

OPEN THEISM: Willing to Believe: "The Controversy Over Free Will."

Willing to Believe: "The Controversy Over Free Will" by R.C. Sproul, was written in 1997, and is one of the better historical presentations concerning "free-will" as the doctrine progresses from the early church fathers through today. Dr. Sproul deals with each sect through the ages and contrasts their views with that of Augustine and classic Reformed theology. In face of the newest threats, "Open Theism" assaults Reformed faith and the whole church. So while this isn't a new book, it is well worth revisiting and having on the reference shelf. The only negative I found was the use of in-text Latin without translation. Most of these instances can be determined from the context and the cognitive nature of Latin, but are nevertheless distracting for one not versed in Latin. I wish Dr. Sproul had lowered the reading level so that this book could be recommended to everyone of the church. It remains a very necessary work for which the Reformed church owes Dr. Sproul thanks. This book could provide a foundation for revisiting this doctrine in our Bible classes. The chapter by chapter listing of footnote references provides a significant bibliography in the history of the church.

Open Theism is not in view as such in this book but it deals with the same subject matter. Dr. Sproul in Willing to Believe writes, "How we understand the will of man, then, touches heavily on our view of our humanity and God's character. The age-old debate between Pelagianism and Augustinianism is played out in the arena of these issues. Any view of human will that destroys the Biblical view of human responsibility is seriously defective. Any view of the human will that destroys the Biblical view of God's character is even worse. The debate will affect our understanding of God's righteousness, sovereignty, and grace. All of these are vital to Christian Theology. If we ignore these issues or regard them as trivial, we greatly demean the full character of God as revealed in Scripture." Dr. Sproul understates the seriousness of this attack on a classical Christian theology and thus Biblical theology.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in a pastoral letter from the General Assembly (June 2002) to all her churches states this concerning Open Theism: "Informed by the philosophical movement of process theology, open theists emphasize God's self-limitation in dealing with humans and an open future. His knowledge is not eternally settled, His foreknowledge is not exhaustive, His providential dealing with the world is not meticulous, and the future is not wholly secure. Some things are fixed, others are not. As evidence of this, open theists point to Scripture language in which God repents, expresses regret and speaks in conditional terms to people. This, they say is not simply phenomenological or anthropomorphic language, but literal. Sometimes in dealing with people, God makes mistakes and has to repent of His actions. A central assumption of open theism is that were God to be fully sovereign, or even (merely) to possess exhaustive foreknowledge, this would eliminate human freedom and the authenticity of our choices. Thus, in the open theist scheme, securing (libertarian)

human freedom becomes ultimate in importance, so that both God's exhaustive knowledge of the future and His sovereign control must be denied."

Perhaps the open theist as Pelagius began in a sincere effort to reveal the truth. Perhaps, both promote the free will of man above the sovereignty of God. I submit that Open Theism is full-blown Pelagianism and not even its later and lesser step child semi-Pelagianism. Because some scholars have embraced this heresy today should not lessen the haste to condemn or severely censure by the church toward those that try to propagate this lie. (This heresy attacks the very foundation of Biblical Christianity, the sovereignty of God.)

The debate is all about the free-will and the autonomy of man. That is, apart from God, man is essentially good and can save himself. Man can choose to believe God and effect his salvation apart from any action of God. The problem lies in a faulty order of salvation as revealed in Scripture. To move faith before regeneration or to set faith beside regeneration removes grace from the equation and destroys "Grace Alone" and it removes altogether one of the great "solos" of the Christian faith. Impugning the character of God or lessening any of God's perfections makes our God no longer the God of the Bible.

The church would do well to remember her heritage and revisit the great battles of her martyred defenders of the truth over these very issues. A new name for an old heresy should not pass under the defense system of the church because of the so-called scholarship of its proponents.

It is past the time for the Reformed churches to remove the philosophical fluff and teach the Bible as understood in our classical creeds and practiced by our forefathers. While almost all denominations outside the Reformed churches tolerate at least some elements of semi-pelagianism, the taint of this ancient heresy should be known and understood by all in the Reformed churches, not just the clergy.

Satan has sounded the attack, once more from within the walls of the church. Arise faithful soldier of the cross and cast out this foul cancer in our midst. Let "Ye are saved by grace, through faith, and that the gift of God," be our battle cry.

By: Dr. Chuck Baynard