corollary to the affirmation of the omniscience of God is the recognition that no force exists except that which is subordinate to God. The power of God is such that no force can thwart His will; indeed, all other forces in the universe owe their existence to God. Only He can choose in any way to limit Himself. The picture of such a powerful God would not be complete without noting that He is both good in

Himself and the source of all good external to Himself; He can be trusted completely and is deserving of all glory and honor.

The Tension Between God's Knowledge and Human Freedom

The preceding discussion of some of the major theological assertions of Arminianism serves to set the background for the consideration of the question at hand: how much of the future does God know? An important aspect of the Arminian understanding of God and His relation to His creation revolves around the knowledge of God and His provision of free moral choice for humanity. Can God know the future actions of human beings without that knowledge robbing them of their freedom to choose?¹⁸

Obviously there are two aspects to the matter at hand: the knowledge of God and the free moral agency of human beings. We will consider each of these concerns in turn. The argument for God's knowledge is directly related to the truth that God is a personal being. As a personal being He possesses the capacity for knowing Himself and all things external to Himself. The biblical portrait of God is of One who is always engaged with His creation in ways that can only be described as coming from knowledge. He communicates with Adam and Eve from the moment of creation onward. He calls the various patriarchs of Israel into relationship with Himself and communicates with them His intentions for them. Perhaps most clearly, God reveals His ability for knowledge and communication in the person and work of Jesus Christ who lived among humans, expressing His knowledge of them at every turn.

¹⁸ For an excellent, though somewhat philosophical, defense of the Arminian position of simple foreknowledge, see David Hunt, "The Simple Foreknowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, Beilby, James K., and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 65-103.

That God is possessed of knowledge is hardly novel and seldom debated. The more crucial, and somewhat controversial, aspect of God's knowledge has to do with its extent. He certainly knows the past and present; can He know the future? Can we really use the term omniscience with which to characterize the knowledge of God? The Arminian answer to the question is an unequivocal yes. Three classical Arminian scholars, Richard Watson, John Miley, and Samuel Wakefield argue for seeing God's knowledge as all encompassing.

Richard Watson asserts that "the omniscience of God is constantly connected in Scripture with omnipresence, and forms a part of almost every description of that attribute; for as God is a spirit, and therefore intelligent, if he is everywhere, if nothing can exclude him, not even the most solid bodies, nor the minds of intelligent beings, then are all things 'naked and opened to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.'"¹⁹ This linking of the knowledge of God with His attribute of omnipresence forms the basis for Watson's argument that the knowledge of God has no limitations, not even that of the future. John Miley makes the point even more forcefully. He claims that "omniscience must be God's perfect conception of himself, and of all things and events, without respect to the time of their existence or occurrence. Any limitation in any particular must be a limitation in the divine knowledge."²⁰ Samuel Wakefield describes omniscience as "boundless knowledge; and when it is ascribed to God the meaning is, not merely that he

¹⁹ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes: Or a View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Carlton & Porter, 1850), 1:371.

²⁰ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Eaton & Mains, 1892), 1:180.

has power to know everything, but that he actually knows all things, past, present, and future.”²¹

The greatness and expansiveness of the knowledge of God is a teaching of the biblical materials. The psalmist declares, ‘O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thought from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in, behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain’ (139:1-6).²² The exalted status of the knowledge of God is clearly the focus of these powerful words. His knowledge not only surpasses human knowledge in content, but the very concept of the knowledge of God, though somewhat analogous to human knowledge, is also beyond human understanding. This leads the psalmist later to declare, “great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (147:5).

In marveling about the extensiveness of God’s knowledge, the writer of Hebrews asserts that “the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (4:12-13).

This brief sampling of biblical material seems to support the theological position that the knowledge of God is vast and without limitations. When that understanding is

²¹ Samuel Wakefield, *A Complete Systeme of Christian Theology*, 2 vols. (Salem, OH: Schmull Publishing Co., 1985), 1:151.

²² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations will be from the New International Version (NIV).

placed against the equally important truth that human beings have freedom, one or the other truths must be either dismissed or re-defined in some ways. I would suggest that while the omniscience of God may need further explanation, and to that I will turn below, there are dangers in limiting God's omniscience. These dangers seem to be sufficient to demand that we do not limit the knowledge of God, even of future events.

It is possible that in limiting the knowledge of God we also limit the nature of God. The God of the biblical revelation is great and without limits. We use Greek concepts, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc., to try to express this understanding of God. While I do admit that we must not sell out theology to the ancient Greek philosophical expressions, that does not make it inherently fallacious to use some of those concepts. Is it possible that a God who has gaps in His knowledge is less than the picture of the biblical God?

