

CLOSING THE DOOR ON OPEN THEISM: OPEN THEISM'S ASSAULT ON THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD (2)

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A. Omnipotence and Sovereignty Vs. Omniscience

Just as open theism robs God of His perfect knowledge, especially His infallible foreknowledge, so it subverts His almighty power. The open theist cannot confess the first line of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Consider this revisionist definition of omnipotence by Clark Pinnock: "We must not define omnipotence as the power to determine everything but rather as the power that enables God *to deal with any situation that arises*."¹

Open theism rejects God's omnipotence and replaces it with something called "omniscience." In an ironic move from men who decry Calvinistic determinism as God creating pre-programmed automatons, the open theists are quite comfortable with the figure of their god as a chess master who is able by his "omniscience" to outmanoeuvre his opponents and so, despite setbacks along the way, finally checkmate his adversaries and accomplish his goals. Gregory Boyd is representative:

God's perfect knowledge would allow him to anticipate every possible move and every possible combination of moves, together with every possible response which he might make to each of them, for every possible agent throughout history ... Isn't a God who perfectly anticipates and wisely responds to everything a free agent might do more intelligent than a God who simply knows what a free agent will do? Anticipating and responding to possibilities takes problem-solving

¹ Clark H. Pinnock in Richard Rice, John Sanders, Clark Pinnock, William Hasker and David Basinger (eds.), *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), p. 121, italics mine.

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intelligence. Simply possessing a crystal-ball vision of what's coming requires none.²

However much Boyd wants to spin it, the fact is that his god does not “perfectly anticipate” the moves of his creatures. Sometimes, as we have seen with Saul and others, he fails to anticipate what his creatures will do.

The omniscient god of open theism has the added attribute of resourcefulness. “Sometimes the desires of God are stymied,” writes John Sanders, “but God is resourceful and faithfully works to bring good even out of evil situations.”³ Sanders continues,

Although God is not succeeding with everyone, the biblical witness is clear that God has made substantial progress ... though the Spirit may not get everything he desires we have reason to hope because we have a God with a proven track record of successfully navigating the vicissitudes of human history and redeeming it.⁴

[God] enters into genuine give-and-take relationships with his creatures and is resourceful, creative and omniscient instead of all-determining and completely unconditioned by creatures.⁵

Pinnock assures us that God is

wise, resourceful, and can cope with all contingencies. Our assurance is based, not on a rational system, but on God's promise and on his track record. God does not promise things he cannot deliver. He is not an insecure deity who needs to control everything and foreknow everything in order to accomplish anything!⁶

² Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), pp. 127-128.

³ John Sanders, *The God who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), p. 115.

⁴ Sanders, *Risks*, pp. 128-129.

⁵ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 162.

⁶ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Since God is resourceful, rather than sovereign, it will come as no surprise that open theism rejects the idea of God's decrees. There is no room in the open theist model of God for His eternal, unchangeable, all-comprehensive counsel, in which He has eternally purposed what He will do in time. We allow Sanders to explain:

God's activity does not unfold according to some heavenly blueprint whereby all goes according to plan. God is involved in a historical project, not an eternal plan. The project does not proceed in a smooth, monolithic way but takes surprising twists and turns because the divine human relationship involves a genuine give-and-take dynamic for both humanity and God.⁷

Statements from Pinnock reveal similar sentiments:

How history will go is not a foregone conclusion, even to God, because he is free to strike in new directions as may be appropriate. If we take divine repentance language seriously, it suggests that God does not work with a plan fixed in every detail but with general goals that can be fulfilled in different ways. God is faithful to these goals but flexible as to how to fulfil them.⁸

[History] is not the situation of omnicausalism where even the input of the creature is predetermined. The open view of God celebrates the real relationships that obtain between God and his people. Real drama, real interactions and real learning are possible because history is not scripted and freedom is not illusory.⁹

In fact, the open theist god is not even in control of all things. Pinnock boldly asserts that his god is restrained in his power. After conceding that "coercive power is available to God, even if he uses it sparingly," he adds,

Baker, 2001), p. 53.

⁷ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 88.

⁸ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 43.

⁹ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 36.

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At the same time we should not exaggerate how easy it is for God to intervene. There are constraints upon God's acting, as I have suggested, such as he cannot just do anything, any-time, anywhere as is so often supposed. God interacts with the givens of the situation.¹⁰

Thus the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth is stripped of His royal sceptre and made dependent upon His own creatures!

