

The 'Openness of God' and the Future of Evangelical Theology

Theology will be front and center at this week's meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia. This is not a year for business as usual, for the society will be confronting charges brought against two of its members. Given the nature of the charges, one or both of these individuals may be removed from membership in the society. Why? The answer to that question points to one of the most significant controversies facing contemporary evangelicals.

The theologians in question, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, are both proponents of a theological movement known as "Open Theism." In sum, open theists argue for a new model of understanding God's knowledge—a model that insists that true human freedom requires that God cannot know human decisions in advance.

Actually, open theists deny God's omniscience in matters that go beyond human decisions. The worldview promoted by open theists is based in a high degree of confidence that God will be able to direct the future in a general way, but open theists deny that God can possess infallible and comprehensive knowledge of the future. In essence, God is waiting with the rest of us to know how any number of issues will turn out.

Promoted by Pinnock and Sanders, along with other popular theologians such as Gregory Boyd, the open theists present a more user-friendly deity, less offensive to many moderns. This new model of God, based in something like what Clark Pinnock calls "creative love theism," redefines the God of the Bible and denies the classical understanding of God's sovereignty, knowledge, and power.

Bruce Ware, a careful critic of open theism, summarizes the movement in this way: "This movement takes its name from the fact that its adherents view much of the future as 'open' rather than closed, even to God. Much of the future, that is, is yet undecided, and hence it is unknown to God. God knows all that can be known, open theists assure us. But future free choices and actions, because they haven't happened yet, do not exist, and so God (even God) cannot know them."

As Ware explains, "God cannot know what does not exist, they claim, and since the future does not now exist, God cannot know it." Most importantly, open theists argue that God cannot know what free creatures will choose or do in the future. Thus, "God learns moment-by-moment what we do, when we do it, and His plans must constantly be adjusted to what actually happens, in so far as this is different than what He anticipated."

In two important books, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* and *Their God is Too Small* [both from Crossway Books], Ware provides a responsible and careful analysis of the open theists' arguments. Ware takes these thinkers seriously, and judges their argument by the Bible. In so doing, he concludes that the open view of God "poses a challenge to the evangelical church that is unparalleled in this generation."

The doctrine of God is the central organizing principal of Christian theology, and it establishes the foundation of all other theological principles. Evangelical Christians believe in the unity of truth. Therefore a shift in the doctrine of God—much less of this consequence—necessarily implies shifts and transformations in all other doctrines.

The open theists point to biblical passages that speak of God repenting or changing His mind. Rather than interpreting those passages in keeping with the explicit statements of Scripture that God knows the future perfectly, the open theists turn the theological system on its head, and interpret the clear teaching of Scripture through the narratives—rather than the other way round.

They also counsel that their “open” view of God is more helpful than classical Christian theism. After all, they advise, it allows God “off the hook” when things do not go as we had hoped.

In a now notorious example, Greg Boyd tells of a woman whose plans for missionary service were ruined by the adultery of her husband and subsequent divorce. This woman, Boyd relates, went to her pastor for counsel, asking him how God could have led her to have married this young man, only to see the marriage end in adultery and disaster. This pastor [presumably Boyd himself?] assured the woman that God shared her surprise and disappointment in how the young man turned out.

Most evangelicals would be shocked to meet this updated model of God face to face. Nevertheless, subtle shifts in evangelical conviction have been undermining Christianity’s biblical concept of God. Belief in God’s absolute knowledge has united theologians in the evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. Denials of divine omniscience have been limited to heretical movements like the Socinians. Even where Calvinists and Arminians have differed on the relationship between the divine will and foreknowledge, they have stood united in affirming God’s absolute, comprehensive, and unconditional knowledge of the future.

Several years ago, a major study of religious belief revealed just how radically our culture has compromised the doctrine of God. Sociologists asked the question, “Do you believe in a God that can change the course of events on earth?” One answer, which became the title of the study, was “No, just the ordinary one.” That is to say, modern men and women seem to feel no need to believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth—just an “ordinary God” who is an innocent bystander observing human events.

Measured against the biblical revelation, this is not God at all. The God of the Bible is not a bystander in human events. Throughout the Scriptures, God speaks of His own unlimited power, sovereign will, and perfect knowledge.

This model of divine sovereignty is explicitly denied by the open theists. As Clark Pinnock explains, “God is sovereign according to the Bible in the sense of having the power to exist in himself and the power to call forth the universe out of nothing by his Word. But God’s sovereignty does not have to mean what some theists and atheists claim, namely, the power to determine each detail in the history of the world.”

The obvious question to ask at this point is this: Just which details does God choose to determine? Pinnock’s “creative love theism” is, regardless of his intentions, a way of taking theism out of theology. This God is so redefined that He bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible.

Pinnock and his colleagues argue that evangelicals must transform our understanding of God into a model that is more “culturally compelling.” Where does this end? The culture gets to define our model of God?

Open theism does not stand alone. Acceptance of this model will require a complete transformation of evangelical conviction. A redefinition of the doctrine of God leads immediately to the redefinition of

the Gospel. A reformulation of our understanding of God's knowledge leads inescapably to a reformulation of how God relates to the world.

Indeed, some have gone so far as to call for an "evangelical mega-shift," that would completely transform evangelical conviction for a new generation. Even granting the open theist the highest motivations, the result of their theological transformation would be unmitigated disaster for the church.

The late B.B. Warfield remarked that God could be removed altogether from some systematic theologies without any material impact on the other doctrines in the system. My fear is that this indictment can be generalized of much contemporary evangelical theology. As the culture draws to a close, evangelicals are not arguing over the denominational issues that marked the debate of the twentieth century's early years. The issues are now far more serious.

Sadly, evangelicals are now debating the central doctrine of Christian theism. The question is whether evangelicals will affirm and worship the sovereign and purposeful God of the Bible, or shift their allegiance to the limited God of the modern mega-shift.

At stake is not only the future of the Evangelical Theological Society, but of evangelical theology itself. Regardless of how the votes go in Atlanta, this issue is likely to remain on the front burner of evangelical attention for years to come.

The debate over open theism is another reminder that theology is too important to be left to the theologians. Open theism must be a matter of concern for the whole church. This much is certain—God is not waiting to see how this vote turns out.