If there are knowledge areas in which God has no clue as to what will happen, could we be limiting the ability of God to provide guidance for His children? If He is not in possession of the fullness of knowledge, can He with any accuracy provide the needed direction for the affairs of human existence? A God to whom the future is as open as is the past is the kind of God who can show humans the path upon which they should travel toward the goals that He has for them.

One of the primary ways in which the omniscience of God is shown in the biblical materials to extend to the future is in the recording of His ability to prophesy future events. It would take more time than is allotted to trace all of the biblical prophecies, so I will quickly call to mind some of the examples that are important here. God knew in advance how long Israel would be in Egyptian bondage (Genesis 15:12-16); He knew

how long Israel would be away from their land after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Jeremiah 25:8-14); He knew by name the individual, Cyrus, who would authorize the return of the people to their land at the end of the exile (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1); He knew about the succession of nations and revealed it to Daniel as He interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar of the great image (Daniel 2:1-49); and, there are numerous indications of God's prior knowledge about the coming of the Jesus into world through the miracle of the incarnation. It could be argued that these are but illustrations of events that God intended to cause, and indeed He did; but it must be noted that all of them are intertwined with the individual responses and activities of multiple human beings. That is, He knew of the actions, choices, decisions, and responses of multiple humans before they actually carried them out and was able to declare ahead of time their result. In fact Miley asserts that "the prophecies cannot be interpreted without the divine prescience of morally free and responsible volitions in men."²³

Isaiah clearly argues that what sets God apart from the gods of the land is that He is able to know what will happen before it does. In chapters 41-48 He exults in the knowledge of God as being vital for separating Him from the various deities of the land who could not even know the present much less the future. Israel's God was able to predict things that had come to pass and what will yet occur. From that section I will cite just one passage as an example: "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you" (42:8-9).²⁴

²³ Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 1:187.

²⁴ Other passages in this Isaiah section that assert similarly are 41:21-29; 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 44:24-28; and, 45:1-7.

The other aspect of the tension with which we are dealing is the freedom of humans to make real choices. The nature of the freedom that is being considered for humans is that we can choose, and could have chosen otherwise than what we chose. That is, the freedom to choose is not coerced by either external or internal forces. This is not to deny that often there are forces outside of ourselves that impact the choices that we make, nor is it to fail to acknowledge that there are internal forces (desires, motives, etc.) that also impact our decisions. The nature of freedom is such that decisions can be made in spite of these forces and that we can really assert that we could have chosen otherwise. In theological/philosophical parlance this could be called libertarian freedom.

It probably is too much of a truism, but we humans do think that we have just this kind of freedom. We understand that we are free to choose in the various situations of our lives. I agree that it is not always correct merely to go by what we perceive to be true, and I further agree that human pride and arrogance can assert things about ourselves that run contrary to God's revelation. In this matter, however, I suspect that our perception is correct, not because of human status but because of the creation-gift of God that humans should be capable of genuinely responding to Him.

If humans did not have this ability to make real choices could their turning to the God of love be genuine? It does seem that the need for free response is a vital part of the relationship that He desires for His creation. God was so committed to this freely-entered-into-relationship of love that He created humans with the capacity to even say no to Him. That Adam and Eve sinned is a testimony to the freedom God granted to them, a freedom that He desired that they use to obey and serve Him.

God's creation of moral creatures necessitated their having the freedom to make choices. If moral choices are coerced it is difficult to see how they can be then called moral. To hold humans responsible to obey and accountable when they do not, demands that they be granted freedom to make the choice whether to obey. To create humans who cannot freely choose to obey God and then punish them for not doing so does not seem worthy of the Moral Ruler of the universe. To create humans who can do nothing other than obey God and then reward them for doing so does not either seem worthy of the Moral Ruler of the universe. The entire system of morality, rewards and punishments, depends upon the creature being free to choose the response they will make, and then being held accountable for that choice.

We have suggested that in the apparent conflict between the knowledge of God and the freedom of human beings we cannot dismiss the knowledge of God. Now, we are noting that human freedom, too, is an important truth that cannot be dismissed without doing violence to the way in which God is working with His world. It does appear that we must to maintain the two, although doing so will require that we revisit the understanding of the nature of the knowledge of God. Perhaps the answer to the question of how much God knows is to be found not in limiting either God's knowledge or human freedom, but in reconsidering the nature of His omniscience.

The Nature of God's Knowledge

The Arminian understanding of the nature of God's omniscience is, for the most part, in line with the Reformation understanding. We will note that at a point the Arminian view will diverge, thus providing the possibility of God knowing the future in all of its contingencies without that knowledge becoming the causal force robbing

humans of their freedom. I will make use of a series of observations to set out an Arminian approach to the omniscience of God.

