

OPEN THEISM: DEFINED, DESCRIBED, AND DENOUNCED!

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I. TRADITIONAL VIEW OF GOD'S OMNISCIENCE

A. Stated

- "To say that God is omniscient is to say that He possesses perfect knowledge and therefore has no need to learn. But it is more: it is to say that God has never learned and cannot learn" (Tozer, Knowledge, 55)
- "[God] knows all that can be known. And this He knows instantly and with a fullness of perfection that includes every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn. God knows...all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth...Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does He seek information or ask questions. God is self-existent and self-contained and knows what no creature can ever know - Himself, perfectly...Only the Infinite can know the infinite" (Tozer, Knowledge, 56-57)

B. Supported

- Isaiah 55:8-9 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts'"
- Romans 11:33-34 "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?"
- Psalm 147:5 "His understanding is infinite."
- Job 37:16 "Do you know about the layers of the thick clouds, The wonders of one perfect in knowledge?"
- 1 John 3:20 "for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things."
- Isaiah 40:14 "With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, And informed Him of the way of understanding?"
- Psalm 139:1-6 "O LORD, Thou hast searched me and known me. Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar. Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, And art intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, Thou dost know it all. Thou hast enclosed me behind and before, And laid Thy hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it."
- 1 Corinthians 2:11 "Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God."

II. CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM OF OPEN THEISM

A. Defined

- Open Theism has also been called openness theology, the open view of God, and free will theism
- Called "open" because it emphasizes that the future is open-ended; there is no fixed future
- There are forces at work today to bring about a future tomorrow and God knows those forces and sees the direction of the future...but His knowledge of the future is more of an educated guess or inference rather than a settled knowledge
- Says that "God's knowledge is limited to what is knowable - past and present actualities. According to this view future contingent events are unknowable, even to God, because they are conditioned on other events and have not yet been determined" (Pyne and Spencer, A Critique of Free Will Theism, Bib Sac 158 [Jul-Sept 2001]: 259)
- Thus, God's knowledge (including His knowledge of future events) is limited to only that which is knowable.
- "The future does not yet exist so there is nothing there to be known" - Sanders

- God has set up the universe so that "some things go contrary to what God intends and may not turn out completely as God desires. Hence God takes risks in creating this sort of world" (John Sanders, The God Who Risks, 11)
- Proponents: John Sanders, Gregory Boyd, Richard Rice, Clark Pinnock
- As a result of this debate, the following questions have been raised:
 - Does God change his mind?
 - Does God change his mind in response to our prayers?
 - Does God know the future?
 - Does he know it precisely or just with a high degree of probability?
 - Was God taking a risk in making the human race?

B. Described

- Not only does God affect man in his course of life, but that man also influences God. As a result, all events in the universe are not necessarily due to God's sovereign will alone. Human decisions and actions, apart from God's will, significantly influence everything that happens.
- "God knows a great deal about what will happen. He knows everything that will ever happen as the direct result of factors that already exist. He knows infallibly the content of his own future actions, to the extent that they are not related to human choice. . . . All that God does not know is the content of future free decisions, and this is because decisions are not there to know until they occur." (Richard Rice, The Grace of God, the Will of Man, 134)
- "Those who reject that God possesses absolute and exhaustive foreknowledge do so on the basis that "the future would be fixed and determined, much as is the past. Total knowledge of the future would imply a fixity of events. Nothing in the future would need to be decided. It also would imply that human freedom is an illusion, that we make no difference and are not responsible." (Pinnock, Openness of God, 121)
- "God's experience of the world is open rather than closed. God's experience does not consist of one timeless intuition. He does not have one eternal perception of all reality, past and future. Instead, He responds to developments and changes in the world as they occur. Accordingly, God is open to new experiences and receives new stimuli. He continuously assimilates new data...Events enter His experience as they happen, not before. This means that God experiences the past and the future differently. They are not the same for Him. He remembers the past exhaustively, in all its detail. Every aspect is vividly present to His mind. But His experience of the future is different" (Richard Rice, God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will, 125)

C. Defended

1. An Emphasis on Divine Ignorance

- Supposedly, some verses show that God does not know the future:
 - Genesis 3:9 "Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'"
 - Genesis 22:12 "And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me'"
 - Open theists maintain that Gen 22:12 proves that God did not know about Abraham's faith until that event took place
 - God did know about it though well before events in Gen 22 - see Rom 4:18-22
 - God was already convinced about Abraham's faithfulness
 - The purpose of this text is not to describe the extent of God's knowledge; rather it is describe Abraham's great faith, manifested in good works (Rom 4; James 2; Heb 12)
 - Genesis 18:20-21 "And the Lord said, 'The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.'"
 - Hosea 8:5 "He has rejected your calf, O Samaria, saying, 'My anger burns against them! How long will they be incapable of innocence?'"
- Supposedly, some verses show that God repents or changes his mind:
 - Genesis 6:6 "And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart"
 - Exodus 32:14 "So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people."

