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The Omniscience of God and Open Theism

Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:16 KJV)

Your eyes saw me when I was an unborn fetus. All the days ordained for me were recorded in your scroll before one of them came into existence. (Psalm 139:16)¹

Chuck is driving west along a two-lane “Farm to Market” road in Texas. He has left Memphis where his life, as he once knew it, was over. He has money, but he has no direction. He has taken care of one last piece of unfinished business and now is stopped at a crossroads in West Texas.

He looks at a map. He walks to the center of the intersection (no need to worry about traffic). He looks north and then turns back to the east. He turns to the south and then to the west. Finally he looks back again toward the north. Which way will Chuck go?² Does God know the direction that Chuck will finally take or is he having to wait with us to find out Chuck’s decision?

Our Reformed brothers will quickly assure us that God indeed knows not only the direction that Chuck will take but also what he will do, when he will do it, and every other aspect and detail of the rest of Chuck’s life. They tell us that the reason the Lord knows Chuck’s future direction and destiny is because he is sovereign and has decreed all that will occur (without being or becoming the author or cause of evil). Therefore, by the fact of his sovereign predetermination of all things, it is only logical and natural that he also foreknows all aspects of everything in the universe.

As Free Will Baptists (along with many other evangelical³ Christians) we also affirm that God does know Chuck’s next move, and the next, and the next, and so on; that is, we believe, as do our Reformed brothers, that our Lord knows not only the direction that Chuck will take but also every

1. *New English Translation*, online translation and notes found at www.bible.org.

2. The idea for the illustration is based on the motion picture *Castaway*.

3. In this paper all I mean by the term “evangelical” is one who is truly born-again from above by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, that is, a true Christian.

other aspect and detail of the rest of Chuck's life. However, we differ with our Calvinist brothers as to the reason God knows all the aspects of Chuck's life. While we affirm the complete sovereignty of God, we deny that his foreknowledge of Chuck's future decisions is a result of his foreordination of Chuck's choices.

We have not been told in the Bible exactly how our Lord knows the future so perfectly and precisely,⁴ but we are instructed as to the factuality of his omniscient foreknowledge. He is sovereign. In his sovereignty, he grants to every person a limited free will which the person exercises within the eternal sovereign plan of God for the past, present, and future. The biblical texts teach that God is always aware of all past, present, and future events. He is not like the idols of men who know nothing (Isaiah 41:21-24). Rather, his name is Yahweh, and he says: "My glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isaiah 42:8, 9).

Within recent years a different group of Christian scholars has arrived on the scene. As these men observe Chuck in the middle of this West Texas crossroads, they confidently tell us that we and our Reformed brothers are mistaken. God does not know which direction Chuck will take when he drives away from the crossroads. Yes, they say, God indeed is omniscient, but since Chuck has not yet made a decision as to his next future move, God is waiting with us to see what he will do. These scholars, often called open theists, are quick to tell us that since God knows all that is possible, and since he knows perfectly Chuck's past and present, he probably can predict what Chuck's decision will be for he knows all the probabilities. He knows Chuck very well. But since Chuck has been created with a free will, he may take an unexpected turn, and, for a brief moment, at least, what happens will not be what God thought Chuck would do.

Open theists affirm that God, who is sovereign, is limited in his knowledge of the free will choices of human beings to the extent that he cannot know their exact future deeds and thoughts. We are told that he cannot know the future because, until a future act happens, it does not exist. God knows all that does exist (and all that he has preordained for the future), but since a future decision made by a person with a real free will does not exist until it is made, God cannot know with certainty (in this case) which direction Chuck will take.

4. F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Answering Life's Inescapable Questions* (Nashville: Randall House, 2001), 332-33.

Although we disagree with our Reformed brothers as to *how* God knows the future (i.e., the basis of his foreknowledge), we are in agreement with them as to the reality that God does exhaustively know the past, the present, and all the future (including all the possible turns that man could have taken in the past or might take in the future). But the open theists are bringing strange teachings to our ears. Their ideas are new and obviously different from what we have heard before. They are quick to assure us that their teaching is based on what the Bible really has to say about God and his creation. In fact, they tell us that their position is more biblical than those of the other two positions (Reformed and Arminian).⁵

Let us leave Chuck in the middle of the crossroads for a few minutes and consider our Lord's foreknowledge (1) as we believe it to be and (2) as it is being taught by open theists.

INTRODUCTION TO THE DEBATE

From its beginning, and from its biblical roots, Christianity has continually affirmed that God is omniscient (*omni* = all; *scientia* = knowledge): that is, he eternally possesses all knowledge—past, present, and future. Christians have also understood God's omniscience to mean that he knows all possibilities (contingents) that might or might not occur. Christians have believed that this understanding of God's omniscience is taught directly and clearly by the Word of God, Old and New Testaments. However, open theism or presentism, as it is sometimes called, sets before us a different version of the omniscience of God.

While proclaiming their belief in the omniscience of God, open theists teach that God does not and cannot know the future free acts of human beings. According to this teaching, God knows the past and the present perfectly, and he knows those areas of the future that he has sovereignly decreed (determined, foreordained). The open theist affirms the omniscience of God but denies that this omniscience includes God's exhaustive knowledge of future human free decisions because these acts or thoughts do not yet exist. Something that does not yet exist cannot be known by anyone until it happens.

Any new doctrinal teaching that appears within the boundaries of evangelical Christianity must expect a critical analysis by all those who believe that "the truth has set them free." In particular, a doctrine that directly touches the person and character of God will certainly come

5. Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 9-10.

under quick scrutiny by Christians who love and try to obey the Word of God. The open theists, some of whom act surprised by the turmoil created by their teaching,⁶ have quickly found themselves “under fire” from many (and most) quarters of evangelical biblical scholarship.

The open theists insist that their position goes far beyond the issue of God’s foreknowledge. Rather than emphasizing the sovereignty of God, they focus on the love of God as he desires to interact with human beings. He is the God who puts himself at risk by being the God of the possible, “a God who can work with us to truly change what *might* have been into what *should* be.”⁷ It is their contention that classical theism does not present God as interacting with humans in such a manner. As we will see, open theists go to lengths to establish what they see as a vivid contrast between the loving, caring, interacting God of presentism and the rigid, unmovable God of classical theism.