First, we should note that the knowledge of God is intuitive in contrast with being the result of acquisition. To make this assertion is to suggest that God does not need to learn anything—His knowledge is immediate and always available to Him. He does not have any areas in which He needs to gain knowledge and is not forever learning new items of data. This would mean that in regard to future choices and activities of humans, God already knows and does not need to learn after they have occurred. That knowledge in God is simple and direct.

How God knows the future is not the concern—there are various theories and ideas about that. The point being asserted here is that He does know the future, not that a particular theory of how He does is the only way in which to express this point. There are those who suggest that God sees into the future almost as though He has a giant time-telescope seeing what is going to happen from somewhere in the eternal past. There are others who prefer to talk about the eternal present of God; so what we consider to be past and future are really in His present. In this way, then, He knows what is future to us because it is present to Him. I am not calling for either of these to be believed, or for some other theory not mentioned here. All I am suggesting here is that God does know, and that intuitively, the future.

If the knowledge of God is intuitive, then second we must also note that it is complete in contrast with being fragmentary. This suggests that God knows completely all that is to be known and that there are no areas in which His knowledge needs further improvement. This would also call for seeing God's knowledge as being incapable of

declining; there is nothing that He has forgotten or will forget. In contrast to human knowledge that is always fragmentary and incomplete, the knowledge of God has no need for anyone to explain things to Him to fill out the gaps in His knowledge.

Third, an Arminian approach to the knowledge of God asserts that He knows Himself and all that is in the created world, which is external to Him. As a personal being, He is fully cognizant of all that He is, knows, and can do. Once again, the contrast with human knowledge is helpful—we know ourselves in part, and often need the help of qualified counselors to enlighten us as to our true motivations and purposes. God has no such need. His knowledge is not limited to being merely internal to Himself, for He also knows that which is external to Himself. In that He created all that is external to Himself and has chosen to relate Himself to that creation, He has a better grasp of the world and the creatures in it than we humans can possibly have.

At this point I need to introduce an Arminian position on the knowledge of God that separates it from Calvinism and will move toward answering the question of how much God knows. Arminians generally see the knowledge of God in relation to the future as prescient and not as causal. That is, this approach to the knowledge of God could be called foreknowledge in the sense of knowing what will happen before, in human time, it happens. To see God's knowledge of the future in this light is to suggest that He knows what we will decide and do before we do it, but that that knowledge does not cause the decision or action that we take. Human freedom still allows the human to make the choice, and the human could have chosen otherwise.

The objection could be raised that if God knows before we act what we will do our actions are caused by that knowledge and our free will is lost. It might be questioned

as to whether knowledge can be causal at all. In Calvinism, which can almost border on being deterministic, that which causes the future to run the course God has planned for it is His decree, His will. That He also knows what will happen is not in itself causal; it is only knowledge of what He was decreed to occur. In Arminianism, that decree of God to predetermine before history begins the course of human history is not held. In human knowledge the most certain knowledge we have is of the past, and that knowledge is not causal. For instance, if I say that I know that in 1492 Columbus sailed the Ocean blue, that knowledge does not in itself cause Columbus to have sailed the Ocean to discover the Americas. The knowledge of God of future events can be prescient and not causal.

The prescient foreknowledge of God is aware of contingencies as contingencies, certainties as certainties, and necessary things as necessary. Robert Picirilli asserts that “God knows all things that will be as certain . . . while some of these certainties are necessary, others are truly contingent.”²⁵ A contingency is that that could occur in more than one way; this would not mean that they are uncertain, however. For example, when I come to a fork in the road I am faced with the contingency of which path to follow. I will take one of them, that is certain; the contingency is seen in that I could have taken the other one. That which is necessary, however, is caused by forces that will not allow for the outcome to be other than what it will be. If I jump off of the roof of my house, I will come down to the ground. The law of gravity will not allow for any other outcome.²⁶

²⁵ Robert E. Picirilli, "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, 2 (2000), 262.

²⁶ For a more complete discussion of the relationship between contingent, certain and necessary, see Picirilli, "Foreknowledge," 261-265; Picirilli, *Grace*, 36-41; Wakefield, *A Complete Systeme of Christian Theology*, 1:153-154; and, Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 1:379-381.