John Frame, in his critique of open theism, demonstrates that Sanders denies that God has complete control even over the non-rational creation:

Sanders denies that all weather comes from God. So evidently for Sanders human libertarian freedom is not the only limit on God's control of the world. He also believes that the natural world itself has a kind of autonomy, so that events in nature, as well as human free choices, sometimes take God by surprise.¹¹

Pinnock teaches what can only be described as a kind of dualism:

At present God's will is resisted by powers of darkness but the day will come when his will shall triumph. At present evil is mounting a challenge to God's rule with considerable effect. The powers of darkness put up stiff resistance and to a degree block God's plans; that is, they can resist God's ability to respond to a given crisis.¹²

So much for Pinnock's definition of omnipotence as God's ability to deal with any situation that arises when Satan's minions can resist "God's ability to respond to a given crisis!"

Indeed, God, according to open theism, *sovereignly limits* His own sovereignty. This is the view of Sanders who writes, "God has sovereignly decided to enter into a project in which he desires reciprocal loving relationships and so does not control everything that happens."¹³ He is aware of the objections of

¹⁰ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 148.

¹¹ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), p. 112.

¹² Pinnock in *Openness*, p. 115.

¹³ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 208.

“decretal theologians” but dismisses them, complaining that such theologians (i.e., Calvinists) “co-opt the term sovereignty for themselves, saying it can have only one meaning—theirs—and thus disqualifying from the discussion any position but their own.”¹⁴

Far from being sovereign, insists Pinnock, God *shares power* with the creatures He has made: “In creating Adam God showed himself willing to share power. He does not insist on being the only power.”¹⁵ He continues with another statement that sounds suspiciously dualistic:

God is not the only power in the universe; he created other powers. Not only does God have to rule with them in mind, *he may even have to contend with them*. The point is that God is not viewed as being completely in control and exercising exhaustive sovereignty. Though no other power can match God’s power, each has a degree of influence that it can exercise. *The situation is pluralistic*: there is no single and all-determining divine will that calls all the shots.¹⁶

Boyd, too, contends that God shares power,

Despite the various claims made by some today that we must protect the sovereignty of God by emphasizing his absolute control over creation and denouncing the openness view, I submit that we ought to denounce the view that God exercises total control over everything, for a truly sovereign God is powerful enough to share power and face a partly open future.¹⁷

Richard Rice agrees with his fellow openness theologians when he defines history as “the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do,”¹⁸ and adds,

God does not control everything that happens. Rather he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue

¹⁴ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 208.

¹⁵ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 42.

¹⁶ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 53; italics mine.

¹⁷ Gregory A. Boyd in James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (eds.), *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), p. 45.

¹⁸ Rice in *Openness*, p. 16.

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God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.¹⁹

Moreover, the open theists pour scorn upon the concept of a sovereign God and try to decorate their idol in an effort to pawn him off on an unsuspecting Christian public. Boyd contends 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 ... It takes a greater God to steer a world populated with free agents than it does to steer a world of preprogrammed automatons.²⁰

Later in the same work, Boyd writes, “To simply control others so that you always get your way is the surest sign of insecurity and weakness.”²¹ Pinnock writes, “God’s perfection is not to be all-controlling or to exist in majestic solitude or to be infinitely egocentric.”²² Later he adds, “God is not a supreme monad that exists in eternal solitude.”²³ Finally, in pejorative language Pinnock writes, “God is not a cosmic stuffed shirt who is always thinking of himself. Rather he is open to the world and responsive to developments in history.”²⁴

Since God does not have an eternal and immutable counsel, He had to hope that His creatures would cooperate with Him, but He is always resourceful enough to think of alternative avenues if He needs to. For example, Boyd is bold to assert that Jeremiah, foreknown and ordained to be a prophet from his mother’s womb (Jer. 1:5), and Paul, a chosen vessel to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), could have resisted God’s call of them and God would have found somebody else: “The fact that God intended a course of action for Jeremiah and Paul didn’t guarantee that it would come about.”²⁵ To this Rice adds the

¹⁹ Rice in *Openness*, p. 7.

²⁰ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 31; italics Boyd’s.

²¹ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 149.

²² Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 5.

²³ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 28.

²⁴ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 41.

²⁵ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 40.

example of Moses, who apparently could also have refused to do what God intended.²⁶ Sanders adds Mary and Moses' mother to the list: "If Mary had declined or if Moses' mother had let her son drown, then God would have sought out other avenues."²⁷

McGregor Wright gives the following tongue-in-cheek analysis:

I will not repeat here the difficulties facing a believer in free will who contemplates what would have happened if Joseph had decided to leave Mary with Elizabeth and go on to Bethlehem alone with the required information for the census. In this example, free will becomes the Grinch that stole Christmas from Bethlehem.²⁸

B. God's Sovereignty Defended

Scripture knows nothing of a god who is infinitely resourceful because the unanticipated free choices of his creatures cause him to seek alternative routes to accomplish his ever-changing purposes.