However, it is with God’s foreknowledge of the future that this paper will deal. His foreknowledge of mankind’s actions and thoughts is seen by all involved in the debate as the key point of difference between open and classical theism. In a paper presented at the 2002 Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Colorado Springs, Bruce A. Ware responded to the question “Why draw the line at foreknowledge?” raised by Clark Pinnock in his work, *Most Moved Mover*. Ware writes:

First, it is precisely here, in open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, that the open view has separated itself from classical Arminianism specifically and from all versions of classical theism generally.... The second reason Pinnock is right to raise the foreknowledge question is this: Open theism has, by this denial, entertained and promoted a reformulated understanding of God and God’s relationship to the world in ways that are massive in its implications both theologically and practically.... It seems to me that before we can think responsibly about whether open theism should rightly be conceived as within or without the bounds of evangelicalism, we must ponder as carefully and fully as we can just what open theism’s distinctive doctrine (i.e. its denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge) leaves us with theologically and practically. After all, open theism is nothing without this doctrine.⁸

6. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 12; and Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), ix-xi.

7. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 18.

8. Bruce A. Ware, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (June 2002):194-95.

For this reason, in this analysis of open theism, the three principal views of God's foreknowledge will first be set forth for comparison. Then open theism's arguments for acceptance as a viable theological option will be evaluated from a biblical viewpoint. Afterwards, we will examine some of the advantages that proponents of open theism expound for their position and look at some of the repercussions of open theism in the ecclesiastical, evangelical community.

TWO "CLASSICAL" VIEWS CONCERNING
THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Both Reformed theology and Reformation Arminian⁹ theology affirm what is usually known as the "classical" view of the foreknowledge of God. This viewpoint states that the biblical data teach that God exhaustively knows the future. He is not learning the future as it happens. He knows what will happen in the physical universe, in the spiritual universe, and in the life of every single individual that has or will ever come into existence. Both Calvinists and most Arminians affirm this biblical teaching because for God to be God, it is his nature to know all things. This belief concerning the Lord's omniscience (past, present, and future) has been the belief of the Christian Church since its beginning (as it was also the belief of the believers of Old Testament times). The belief in man's libertarian free will was also the belief of the early church until the time of Augustine and continues to be the belief of the majority of Christian believers outside the specifically Reformed traditions.¹⁰

9. The Free Will Baptist theological position is a classical Arminian position. By "classical" we mean a theology that is very similar in its belief to that of Jacob Arminius and the original Remonstrants. Today there are various terms used to express our theological stance. Robert Picirilli prefers to refer to our belief as "Reformation Arminianism." Stephen Ashby and J. Matthew Pinson speak of "Reformed Arminianism." F. Leroy Forlines uses "Classical Arminianism," and A. B. Brown writes of a "Modified Arminianism." There is no theological difference in the basic tenets of the writings of these men, only a preference for one term over the other. For an excellent historical summary of the roots of our Arminian heritage, see chapter one of Robert E. Picirilli's *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting views of Salvation: Calvinism & Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002). For a Reformed Arminian view of perseverance, see Stephen Ashby's "A Reformed Arminian View," in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

10. John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2002), 138: "Libertarianism has a long history in Christian theology. Most of the church fathers more or less held this position until Augustine, during the Pelagian controversy, called it into question." In footnote 12 (same page), he notes: "Those Calvinists who place great weight on antiquity and tradition will have to concede, therefore, that the oldest extracanonical traditions do not favor their position."

While this is the “classical” view of God’s foreknowledge, Arminians are said to believe in God’s “simple foreknowledge.” This is the affirmation that the foreknowledge of God—“uncomplicated by exceptions, additions, qualifications et cetera—is by itself wholly compatible with human freedom, divine agency and enhanced providential control.”¹¹

If we reserve “classical” to refer to the view (both for the Calvinist and the Arminian) that God exhaustively knows the future, and if we use “simple” foreknowledge to refer to the Arminian view, then we will use the term “Calvinist”¹² to refer to the Reformed view of God’s foreknowledge. As noted in the story of Chuck at the crossroads, the difference between the two “classic” viewpoints has to do with the *way* in which God knows the future, not *whether* he knows it.

The Calvinist’s view of foreknowledge is based upon God’s sovereign decrees. What God decreed to be is what will be. His sovereignty is such that any thought that he had in eternity “past” must, by necessity, come to be at the time he has so predetermined. This view rejects completely the libertarian free will of mankind, that is, that people are able to make free moral choices that might “go one way or the other” (i.e., decisions that are contingent).

The Reformed teaching is that all things are determined by God. The sovereign decisions of God preclude any libertarian freedom on the part of mankind. All mankind’s seemingly free will choices are responses to God’s choices (decrees) that have come first, and he does not base his foreknowledge on a future knowledge of mankind’s libertarian free choices. John Frame writes from the Reformed perspective:

Reformed theologians have often rejected the antecedent-consequent distinction, because of its association with libertarian freedom. But they have adopted a rather similar distinction, between God’s decretive and preceptive wills. God’s *decretive* will (or simply his “decree”) is synonymous with his foreordination.... It is his eternal purpose, by which he foreordains everything that comes to pass. God’s *preceptive* will is his valuations, particularly as revealed to us in his Word (his “precepts”). God’s decretive will cannot be successfully opposed; what God has decreed will certainly take place. It is possible, however, for creatures to disobey God’s preceptive will—and they often do so.

11. David Hunt, “The Simple-Foreknowledge View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 67.

12. Sometimes referred to as the Augustinian-Calvinist view.

This distinction is somewhat similar to the antecedent-consequent distinction, although the two distinctions tend to appear in different theological traditions. God's preceptive will, like the antecedent will, consists of his valuation of every possible and actual state of affairs. His decretive will, like the consequent will, determines what will actually happen. The difference between decretive and consequent is that the concept of a decretive will excludes libertarianism. God's decision as to what will actually happen is not based on his foreknowledge of the libertarian free choice of men.¹³

According to the Calvinist viewpoint, what appear to be free choices made by humans are really decisions that can only conform to what they desire, given their fallen state. They are not really making undetermined libertarian choices. The seemingly free choices that people make are compatible with God's decretive will. God's sovereignty remains intact, people make the choices they can, given their moral, spiritual condition, and the Calvinist declares them morally responsible for their own sins. Of course, this point moves us beyond the point of the exhaustive foreknowledge of God, but it is this viewpoint that the open theist attacks more than the Arminian view of "simple foreknowledge."