Human freedom brings contingencies to the table in the discussion of how much God knows. The Arminian understanding is that the foreknowledge of God knows those contingencies as contingencies. It is certain that at the fork in the road I will take one of the paths, and God knows the path that I will take. I could have taken the other path, and if I had God would have known that. In that contingent is not necessary, I take the path of my choosing, about which God knows fully. Arminius expressed it this way: “But if he [God] resolve to use a force that is not irresistible, but that can be resisted by the creature, then that thing is said to be done, not necessarily but contingently, although its actual occurrence was certainly foreknown by God, according to the infinity of his understanding, by which he knows all results whatever, that will arise from certain causes which are laid down, and whether those causes produce a thing necessarily or contingently.”²⁷

This approach to the foreknowledge of God also assists in understanding the manner in which God knows those for salvation who will respond to His gracious call. In contrast to the view that God decrees who will be saved, the Arminian understanding is that God’s foreknowledge is prior to His decree. In talking about the decree of God to save particular persons, Arminius expressed his understanding in this way: “This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing grace, believe, and through his subsequent grace would persevere . . . and, by which foreknowledge, he likewise knew those who would not believe and persevere.”²⁸

²⁷ James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1977), 1:291.

²⁸ Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 1:248.

I am not in any way suggesting that God cannot force me to take a specific path, whether I want to take it or not. I do see Him in possession of such power. However, I am asserting that He has chosen to allow human beings to have genuine freedom and, though He knows which path I will take, He does not remove that freedom from me even if I am about to choose the path that will be harmful to me.

The result of God's prescient foreknowledge is the magnification of His all-inclusive knowledge. He does not await my decision before knowing what I will do, nor is He wondering what the future will turn out to be, as if it were composed merely of my human decisions. Such prescience means that God knows what will happen, but not that His foreknowledge causes what must take place. The important variable is the free choice of the human.²⁹ Thus, the human being remains responsible before God for choices made, even though God knows those choices that will be made by the human. This is so because the foreknowledge of God does not coerce, or force, the choice that the person makes.³⁰

The Praxis of the Arminian Approach

The Arminian approach to the question of how much God controls is scriptural and logical. It allows for the omniscience of God and the freewill of humans to both be accepted. The question that remains has to do with the practical application of the view. I will make some brief observations about three important areas of praxis: prayer, guidance, and the problem of evil.

²⁹ See Wakefield, *A Complete System of Christian Theology*, 1:156; Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 1:380-381. The argument is made that God's foreknowledge of future events renders them certain but not necessary. Therefore, it could be said that future events in God's foreknowledge will take place, not that they must take place.

³⁰ See also Augustine, "On Free Will," *Augustine: Earlier Works*, Burleigh, John H. S., The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1953), 169-179; and Hunt, "The Simple Foreknowledge View," 86-91.

Pentecostals and Charismatics, especially, are concerned that their theology allow for prayer to be meaningful and effective. We want to know that prayer changes things, elicits God's favor, and opens to the miraculous intervention of God in our affairs. To say that God knows contingencies as that, is to allow for the intervention of God in response to the praying of humans. That He knows what He will do in response to our praying renders our praying effective and valueable, because He also knows what will happen if we do not pray. That He knows that He will move in response to our praying makes our praying essential to our lives as His servants.

A God who knows the future is able to render guidance for humans in regard to the decisions and choices they face. Since His knowledge of the future is not causal and He knows the contingencies as that, He can provide direction for human affairs. 1 Samuel 23:10-13 tells the story of David's conquest of the Philistine town of Keilah. After the victory, Saul, who is chasing David hoping to corner and kill him, called out his armies to move against David. When David inquires of God whether Saul will come down to Keilah and whether the men of Keilah will turn him over to Saul, God answers in the affirmative to both questions, indicating His knowledge of what will happen. Receiving this word from God as guidance, David and his army moved from Keilah, an act that caused Saul to not come. Clearly God knew what would transpire if David stayed at Keilah, and He knew what would happen if David moved from there. God was able to provide the needed guidance out of His knowledge.

The problem of evil is a most vexing dilemma, one that really does not yield to any easy answers. That God knew that Adam and Eve would fall in no way caused them to fall. They were fully responsible for the choice that they made. That God knew that

Judas was to betray Jesus did not void his freedom to choose or his responsibility for the choice that he made. God has created a world out of His sovereign will that includes the allowance for humans to choose, and even to choose foolishly and sinfully. Because of the sinful choice of the first pair sin has become a reality in human existence. To say that God knew what Hitler, Stalin, and a host of other extremely evil persons, would do does not make Him responsible for what they did. The results of the entrance of sin into the world continue to multiply, and will until the final justice of God is revealed at the day of His appearing.

Conclusion

How much does God know and control? If by that question one is asking about the ultimate intentions of God, about whether the kingdom of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and Christ, about whether the justice of God will be revealed from heaven against evil doers, or about whether God will wipe away every tear in His kingdom, the answer is He will see to it that is accomplished. But, if one is asking about the specific day-to-day choices of humans who are free to choose otherwise, the answer is that while He knows the choice that I will make, He does not control that choice. God is omniscient without violating human freedom.

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