A god who sovereignly decrees to lay aside his sovereignty is an oxymoron. John Frame expresses what every Reformed Christian knows:

Scripture contains no hint that God has limited his sovereignty in any degree. God is the Lord, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. He is always completely sovereign. He does whatever pleases him (Ps. 115:3). He works everything according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11). Furthermore, God's very nature is to be sovereign. Sovereignty is his name, the very meaning of the name Yahweh, in terms of both control and authority. If God limited his sovereignty, he would become something less than Lord of all, something less than God. And if he became something less than God, he would destroy himself. He would no longer exist.²⁹

²⁶ Rice in *Openness*, p. 55.

²⁷ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 92.

²⁸ R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong With Freewill Theism?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), p. 191.

²⁹ Frame, *No Other God*, pp. 130-131.

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God can no more limit His sovereignty than He can limit or voluntarily divest Himself of His holiness, His omnipresence or His love. God is one simple being and all His attributes are one in Him. Furthermore, the texts which Frame cites are important. They do not teach that God could, if He so chose, do all His good pleasure and accomplish His will, but they teach that God *actually does fulfill* all His will, at all times and in all places. Never is God's will thwarted in the slightest degree: "he doeth [not merely "He can do"] according to his will" (Dan. 4:35); "our God is in the heavens: he hath done [not simply "He is able to do"] whatsoever he hath pleased" (Ps. 115:3); "Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he [not "that He could do"] in heaven, and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places" (Ps. 135:6); "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all [not "some of"] my pleasure" (Isa. 46:10) and "[He] worketh [not merely "is able to work if He so chooses"] all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11).

Bavinck is not impressed by the infinitely resourceful god of the advocates of middle knowledge. How much more disdain would he pour upon the god of open theism?

[According to the theory of middle knowledge and, by extension, of open theism] the creature is now creator, autonomous, sovereign; the entire history of the world is taken out of God's controlling hands and placed into human hands. First, humans decide; then God responds with a plan that corresponds to that decision ... What are we to think, then, of a God who forever awaits all those decisions and keeps in readiness a store of possible plans for all possibilities? What then remains of even a sketch of the world plan when left to humans to flesh out? And of what value is a government whose chief executive is the slave of his own subordinates?³⁰

C. Immutability Vs. Flexibility

Another one of God's perfections is His immutability. Since God is perfect He cannot change, neither for the better, nor for the worse. Open theists of-

³⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 201.

fer limited assent to the doctrine of divine immutability but only as regards God's *being*, not His will which changes times innumerable in response to man's free actions.

Open theists do not teach God's immutability because they see that as a product of the influence of Greek philosophy. Boyd writes, "The view of God as eternally unchanging in every respect (and thus possessing an eternal, unchanging foreknowledge of all of world history) owes more to Plato than it does to the Bible."³¹ Sanders writes, "The essence of God does not change but God does change in experience, knowledge, emotions and actions."³² Pinnock expresses it this way: "If God is personal and enters into relationships God cannot be immutable in every respect, timelessly eternal, impassible or meticulously sovereign."³³ "It requires us to decide whether God is perfect by virtue of unchangeability, as the philosopher says, or perfect by virtue of relationality, as the Bible indicates."³⁴ Later he writes, "God is immutable in his essence but flexible in his dealings."³⁵

Rice complains that Augustine influenced the church to believe in an unchangeable God:

God's immutability implies that neither his knowledge nor his will ever change. Augustine made God's immunity to time, change and responsiveness to his creatures axiomatic for Western theology.³⁶

Just as the open theists put a positive spin on the limited knowledge and limited power of God, so they extol God's alleged changeableness. Pinnock writes, "A static and immobile God is not more perfect than our heavenly Father."³⁷ Boyd adds,

When a person is in a genuine relationship with another, willingness to adjust to them is always considered a virtue.

³¹ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 109.

³² Sanders, *Risks*, p. 187.

³³ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 72.

³⁴ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 7.

³⁵ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 87.

³⁶ Rice in *Openness*, p. 80.

³⁷ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 88.