The Free Will Baptist observes Chuck standing in the crossroads, and, while he might venture a guess as to which direction the man may go (by probably eliminating the direction from where he came, and perhaps from another piece of data also known to him), he is absolutely certain that God does know which direction he will take. God may be bringing some influence on Chuck's life that will cause him to respond in one direction or another, and although not probable it is also possible that God could directly force Chuck to go in one certain direction. However, regardless of the final choice that Chuck may make, God simply knows it already because he is God, and God knows all things completely. His knowledge of the future is "certain" but is not causative of the free acts of mankind. "All things that occur are certainly foreknown by God. Every happening is certain and known as such by God from all eternity."¹⁴

As noted above, the Arminian viewpoint does recognize that God could become the direct cause in Chuck's decision if he so desired. After all, God is sovereign. To leave Chuck again, we can think of

13. John Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2001), 109.

14. For an excellent discussion of the terms *certainty*, *contingency*, and *necessity*, see Picirilli, 36-43.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, as he stands before two roads, one that will lead him against Rabbah of the Ammonites and the other against Jerusalem (Ezekiel 21:18-23). In the king's right hand are found the pagan signs for divination indicating an attack on Jerusalem. At the same time, God was foretelling the punishment that was to fall upon a rebellious Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar's "free" decision resulted in God's will being done. While not condoning the use of the pagan divination practices, God worked through them to assure the direction of the Babylonian attack. He was the direct cause of the action taken.

The "simple" view of God's foreknowledge does not expound a particular theory of how God exhaustively knows the past, present, and future (as well as all possible contingents). While a detailed examination of God and time is beyond the scope of this paper, we can know from the Bible that God himself is timeless. Moses sang: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psalm 90:20). Of the Father and of the Lamb it is written: "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last" (Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 22:13).

Wayne Grudem writes:

The fact that God never began to exist can...be concluded from the fact that God created all things, and that he himself is an immaterial spirit. Before God made the universe, there was no matter, but then he created all things.... Before God created the universe, there was no "time," at least not in the sense of a succession of moments one after another. Therefore, when God created the universe, he also created time. When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another. But before there was a universe, and before there was time, God always existed, without beginning, and without being influenced by time.... The fact that God always existed before there was any time [indicates] to us that God's own being does not have a succession of moments or any progress from one state of existence to another.¹⁵

Grudem explains that although in some sense all time is "present" with God in his consciousness, he does see all events of time equally vividly as well as seeing them at their point in time.¹⁶

15. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 169.

16. *Ibid.*, 171.

Others do not wish to speak of an eternal present (or “eternal now”) of God, as in the sense that all past, present, and future acts are equally present before him to the extent that he is “timeless.” If time is viewed not as a succession of events (which necessitates a beginning of time) but rather as the “possibility of now and then,” then time can be viewed as the possibility of a succession of events that may or may not be present. In this view, God remains the God of History, participating in time but at the same time being the eternal Lord.¹⁷

Regardless of how a proponent of simple foreknowledge may try to explain how God knows, all are in agreement that God is not learning the future as it develops. He knows the future, at any time, as vividly as he knows the past and the present.

OPEN THEISM AND THE TEACHING OF THE BIBLE

There are three men whose writings seem to have made them the principal “spokesmen” for open theism. Gregory A. Boyd, Clark H. Pinnock, and John Sanders are usually considered to be the leaders of this movement, although there are others whose writings are also well-known in this area.¹⁸

While there is a very clear consensus concerning the basic tenets of open theism among all these writers, there are also some differences of opinion concerning various aspects of the teachings. Some of these differences will be noted in this paper, but, by and large, the paper will focus on the main teaching of these three men, taken as representative of the view.

In this section, I have chosen to focus on two aspects of open theism’s position: (1) Why was the classical view of God’s foreknowledge questioned? (2) What biblical argument can be mounted in favor of this new position? A growing body of books and papers can be consulted to examine other important aspects of this subject.¹⁹

17. Forlines, 67-70.

18. Among other important open theist writers are David Basinger, William Hasker, and Richard Rice.

19. Among other important aspects of open theism’s teaching are: its hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures; its view of the inerrancy, inspiration, and authority of the Scriptures; and its view of God’s future knowledge of those who will be saved or lost.

Why Did Open Theists Begin to Question the "Classical" View of God's Foreknowledge?

What in the classical explanation of God's foreknowledge failed to convince open theists? When did they begin to see these supposed weaknesses with the acknowledged and accepted view of the church concerning the Lord's foreknowledge?

Why did these men choose the path they now openly advocate? I readily admit that one cannot know all the reasons behind certain decisions or beliefs, and I do not profess to have found *the* real reason these men have become open theists. I do see, however, what seems to be a very real possibility behind some of their arguments for open theism.

In his work *God of the Possible*, Boyd tells us that he has been considering the question of God who "changes His mind" for seventeen years. After three years of study he became convinced "that the customary view—that the future is exhaustively settled²⁰ and that God knows it as such—was mistaken."²¹ From there he moved toward what is now known as open theism or presentism.

In chapter three of the same book, Boyd writes of the practical difference that the belief in open theism will make in the life of the believer. Among the practical differences he speaks of is that of confronting the problem of evil (theodicy). Boyd is the author of *Letters from a Skeptic*, a book that arose from letters that he and his agnostic father wrote to each other concerning apologetic issues.²² One question concerned why God would allow Adolf Hitler to be born, knowing that he would later kill millions of Jews. In a later work Boyd reflected on the answer he gave his father: "The only response I could offer then, and the only response I continue to offer now, is that this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler."²³

In a more recent work, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, Boyd expounds a theodicy ("trinitarian warfare worldview") that explains the presence

20. That the future is "settled" seems to be the favorite or "settled" expression that Boyd uses continually to express the "classical" view of God's knowledge of future events. While "settled" could mean the same as "certain," it usually carries a different connotation, i.e., that which is settled is that which is determined or caused. "Settled" is not the word that Reformation Arminian theology uses to speak of our Lord's foreknowledge of the future. The future is certain, not "settled."

21. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 8.

22. Gregory A. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions about Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1994).

23. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 98.

of evil in the world predicated upon the basis of open theism.²⁴ He rejects the “classical” Christian worldview which, he believes, makes God responsible for the evil in the world and for doing nothing to stop some of it. His critique has to do with how a good God could allow such evil in the world in order to carry out some sort of good providential purpose.²⁵

Sanders begins his work *The God Who Risks* with examples of the problem of evil in the world. His view is that the traditional biblical view of God’s providential care is not adequate to answer the question of evil in the world. His work is an attempt to set forth a doctrine of divine providence in which God is a “risk taker.” He states that his work is not about the problem of evil but rather about a personal God who enters into a give-and-take relationship with human beings.²⁶

Because open theists see their principal battle as one against the Calvinistic viewpoint of God’s foreknowledge (i.e., sovereign determinism), they often ascribe to this position extremes that do not coincide with Reformed theology. Pinnock, in a critique of the criticisms brought against his position, writes:

It astonishes me that people can defend the “glory” of God so vehemently when that glory includes God’s sovereign authorship of every rape and murder, his closing down the future to any meaningful creaturely contribution, and his holding people accountable for deeds he predestined them to do and they could not but do.²⁷

In trying to think about the “why” question, it is difficult for me to escape, at least in part, the idea that the open theists are seeking an answer for our postmodern society that will satisfy mankind’s questions concerning the presence of evil in the world. All those who write for presentism state that the problem of evil was not the primary motivating factor in their arrival at their position, but all their works (except the more philosophical arguments²⁸) seem to return to answers that seek to explain God and man in terms of their relationship to the existence of evil in the universe.

24. Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001).

25. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 11-14.

26. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 14.

27. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 16.

28. Even William Hasker in his “A Philosophical Perspective” in *The Openness of God* (149, 152) brings into partial play the question of evil.

I believe that we all agree that God is not the cause of evil. However, the open theist's affirmation that God cannot know for sure what evil will occur and at times is unable to prevent such evil is unacceptable.²⁹ It is unacceptable as an answer because open theism's biblical arguments do not support their conclusions. We turn now to those arguments.

The Biblical Arguments of Open Theism.

Before looking at some of the principal "biblical" arguments of open theism, I believe it will help to understand why presentism (with its Arminian "roots") rejects the Arminian view of "simple foreknowledge." One of the basic arguments of open theism against "classical" foreknowledge is that the idea of God's having exhaustive future knowledge is a Hellenistic philosophical insertion that entered into Christian thought with the early church fathers. The open theist claims to be reading the biblical texts as they truly are meant to be understood. "Classical" theologians understand those texts, for example, that speak of God's changing his mind or repenting to be presenting an unchangeable God by using human manners of expression to express aspects of his being or action without contradicting his immutability.

Presentism claims its view is correct in reading these texts. When the Bible says the Lord "changed his mind," that is exactly what it means. Either God realized that he made a mistake or had to reevaluate the situation, so he repented or changed his mind. The open theist challenges the classical viewpoint's principle of interpretation, charging that it comes from a mixture of biblical interpretation with Hellenistic philosophy.

The view of God worked out in the early church, the "biblical-classical synthesis," has become so commonplace that even today most conservative theologians simply assume that it is *the* correct scriptural concept of God and thus any other alleged

29. Boyd, *Satan*, 16: "The warfare worldview is not without difficulties. Foremost among these is the question of how this view can be reconciled with the biblical teaching that God is the all-powerful Creator of the world. Since the warfare worldview denies that God always has a specific reason for allowing evil deeds to occur, must it not deny that God is able to prevent events he wishes would not take place? We may state the dilemma as follows: It seems we must either believe that God does not prevent certain events because he chooses not to or because he is unable to. The warfare worldview denies that God always chooses not to intervene, for this would require the belief that there is a specific divine purpose behind everything. Hence the warfare worldview must accept that at least sometimes God is unable to prevent them. But how then can we continue to affirm that God is all-powerful?" (emphasis in this quotation and in all hereafter in original)

biblical understanding of God (such as the one we are proposing) must be rejected. The classical view is so taken for granted that it functions as a preunderstanding that rules out certain interpretations of Scripture that do not “fit” with the conception of what is “appropriate” for God to be like, as derived from Greek metaphysics.³⁰

However, the classical theologian is not the only one with presuppositions. The open theist also approaches the Bible with a certain presupposition concerning the free will of man.³¹ Presentism argues that if the Lord already knows all of our thoughts and feelings and actions, then we are not really free beings. What difference do our prayers make? Do our ideas really count for anything? For the open theist, real human freedom is only possible if the future is not known by God, that is, if it is “open.” Ware summarizes this philosophical presupposition of open theists:

If God *knows* all that will occur in the future, then we are not free to do differently than what God knows, and hence we are not truly free. Furthermore, since God can know only what is real, he cannot by definition know the future—because it has not as yet happened and so is not real.³²

Open theists reject the “simple” view of God’s foreknowledge, claiming that there is a logical incompatibility between God’s exhaustive foreknowledge and the free will of man.³³ An open theist’s explanation (and thus, his rejection) of God’s simple foreknowledge of which direction Chuck will take upon leaving the crossroads might be something like the following:

- It is true that Chuck will soon decide to leave the crossroads and travel in one direction.
- It is not possible for God, at any time, to believe something that is false. He must always believe what is true.

30. John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God* (60). See this entire chapter by Sanders (59-100) to understand open theism’s rationale for charging classical theology with constructing a synthesis of biblical teaching and Hellenistic philosophy. Similar open theist arguments are also found in Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 65-79.

31. It should be noted that all open theists are Arminian (or “neo-Arminian”). However, most Arminians are not open theists.

32. Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), 19.

33. See William Hasker’s argument that simple foreknowledge and human freedom are not logically compatible in “A Philosophical Perspective” in *The Openness of God*, 147-50. See also Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 200-206.

- God has always believed that Chuck will move in the direction that he will eventually take.
- If God eternally has believed that this certain event is true, no one can ever make it happen that God would believe anything different (the past cannot be changed).
- For this reason, Chuck does not have the power to go in any direction except in the one which God has always believed that he would go.
- It is not possible for God to have believed that Chuck would travel in one certain direction and then for Chuck not to go in said direction.
- Therefore, Chuck has no freedom or power to travel other than in the direction that he will travel. So Chuck's free will choice is not really a free will choice at all.³⁴

William Hasker rejects the simple foreknowledge argument that God's foreknowledge does not cause the future decision to be made. He says that it does not really help our understanding of what happens in the present because his simple foreknowledge cannot be used in any providential way to help us.³⁵

The above open theistic argument against simple foreknowledge fails in what it assumes. That is, it assumes that the fact that God knows what Chuck will choose is incompatible with Chuck's being free to choose. If Chuck chooses to go east, for example, God knows that in advance and therefore he cannot choose any other direction. This logical (and fallacious) assumption winds up—like Calvinism—making God's knowledge of the future the factor that determines the event.

Against the open theist's cause for rejection of the simple model of God's foreknowledge, Robert Picirilli writes:

Once we speak of any future event (or of the future in general) as "foreknown," and then say that even God cannot change it because this would make his foreknowledge wrong, *we have created the logical problem with our way of expressing it*. We have turned foreknowledge on its head. When we assume, in formulating an illustration, that the future will be a certain way, then we have logically put ourselves "on the other side" of that future. In such a case, then, of course what will be "cannot" be otherwise. Even God cannot make a fact of history a non-fact.