- Jonah 3:10 "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it."
- 1 Samuel 15:11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands."
- Jeremiah 26:13 "Now therefore amend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God; and the Lord will change His mind about the misfortune which He has pronounced against you."
- How do we respond to these verses?
- How can both immutability of God and changeableness of God (repented, relented) be true?
 - Mal 3:6 - "For I, the Lord, do not change"
 - Root word of words like "relent, repent, be sorry, grieve" in OT is *naham* which comes from a word that carries with it the idea of heavy breathing or sighing deeply
 - When God "repent, grieves" the point is not that he has changed in his character
 - Instead, it's an anthropopathic term that conveys God's deep emotions and feelings over the events that took place
 - Thus, his character/purposes have not changed, but his feelings/emotions have
 - In Gen 6:6, point is that sin in the world has filled his heart with pain
 - "Immutability must not be thought of as if it were some type of frozen immobility. God is not some impervious being who cannot respond when circumstances or individuals change" - Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*
 - In Exodus 32:14, "Moses' appeal for God to change His mind, to relent, succeeded because God had only threatened judgment, not decreed it. A divine intention is not an unchangeable divine decree. Decrees or sworn declarations (cf. Gen. 22:16-18; Ps. 110:4) or categorical statements of not changing or relenting (cf. Jer. 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14, 15) are unconditional and bind the speaker to the stated course of action regardless of the circumstances or reactions of the listeners. Intentions retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action (cf. Jer. 15:6; 18:8-10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13; Jon. 3:9, 10; 4:2)." - MacArthur Study Bible
 - God has real and changeable emotions that do not threaten His immutability
- Open theology denies reality of anthropopathisms - a word used to portray God figuratively as having human emotions (figurative literary device used to help human mind attempt to comprehend God in terminology they understand)
- Open theism says that when it comes to God's emotions, they are to be taken literally, not figuratively (i.e. God repents really means God repents)
- But we don't take anthropomorphisms figuratively (He does not have hands, wings, eyes)

2. God is Mutable

- Open theism teaches that God is "an eternally on-going event, and an event which is dynamic and open...[There is] eternally room for expansion" (Greg Boyd, *Trinity and Process*, 386)
- Problem:
 - Classic theologians have taught that God is immutable - i.e. unchanging in his essential nature and being
 - Classic theology views God as being outside of time, not trapped within it

3. God is not in Full Control

- "There is no single, all-determinative divine will that coercively steers all things...God, for whatever reasons, designed the cosmos such that he does not necessarily always get his way" (Greg Boyd, *God at War*, 20, 47)

4. A Response to the Problem of Evil

- Open theists claim this view better explains the mysteries of human tragedies
- "When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is a pointless evil. The Holocaust is a pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these [evil] occurrences" (Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 262)

5. An Emphasis on Man's Freedom

- Open theists believe that complete foreknowledge by God of our future decisions implies the loss of our free will
- "God elicits human cooperation such that it is both God and humanity who decide what the future shall be. God's plan is not a detailed script or blueprint but a broad intention that allows for a variety of options regarding precisely how his goals may be reached" - John Sanders
- "Graciously, God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the open part of the future into being" - Sanders
- "We believe that God does not rightly control everything and that humans have libertarian freedom. We have the freedom to do otherwise than we did and we can thwart some of God's will" - Sanders
- David Basinger lists these characteristics:
 - a. God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom - freedom over which he cannot exercise total control
 - b. God so values freedom - the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible - that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results
 - c. God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and thus is affected by what happens in our lives
 - d. God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although he may very well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make." (Clark Pinnock, et al., eds, The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God, 156)
- Example: If Hebrew midwives had feared Pharaoh rather than God and killed the baby boys, then God would have responded accordingly and a different story would have emerged
- How do you explain the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom?
- Classic theologians believe in divine compatibilism - God's sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible - that humans are completely free to act on their desires but that God's will is never thwarted

D. Implications of Open Theism on other doctrines:

1. Doctrine of Sin

- Some open theists teach that God did NOT expect Adam and Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden

2. Doctrine of Angels

- Because events in history occur (according to open theism) as a result of the decision of free agents (some human, some angelic), God does not completely control demons. Thus, God is locked in mortal combat against the devil and his angels. "God must work with and battle against other created beings" - Boyd

3. Doctrine of Christ

- Because open theists believe that God has to relate mutually with humans and other free agents in order to get His will done, open theists are compelled to reinterpret the details of the life of Christ
- For example, Mary did not necessarily have to be the mother of Jesus
- "If Mary had declined then God would have sought other avenues. After all, it is doubtful that there was only one maiden in all of Israel through whom God could work. God is resourceful in finding people and then equipping them with the elements necessary for accomplishing his purposes" - Sanders