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Why should this apply to people but not to God? On the contrary, since God is the epitome of everything we deem praiseworthy, and since we ordinarily consider responsiveness to be praiseworthy, should we not be inclined to view God as the most responsive being imaginable?³⁸

God's flexibility is seen especially, argue the open theists, in His response to our prayers. According to Sanders, God invited Abraham "into the decision-making process" before He decided what to do with Sodom.³⁹ Moses, too, could prevail upon God:

Being in relationship to Moses, God is willing to allow him to influence the path he will take. God permits human input into the divine future. One of the most remarkable features in the Old Testament is that people can argue with God and win.⁴⁰

Pinnock writes, "God does not will to rule the world alone but wants to bring the creature into his decisions. Prayer highlights the fact that God does not choose to rule the world without our input."⁴¹ Later he states,

God may want to move but may be prevented because, though he has the power, he wants to work hand-in-hand with the covenant partners with whom he shares dominion over the world. Without openness to God, there is no power.⁴²

D. God's Immutability Defended

The Bible is clear that God is immutable (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). In addition, God's counsel is immutable (Heb. 6:17). The context of Hebrews 6 shows that God's counsel concerning the blessing of Abraham, and thus the realization of salvation by Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, is unalterable. Richard Muller summarizes the Reformed orthodox consensus on the immutability of the divine counsel:

³⁸ Boyd, *Possible*, p. 78; italics mine.

³⁹ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 64.

⁴¹ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 42.

⁴² Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 135.

The eternal decree is utterly free but, once decreed, immutable. The Reformed insist that God in his eternity “could have determined himself to other objects than those he has decreed” but pointedly deny that the decree, once willed can be rescinded.⁴³

God’s immutability, rightly understood, is not a philosophical abstraction. James Montgomery Boice compares the immutability taught in Scripture with the philosophical concept:

The immutability of God as presented in Scripture, however, is not the same thing as the immutability of “god” talked about by the Greek philosophers. In Greek thought immutability meant not only unchangeability but also the inability to be affected in any way.⁴⁴

Charles Hodge makes the same careful distinction:

Theologians in their attempts to state, in philosophical language, the doctrine of the Bible on the unchangeableness of God, are apt to confound immutability with immobility We know that God is immutable in his being, his perfections and his purposes; and we know that he is perpetually active. And, therefore, activity and immutability must be compatible; and no explanation of the latter inconsistent with the former ought to be admitted.⁴⁵

E. God’s Repentance and Other Anthropomorphisms

The entire edifice of open theism is built upon two rocks. The first is libertarian free will and the second is an appeal to God’s repentance. We will consider the latter here and treat the former later.

⁴³ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 317-318.

⁴⁴ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, rev. 1986), p. 142.

⁴⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, repr. 2008), p. 391.

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Orthodox Christianity has traditionally understood texts which teach that God repents or changes His mind as anthropomorphisms or anthropopathisms, figures of speech according to which God accommodates His speech to human beings and presents Himself *as He seems to us, not what He actually is*.

Open theism rejects such an interpretation. “Classical theists are left with the problem of misleading biblical texts, or at best, meaningless metaphors regarding the nature of God,” complains Sanders.⁴⁶ Some open theists will concede that there are anthropomorphisms in Scripture, especially when Scripture ascribes physical characteristics to God who is spiritual (John 4:24), but Pinnock is prepared to make room even for the possibility that God is corporeal! He writes,

It seems to me that the Bible does not think of God as formless. Rather, it thinks of him as possessing a form that these divine appearances (Exod. 24:10-11, 33:23; Is. 6:1; Ezek. 1:28) reflect ... Most people, I suspect, think that God chooses to be associated with a body, while being himself formless. That may be so, but it is also possible that God has a body in some way we cannot imagine and, therefore, that it is natural for him to seek out forms of embodiment. I do not feel obligated to assume that God is a purely spiritual being when his self-revelation does not suggest it. It is true that from a Platonic standpoint, the idea is absurd, but this is not a biblical standpoint. And how unreasonable is it anyway? The only persons we encounter are embodied persons and, if God is not embodied, it may prove difficult to understand how God is a person. What kind of actions could a disembodied God perform?⁴⁷

At least Pinnock is consistent in rejecting anthropomorphisms. The Bible is clear that God is spiritual (John 4:24) and that a spirit is by definition *not embodied* (Luke 24:39). Moreover, who is Clark Pinnock to limit what the invisible, infinite and spiritual God can do? God’s hand, although not made

⁴⁶ Sanders, *Risks*, p. 69.

⁴⁷ Pinnock, *Mover*, p. 34.

of flesh, blood and bones as ours is, is the true hand, of which our hand is but a dim reflection. By that hand, He stretched forth the heavens and by that hand, His fatherly hand, He governs all things (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 27-28). His is the true power. His spirituality does not limit Him in the least. In addition, the souls of the dead are disembodied in the intermediate state. Does Pinnock imagine that because they have been “unclothed” (II Cor. 5:4) the souls of the dead do nothing?

There are three main types of passages, which have traditionally been interpreted as figurative, to which the open theists appeal: passages where God “learns” or seems to be ignorant, passages where God “repents” in response to human actions and passages where God expresses “regret” over what has happened. We will consider these three in turn.

... to be continued (DV)