But no fact of *future* history is fixed by the knowledge of it: everything that God knows about the future, he knows only

34. Hasker, 148.

35. *Ibid.*, 149.

because it will happen, not vice-versa. It would be utterly foolish to say, for example, "Since the Holocaust happened, it cannot *not* have happened!" It is precisely the same "logic" to say, assuming by foreknowledge a perspective on the other side of a future event, that the event must occur to keep foreknowledge from being wrong. The error in that is self-evident.³⁶

Picirilli continues with his critique of the position of Sanders (the same basic position as that of Hasker):

On the broadest level, Sanders's objection is that once God decided to create the world as it is, knowing every event in its history in advance, the world cannot be other than it is and the events of its history cannot be other than they are. The answer is the same: God determined to create a world with true contingencies and foreknows it as a world with contingencies. If the world operates with human beings who make real, libertarian choices between alternatives, then that is both the world God decided to create and *the world which he foreknows*.

If, then, our formulation of such issues seems to tie us in logical knots, it is our formulation that does it, not the real world itself. In the real world, knowledge of the facts (even future facts) flows logically from the facts. If the eternal God is aware of facts before they become facts, the *knowledge* still bears the same relationship to the *facts known*. To put this simply, he knows what I will do (and what he will do in response) *only if I do it*.³⁷

The simple viewpoint of God's foreknowledge does not equate "certain" with "settled" in the sense that the future is determined by God (in the case of free will choices) before these choices are made. The future is certain. It will be what it will be, which, by the way, is the exact same outcome that would exist even if open theism were to be true. Even with God not knowing man's future free choices, the future would be what it would be. I believe that open theism's acceptance of Calvinism's definition of God's sovereign predetermination of all things in the universe over against the traditional and classical viewpoint of God's "simple foreknowledge" has led its proponents to a position that removes from God those powers and knowledge that the Bible clearly ascribes to him.

36. Robert E. Picirilli, "An Arminian Response to John Sanders," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001):473.

37. *Ibid.*, 474.

It is clear that one of the basic tenets of open theism is that the Scriptures do not teach “that the future is *exhaustively* settled. We hold that God determines (and thus foreknows as settled) *some*, but not *all*, of the future.”³⁸ According to presentism, God exhaustively knows the past and the present, and he exhaustively knows all of the future that he himself has preordained. However, he does not completely know the future acts and thoughts of mankind. He does, however, have perfect knowledge of all future probabilities.

When the improbable happens, as sometimes is the case with free agents, God genuinely says he “thought” or “expected” the more probable would happen. Because God is infinitely intelligent, we cannot conceive of God being altogether shocked, as though he did not perfectly anticipate and prepare for this very improbability (as much as if it was a certainty from all eternity). But *relative to the probabilities of the situation*, the outcome was surprising (*viz.* improbable).³⁹

Open theism has a broad impact on theology and biblical studies. Three areas in particular deserve special attention.

1. Open theism bases its teaching on a reading of scriptural passages in a “straightforward manner,” that is, what the text says about what God feels is what the text means. The following biblical passages are cited by open theists in their attempt to demonstrate their teaching that God is “open” to the future.⁴⁰

Isaiah 40-48

Through Isaiah the prophet, Yahweh speaks to Israel concerning its idolatry and the future liberation of Israel from captivity. He calls upon Israel to compare him with the pagan idols. In particular open theism calls attention to Isaiah 46:9-10 and 48:3-5. These two passages are seemingly chosen because of their strong statements concerning the foreknowledge of God.

38. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 23.

39. Gregory A. Boyd, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (June 2002):237.

40. Among other biblical passages cited by open theists to demonstrate their teaching are:

Genesis 3	Exodus 32-34	1 Samuel 15:35
Genesis 6	Numbers 11:1-2	1 Samuel 23:10-13
Genesis 9:14-16	Judges 10:12-16	Jonah 4:2
Genesis 18:22-33	Jeremiah 3:7, 9	Ezekiel 12:3

Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is no one else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure. (Isaiah 46:9-10)

I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass. Because I knew that thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass; I have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I shewed it thee: lest thou shouldest say, mine idol hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image, hath commanded them. (Isaiah 48:3-5)

Classical theology has understood that these passages (as well as the entire scope of Isaiah 40-48) speak (and teach) of the sovereign calling and action of Yahweh (to call Cyrus). Tied up with that is his divine foreknowledge of all future events.

Open theists understand that to some extent the passage is talking about what God has determined to do in the future: "My counsel (purpose) shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure (intention)." But they deny that the passages are all-encompassing truth that teach God's future knowledge of Israel (and the rest of the world). God is only saying that the idols and images do not know anything and have done nothing. The Lord is only showing to Israel what he is doing so that the nation will not claim that their idols have brought about the deliverance. It was not that God had information about what might happen, but rather it was his determination to bring about his will and to tell Israel about it. Boyd writes:

Passages such as these beautifully demonstrate that the future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it. God is not at the mercy of chance or free will.... Open theists...maintain that God can and does predetermine and foreknow *whatever he wants to* about the future. Indeed, God is so confident in his sovereignty, we hold, he does not need to micromanage everything. He could if he wanted to, but this would demean his sovereignty. So he chooses to leave some of the future open to possibilities, allowing them to be resolved by the decisions of free agents. It takes a greater God to steer a world populated with free agents than it does to steer a world of preprogrammed automatons.⁴¹

41. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 31.

Free Will Baptists are in agreement with Boyd's last two sentences, but not with open theism's assertion that God does not know (and cannot know) what these decisions of free agents will be. These Isaiah passages do set forth Yahweh's own claim to be the only God, doing what he will do in the future and also knowing the future. He shows or declares what he will do and what other free agents will do. "That which he declares (and hence foreknows) will happen in the future includes *innumerable future actualities involving free creaturely decisions and actions not yet to take place.*"⁴²

Psalm 139

Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24 has long been a source of delight and comfort to Christians troubled with their own sins and failures. God's intimate knowledge of his children (not to mention the entire human race) encourages Christians in all lands with thoughts of his greatness and with the need to guard holiness in their lives. Verse 16 states: "Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them." The term translated *members* (*days* in other versions) is *yamim*, the plural of the normal Hebrew word for "day." Therefore, God know all the *days* of our lives.