4. Doctrine of Soteriology

- "There is nothing specifically said in the OT that would have led one to predict a dying and raised Messiah" - Sanders
- Supposedly, the cross could have been avoided
- "Jesus wrestles with God's will (in the Garden of Gethsemane) because he does not believe that everything must happen according to a predetermined plan...Although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross...Until this moment in history other routes were perhaps open" - Sanders

III. OPEN THEISM DENOUNCED

- "Openness theology poses the first major doctrinal threat to evangelicalism in the twenty-first century" (Richard Mayhue, *The Impossibility of God of the Possible*, TMSJ 12/2 [Fall 2001]:204)
- 5 Reasons to reject open theism (adapted from Mayhue, *The Impossibility*, 207-20)

A. It Dismisses the History of the Church

- Classical view of *God's* omniscience is the majority view of the church; the open view is rare in church history

B. It Deifies Man and Humanizes God

- Boyd says this: "I have discovered a new appreciation and excitement regarding my own responsibility in bringing about the future"
- This is man-centered theology in that the roles are reversed: instead of believers glorifying *God* and enjoying Him forever, openness theology essentially says that *God* glorifies humans so that they can enjoy themselves forever
- "Boyd's overemphasis on the human at the expense of the divine borders on an "I'm the master of my fate, the captain of my soul" mindset. It involves "divine demotion" and "human promotion." There is no longer a vast, unmeasured gulf between the transcendent *God* and His human creation. Philosophically speaking, Open theists are attempting to level the playing field by bringing *God* down closer to man's level, and thereby giving the appearance that man has been elevated. Boyd teaches about a *God* who has backup Plan B and Plan C just to cover what man might do to confound His best Plan A. Rather than focusing on the ignorance and incompetence of man, openness focuses on the alleged ignorance and incompetence of *God*" - Mayhue, *The Impossibility*, 211.
- Open theism really redefines the person of *God* by looking at how humans act and then saying *God* must act same way (*God* is in the image of man, rather than vice versa)

C. It Discards the Mysterious Aspects of God

- The Bible continually portrays *God* as one whose character and ways are infinitely beyond any substantial human understanding and whose future plans will not be overturned by anyone or anything
- Biblical evidence:
 - Daniel 4:35 "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"
 - Isaiah 40:28 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting *God*, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable."
 - Psalm 139:17-18 "How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O *God*! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with Thee."
- There are many aspects of *God's* character/ways we cannot understand
 - *God* and man wrote Bible
 - Christ is fully *God* and fully man
 - *God* is sovereign but man is responsible
- When faced with this apparent contradictions, we must let *God* be *God*
- Human reason must adjust to *God's* being and not the reverse

D. It Diminishes God's Deity

- Open theism undermines the doctrine of the divine nature of *God* stated in such passages as:
 - Isaiah 42:8-9 "I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, Now I declare new things; Before they spring forth I proclaim them to you."
 - Isaiah 44:7-8 "And who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; Yes, let him recount it to Me in order, From the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming And the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any *God* besides Me, Or is there any other Rock? I know of none."

- Isaiah 45:21 "Declare and set forth your case; Indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides Me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me."
- Isaiah 46:9-10 "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'"

E. It Downplays Biblical Evidence for God's Foreknowledge

- Proverbs 21:1 "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.
- In Isaiah 44:28, Isaiah records God's prediction that Cyrus will give the decree to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Interestingly, this prediction is given 150 years before Cyrus is even born. Yet, Ezra 1:1-2 records the account of Cyrus' decree
- Acts 2:23 "this *Man*, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death"
- Micah 5:2 indicates that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, yet Joseph and Mary were in Nazareth (Luke 2:4-5) as the time for Christ's birth approached. Due to a decision on the part of Caesar Augustus, however, everyone had to return to their own city to register for a census. This decree by the Caesar (a human decision) forced Joseph and Mary to return to Bethlehem and, while there for the census, Mary gave birth to Christ in exact fulfillment of Micah 5:2.
- Ephesians 1:11 "also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will"
- Deuteronomy 31:20 "For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant."
- Isaiah 40:28 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable."
- Dreams of Daniel 2 and 7 clearly show God knew the future events of kings and nations, even though many human decisions were involved
- Psalm 115:3 "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

IV. WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

A. The Gospel is at stake

A Socinian view of God leads inevitably to a Socinian view of salvation which is not the good news of salvation by God's free grace - by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone - but rather a message of salvation by one's own efforts, a false gospel that is not good news at all. It is the gospel that is at stake in this debate (Robert Strimple, "What Does God Know?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis.*, 150)

B. God's omniscience is our hope in the midst of trials