Open theists often seem to indicate that such biblical passages could just as easily be understood to support their view. Boyd states:

Even if this verse said that the exact length of our lives was settled before we were born, it wouldn't follow that *everything* about our future was settled before we were born, and certainly not that it was settled from all eternity. God can at *some point* predetermine and/or foreknow *some* things about the future without *eternally* predetermining and/or foreknowing *everything* about the future. We must be careful not to outrun what Scripture teaches.⁴³

While we will be quick to recognize that David is writing a song or poem and that we must understand what type of literature it is, the literary type used does not diminish the truth taught. In verses 1-3 it is obvious that David believes Yahweh has present knowledge of him and of his thoughts. Additionally, verse 4 indicates that the Lord also has future knowledge of David's next words. As David writes his meditation on

42. Bruce A. Ware, "Rejoinder to Replies by Clark H. Pinnock, John Sanders, and Gregory A. Boyd," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (June 2002):254.

43. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 41.

God's knowledge, he is overwhelmed by the greatness of what God knows and of his presence. Whether the term in verse 16 is translated "members" or "days," the clear biblical teaching is that God knew them before they existed.

Open theism speaks much of the changing of God's mind. Two passages used to demonstrate their view that God does not exhaustively know the future are Genesis 22:1-15 and 2 Kings 20:1-11.

Genesis 22:1-15

Genesis 22 is the well-known and beloved story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in order to obey the command of God. The first verse of the passage tells us that God was "testing" ("tempt" KJV) Abraham. In verse 12, the Angel of Yahweh tells Abraham not to harm the boy, "for now I know that thou fearest God."

Open theism, against classical Christian belief, says that the purpose for the test was for God to "know" or to find out if Abraham really did fear him. While Abraham probably benefited from the experience, God needed to know whether Abraham really feared him. He apparently thought that he did, but he needed to be sure. "If one presupposes that God already 'knew' the results of the test beforehand, then the text is at least worded poorly and at most simply false."⁴⁴

Classical Christianity has understood the use of "now I know," spoken by God in this passage, to be an anthropomorphic manner of God's expressing what he already knew concerning Abraham's faith. Rather than being a test for the Lord, it was Abraham himself who was "justified by his works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar" (James 2:21; cf. Hebrews 11:17; Genesis 22:5).

Open theists claim that they are the ones who are reading the text correctly by denying that this is an anthropomorphism. God needed to know, so he put Abraham to a genuine test. But the classical theologian asks, "Then what about Genesis 3:9-13 in which God asks Adam a series of questions? Was God also looking for information in this case as well?"

2 Kings 20:1-11

When he was some 39 years old, King Hezekiah of Judah received a prophetic word from Yahweh (via Isaiah) that he should "put his house in order," for he was soon to die. In verses 2-3, Hezekiah, weeping, prays and begs God to grant him more life. In verse 5, Yahweh grants Hezekiah 15 more years. Isaiah gives him God's answer and instructs him

44. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 52.

medically and spiritually as to what he should do. Hezekiah obeys, and he is given 15 more years to live.

Here, we are told, is a clear example of God's changing his mind after listening to the prayer of one of his people. For open theism, the future is open. Pinnock writes:

Thus the time of the king's death was shifted to a date more remote in time. This shows that the exact time of death was not forever settled in God's mind but was something flexible, depending on the circumstances. . . . The future is not something fixed in God's mind in meticulous detail, some things can go one way or another. The future is still in the making and open to as yet unrealized possibilities.⁴⁵

Of course, Reformation Arminianism, along with Reformed theology, notes that in 2 Kings 20:1 Yahweh seems very emphatic as to the fact that Hezekiah's sickness was going to result in his death (a future event at the time which God knew). After granting Hezekiah's petition for more life, the Lord tells him, "I will add unto thy days fifteen years" (v. 6a). That is not moving his death to a date "more remote in time." Fifteen years more is the amount of time that Hezekiah lived (another future fact known by God fifteen years before it happened). The fact that God responds to the prayer of his people does not mean that he does not know what is going to happen and how he is going to respond when it does happen (i.e., in this case, the prayer of Hezekiah). Open theists strive to prove that theirs is the true viewpoint that connects prayer with a relational God. The "changing of God's mind" to answer a prayer indicates neither that God is a liar nor that he does not know what will happen in the future to an answered prayer. Open theists must not be allowed to give the idea that they have arrived and discovered that our Lord is a relational God who desires the prayers of his people.

In fifteen years much can happen. In fact, just three years later, Manasseh was born to Hezekiah, and he was the most wicked king ever to rule over Judah. Did God know that was going to happen? Did he regret his decision to give Hezekiah fifteen more years?

Surely the Lord knew what would happen with Manasseh. Without a doubt, God was to be grieved due to the wickedness that would come during the fifty-plus years of Manasseh's reign, for the Bible does teach that God is a Being with emotions. He regretted the wickedness of humanity in the days of Noah (Genesis 6). He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (cf. Ezekiel 18:23, 32), and he does rejoice in the

45. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 48.

fulfillment of righteousness and holiness (Isaiah 52-53). These emotions of God of which the Bible speaks are not indications of changes in the ontological being of God but rather show forth his immanent, relational, and salvific character.

Classical theology has never tried to enclose God in a box as if he experienced no feelings or emotions. Though open theists try hard to paint a caricature of the God of classical theology as one who has no feelings and is never changing, yet the historical understanding of God's immutability does not mean that he is immobile. God is love, and he can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19; Matthew 23:37; John 11:34-38).

2. Open theism understands biblical prophecy differently from the interpretation given by classical Christian theology. Those who hold this position view much of biblical prophecy as not necessarily dealing with specific free choices of individuals in the future.

Open theists do see some precise, predictive prophecy in the Bible, for example, the Isaiah prophecies concerning the Lord's servant, Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1-3); the naming of Josiah (1 Kings 13:1-3); and the naming of Jesus and John the Baptist (Luke 1:13, 31). Obviously in such cases, some of the free will of these individuals (or that of their parents in these last three cases) would be limited as it had to do with their preordained activities.⁴⁶

However, other prophetic utterances that have to do with specific people and their free will are said to be examples of God's knowledge or foreknowledge of a person's behavior. Presentism emphasizes that it proclaims a God who has infinite knowledge of all probabilities and of all people's past and present (actions, behavior, character). Therefore, open theism sees much prophecy simply as God predicting accurately how a person will behave under certain circumstances.

In Matthew 26:34, Simon Peter's denial of the Lord Jesus is considered by presentism as an example of our Lord's infinite knowledge of a person's behavior patterns under all circumstances. Boyd believes that this was the case with Jesus' prediction concerning Peter's triple denial.

Contrary to the assumption of many, we do not need to believe that the future is exhaustively settled to explain this prediction. We only need to believe that God the Father knew and revealed to Jesus one very predictable aspect of Peter's character. Anyone who knew Peter's character perfectly could have predicted that under certain highly pressured circumstances (that

46. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 34.

God could easily orchestrate), he would act just the way he did.⁴⁷

Other biblical prophecy is seen as conditional prophecy, that is, the future is open in the sense that if a condition is fulfilled, then a certain thing will happen, but if not, then the prophecy will not come about. Most Christians would agree that this type of prophecy is found in the Bible. While not explicit, Jonah's proclamation of the doom of Nineveh carried within itself a conditional promise. If there was repentance, there would be no immediate, promised destruction. But once again, the difference between open theism and Reformation Arminianism is the question of whether God knew (in this case) that there would be a repentance on the part of the people of Nineveh. Open theists deny that he had such exact foreknowledge. We affirm that he did.

Perhaps the area of prophecy where the greatest difference is seen is what open theism might call "imprecise prophetic forecasts."⁴⁸ Ware writes that a better name for this presentist category would be "God's best guess."⁴⁹

According to the presentists, these are prophecies that had to do (or will have to do) with a present situation, and they should not be held to any sort of precision. These prophecies were not always fulfilled to the exact letter of the original prophecy. The future was open and God was free to fulfill his word as he chose once the time arrived for some sort of fulfillment. They are promises "in general terms and a blessed hope more than . . . a precise prediction."⁵⁰

Classical Christian interpreters have always understood biblical prophecy in two senses. First of all, the prophets of the Old and New Testaments did proclaim a prophetic word concerning righteousness and against injustice. However, the prophetic word of God (via his prophets and prophetic writings) did include many truths that would find their fulfillment in the future with complete precision as spoken from the Lord. In *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* Ware mentions a biblical survey done by Steve Roy that concerns divine foreknowledge.⁵¹ In the survey, there were 128 texts that state what the Lord will do in the future through nature; 1,893 texts that predict that God will do something in the future either in or through human beings; 1,474 texts that state what humans will do apart from what God might do directly

47. *Ibid.*, 35.

48. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 50.

49. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 132.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 100.

through them; and 622 texts that speak of what unbelievers will have happen to them in the future or will do to others in the future. That is an immense amount of prophetic biblical material that God apparently knows ahead of time through his exhaustive foreknowledge.

One prophetic category that open theism does not seem to mention is that of unconditional predictions. These are prophecies that God declares will certainly come to pass, which are based on his divine foreknowledge of the future with all of the involved free will choices of mankind. There are many biblical examples of unconditional prophecy. For example, on the Day of Pentecost Peter preached concerning the Christ and his death. He told his listeners: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). In his paper "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Theologically," Ware seeks to draw the open theists' attention to Daniel 11:1-4. His point is that while the open theists deny that God has exhaustive foreknowledge of future events, "the number of free choices and actions predicted—either explicitly or implicitly—from just these four verses boggles the mind!"⁵²

Deuteronomy 18:18-22 lays out the criteria for prophecy given by a false prophet:

But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die.... When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously; thou shalt not be afraid of him (vv. 20, 22).

The question must be, If God has such strict criteria for prophecy and prophets, how can he not be precise in his predictions? If he does not know the future and yet makes general prophecies that might or might not come true with some sort of precision, how can he require a stricter standard from finite, sinful beings?

3. Open theism's understanding of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus reveals just how deeply their thinking impacts the basic message of Scripture. For example, Sanders states that while the incarnation was always part of the divine plan of God, the death of Jesus on the cross was not.

In *The God Who Risks* Sanders has a section on the New Testament materials entitled "Gethsemane: The Pathos of Jesus." We are told that

52. Ware, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Theologically," 202.

Judas did not betray Jesus, only handed him over, perhaps hoping for some sort of a resolution of differences between Jesus and the high priest, and that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane to the effect that the "cup pass" from him meant that Jesus himself was unsure about the necessity of the cross. Sanders explains that the incarnation had always been part of God's plan from eternity, that "the incarnation is not a contingency plan for redeeming fallen humanity but a means of accomplishing the type of relationship God always intended with his creation."⁵³

My own view is that the incarnation was always planned, for God intended to bring us into the joy and glory shared among the triune Godhead. . . . Human sin, however, threw up a barrier to the divine project, and God's planned incarnation had to be adapted in order to overcome it.⁵⁴

Sanders cannot allow God to have conclusively foreknown that Adam and Eve would sin, thus bringing sin into the world. But he is faced with the problem of the incarnation. He is also faced with several seemingly very clear Bible passages that speak of the predetermined and foreknown death of Jesus. Peter writes of our redemption that comes through "the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Peter 1:19, 20). John is told in a vision (Revelation 13:8) that there will be a time when all unbelievers on earth will worship the beast. Those who worship him are those "whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." The phrase "from the foundation of the world" (i.e., from eternity) probably modifies "the Lamb slain,"⁵⁵ though Sanders makes "from the foundation of the world" refer to "names . . . written in the book of life."

Sanders's explanations, however, as to how the incarnation itself was planned without sin being foreknown are not satisfying. He first of all says Jesus was not literally slain in eternity but rather in Palestine during the reign of Pilate. Then we are told that perhaps what John and Peter meant by their phrase "from the foundation of the world" was that for a very long time God's wisdom had been working toward the salvation of lost man.

53. Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 98-104.

54. *Ibid.*, 103.

55. See Picirilli's explanation of this probable linkage in "An Arminian Response to John Sanders," 481-83.

Picirilli points out that regardless of whether “from the foundation of the world” modifies “written in the book” or “the Lamb,” the problem for open theism remains. If it modifies the Lamb, then sin was foreknown because “the Lamb” (notice its Old Testament implications) implies sacrifice for sin. If it is writing in the book that is modified, then those whose names are written in the book are individuals who were foreknown from before the beginning of the world, and the fact that there are many whose names are not written in the book indicates the presence of sin.⁵⁶

The death of Jesus paid for every specific sin (Colossians 2:13), thus indicating that there must have been in God’s mind specific individuals who committed said sins. Thus, those who are redeemed have had their names written in the book of the Lamb from all eternity.⁵⁷

Open theism professes to base its principal tenet concerning God’s definite (rather than exhaustive) foreknowledge on biblical evidence. Open theists examine the classical biblical texts that have been used from the beginning of the church and conclude something to the effect that, “Yes, but they don’t have to mean that exclusively. They could mean what we say they mean.” But saying that a text “could” mean something falls short of demonstrating that it *does*. Open theism has failed to show that God does not know the future free acts and thoughts of mankind. It has not shown that God has not given specific prophecies which have been fulfilled and continue to be fulfilled, all based on his exhaustive foreknowledge, and many of them requiring that he foreknow the free acts of human beings.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS THAT RESULT FROM THE ACCEPTANCE OF OPEN THEISM

1. Prayer, as seen by the proponents of open theism, is an experience in which the believer is working together with God to accomplish the purposes of God. In open theists’ writings, prayer is repeatedly put forth as one of the great new gains of presentism. While God is absolutely sovereign, a Being who does not need us to accomplish his will, he has,

56. *Ibid.*, 482-83

57. Other passages in the New Testament also indicate that the Lord knows who individual believers are (will be). For example, Ephesians 2:10 speaks of divinely predetermined good works that God’s workmanship is to walk in. Does that mean that the Lord simply has some sort of general guideline of good works in which the corporate body of believers should walk? No, this is another passage that teaches that God has a complete foreknowledge of all those whose names are written in the book of the Lamb and that he has individual plans for each of them that will, in the end, result in their becoming his masterpiece of work.

however, created the universe in which he desires that redeemed mankind work together with him to carry out his work and plans.

Open theism critiques the exhaustive foreknowledge view, saying that prayer to a God who has already decided everything is not very effective, even if it does honor him. According to presentism, prayer in the openness arena allows God “genuinely” to respond to us.

Our prayers make a difference to God because of the personal relationship God enters into with us. God chooses to make himself dependent on us for certain things. It is God’s sovereign choice to establish this sort of relationship; it is not forced on God by us.... God wants us to be his partners not because he needs our wisdom but because he wants *our* fellowship. It is the *person* making the request that makes the difference to God. The request is important because God is interested in us.... The relationship is not one of domination or manipulation but of participation and cooperation wherein we become collaborators with God.... It did not have to be this way. It is so only because God wanted a reciprocal relationship of love and elected to make dialogical prayer an important element in such a relationship.⁵⁸

While we can affirm much of what Sanders has written concerning God’s desire for our prayers and our fellowship with him in prayer, we cannot affirm the underlying tenet that God does not know precisely what will happen in the future. Sanders writes that it is God’s choice to establish this type of relationship. That is true, as far as it goes, but according to open theism he cannot know for certain what we will say or do.⁵⁹

In prayer, as God’s dependent children, we are not working out together with him the best plan for ourselves or for our family or for our church. Rather we come to him who knows all, and we speak with him with confidence. We know he wants to listen to us, and we know that the Holy Spirit takes our prayers and makes them “effective” before the Father. We pray “may thy will be done,” not “may our will be done as we have worked it out together.”

2. Open theists claim that their view of divine guidance and comfort offers better answers for Christians who are buffeted by the evils of the

58. Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 271-72.

59. Some open theists apparently believe that God could have exhaustively known the future but has chosen not to know it, which in itself seems totally impossible. How could God have the ability to know all things and then decide not to know all things? See Boyd, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue,” 223.

world than does the providential guidance and exhaustive foreknowledge taught by classic theology.

Classical theology has not given us all the answers for the presence of evil in the universe. We do know that evil and death are in the world because of sin. We know also that the universe itself is under the curse of God until that time when he himself lifts it. We are told that everything that happens to us (good or bad) can be made to work together for good (Romans 8:28). While we do not understand all that this passage implies, it does give us comfort that our God does know the reason why bad things happen and that he will work his purpose through "all things."

Open theism tells us that sometimes bad things happen that God did not expect to happen. He is not caught off guard for very long, but even knowing all the probabilities that could happen in every circumstance, there are times where human free will goes against what he thought or intended would occur.

Open theists profess great comfort in knowing that God did not plan the bad things that happen to them (once again reading determinism into their definition of God's sovereign foreknowledge). The bad things that happen to them sometimes also come as a "surprise" to God as well. Not everything in the universe has a purpose in God's grand plan. That is supposed to be a comfort to people. I personally fail to see how I can gain any comfort from God if I am not sure that he knows what is going to happen next and why it is going to happen.

The Old and New Testaments clearly explain and give examples of how God sometimes permits tests (i.e., bad things, difficult times) to come into the lives of his people. He does so in order to bring about maturity and to "test" their faithfulness, causing their sanctified faith to grow.

Today's society does not want to listen to an answer that speaks of the need to suffer and to grow through adversity. While I do not claim that this is one of the purposes behind open theism's boast that their model of divine comfort and guidance is superior to that of classical theology, it certainly is the type of answer that fits well with the attitude of the present, postmodern worldview.

3. The possible future direction of the open theistic movement brings questions to the mind of many concerned Christians. The direction of thought seen in at least two of the representatives of this movement does offer some concern for the future of the brothers involved.

Pinnock is well-known in evangelical circles for his "pilgrimage" from Reformed theology to Arminianism, and now to some sort of "neo-

Arminianism." He no longer believes in an eternal punishment in hell for unbelievers but along with others has adopted belief in annihilationism.

In his recent work *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, Boyd also writes of the eternal end of those who reject the love of God. Rather than being annihilated, they move into some sort of eternal *nothingness*. "This torment is their eternal dignity and humiliation, their choice and their damnation, and it expresses God's eternal love as well as his eternal wrath."⁶⁰

Boyd continually refers to this current life as the probationary period. In a chapter entitled "On Incomplete Probationary Periods," he seems to be indicating that deceased babies and mentally incapacitated people may have to undergo some sort of future probation (purgatory?).⁶¹ Later in speaking about the believer's judgment, he talks of the possibility of a "refining chastisement" that could occur after death in order to complete *then* what was not completed *now*.⁶²

These ideas seem to go far beyond the pale of biblical teaching. What will be the next move in speculative theology? Will open theists move further and further towards universalism?

CONCLUSION

Chuck is still standing in the West Texas crossroads. What have we learned? Our Reformed brothers have yet to convince us that Chuck can only go in one direction because one direction was preordained by God from the beginning of time. We certainly do have much in common with these brothers, but they have been unable to convince us that the Book says that.

Now open theists want us to believe that, although God probably can figure out the direction Chuck will eventually choose, he does not know for certain—does not "foresee"—what the man will do. Unless God has some specific predetermined purpose in Chuck's going in one particular direction, Chuck is free to move about the country as he chooses. If he moves in a direction that God did not think he would, that is okay too, because God will certainly know with a higher probability next time which way Chuck may choose.

I affirm, instead, that Chuck is free to choose what he will choose (under the given circumstances). I also affirm that God already knows the way he will finally choose. I choose to live my life with the sovereign

60. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 357.

61. *Ibid.*, 383.

62. *Ibid.*, 385.

God of the universe who loves to listen to me, who knows what is always going on and what will always go on, and who gives me, within obvious limitations, the ability (free will) and responsibility to choose the way in which I will go when I arrive at the next crossroads in my life.