

Open Theism

This pastoral letter sets forth theologically the biblical principles which should be applied to the questions we face as Christians and churches in evaluating and responding to the issue of open theism.

A pastoral letter is intended to shine the light of God's word broadly on a general area of concern to the Church. Requiring the approval of only one General Assembly, it is not as definitive as a Position Paper, which requires the approval of two General Assemblies (including a minimum of one year circulation among the presbyteries). The primary purpose of a pastoral letter is to guide churches within the EPC rather than to identify our positions to the world. (Act of Assembly 97-13)

It has often been said that what one believes about God is perhaps the most important thing about his or her theology. Consequently, when a group of evangelical scholars propose a radical redefinition of God, it is a serious matter, especially when that view makes significant departures from classical, Reformed and, ultimately, biblical theology.

During the past few years, a view of God has been set forth which has come to be known as "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 Scriptural 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.

Open theists also contend that the Christian church has adopted a doctrine of God that is misleading and inconsistent with the Bible. It presents God as a kind of static, unrelational, non-interactive, unmoved mover. The classical view, they say, is deeply rooted in Greek philosophy, and hopelessly irrelevant to contemporary life.

This pastoral letter not only aims to identify the movement of open theism, but also to provide some brief, contemporary comments from both a biblical and confessional standpoint. It is written because of the extent to which this view has been making headway in evangelical circles. We believe the debate cannot be ignored or go unanswered. While this letter is far from exhaustive, we want to suggest ways to respond and, in the process, to deepen our own understanding of God in a way that is faithful to Scripture and spiritually beneficial to the church.

On a positive note, open theists challenge Christians to think about theology and to ask questions about who is God and what is he like. They prompt Christians to search their Bibles and reflect on the nature of prayer, suffering and human freedom—which is good. Their concern for a God who is near, who relates to us, who feels, suffers, interacts with us, and honors human choices is also good. The problem with open theism lies in the inadequate solutions it offers.

Classical theism and Reformed theology state that God's knowledge of the future is exhaustive, his providential guidance is complete and the triumph of his eternal purposes is assured. Open theists misrepresent the classical and Reformed view of God. In Reformed theology God is not the unmoved mover of Aristotle who is unaffected by our relationships. Rather he is the covenant-making God who graciously enters into relationships with us. Belief in a living, active God has always been at the very heart of Reformed theology.

Open theists allege that a God who is immutable cannot be touched by our feelings or prayers. We affirm that immutability means God, in his essence, character and purposes, does not change. Yet this immutability of his nature allows for God feeling, responding, answering and being touched by our infirmities.

This view of divine immutability is not driven by Greek philosophy. While the early church fathers sometimes employed Hellenic terms for theological discussion, directed by the Holy Spirit they routinely poured

Christian meaning into them that was profoundly different from Greek philosophy.

Furthermore, open theists insist that divine sovereignty nullifies human freedom. However, in saying this, they ignore massive amounts of Scripture that affirms God's absolute sovereignty over history and human lives (e.g. *Gen. 50:20, Isa. 10:5ff, Acts 2:23*). Scripture presents the covenant God as One who reigns. He knows the end from the beginning. He declares in advance what will happen. He assures his plans will come to pass. "I am God, and there is none like me," says Isaiah 46:8-10, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come."

Unfortunately, open theists seek to minimize the mysteries Scripture holds forth on this subject. The Bible pictures a God who is absolutely sovereign, yet who calls human beings to make real choices with real consequences. It affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility in a tension that we cannot fully resolve this side of heaven. Rather than affirm one strand of truth (e.g. *human responsibility*) while ignoring others (e.g. *divine sovereignty, omniscience, etc.*) Scripture affirms both, while acknowledging the limits of what our finite human minds can grasp and affirming the incomprehensibility of God (we cannot know all of him with our finite minds).

When open theism talks about God's will, it considers his will only in the causative sense. On this showing it misrepresents Reformed theology as teaching that God efficiently caused Adam to sin, Judas to betray Jesus, etc. Reformed theology insists that there is both a decreative will of God and a permissive will of God. While his will is unified, it includes conditional and unconditional elements.

While affirming authentic human choices and real responsibility, Reformed theology has long acknowledged the limits of our human freedoms. Sin curtails the range of our choices. Sinners have the capacity to choose freely at the psychological level but, since the Fall, have lost the freedom to glorify God and choose Christ. We need grace and the true freedom that Christ brings.

Reformed theology affirms that the sovereign God of the Bible calls people to be responsible—to do good, to trust God, and to pray. God answers our earnest prayers. One of God's purposes in prayer is to change us who pray; another is to facilitate the realization of God's foreordained ends.

What about Scripture texts that say God repents? The Hebrew word for repent has a range of meaning, one of which means to grieve (*Genesis 6:6*). While from a human perspective it appears as if God is changing his mind, we believe that God sees all eventualities and incorporates them into his overarching plan. We see the parts; he sees the whole. Thus, God's sovereign plan ultimately does not change.

We believe that raising these issues is not an instance of theological hair-splitting or wallowing in theological minutia. There are many pastoral concerns that arise from open theism.

If open theism is right and God neither knows nor controls the future, then we cannot take comfort in God's providential direction in our lives. Moreover, human suffering is pointless. The foundation of prayer collapses, for the God of open theism may not be able to help us. Divine guidance is problematic. Predictive prophecy is unreliable. If God does not know the future, how can he predict accurately the course of world history or salvation history? At best we are left with only a vague, uncertain hope that God will somehow win out in the future.

We believe that open theism profoundly reduces the view of God. Its net effect is to enlarge man and diminish God. The God it ends up with is a weakened deity who is finite in power and knowledge, makes mistakes for which he may even have to apologize, is often frustrated and disappointed, and cannot assure us of a triumphant outcome to history. Put simply, the God of open theism clearly does not have the whole world in his hands! Consequently, we believe that open theism, which is a radical form of Arminianism, is seriously flawed and incompatible with Scripture and our Confession.

In contrast, the God of the Bible, of classical orthodoxy, and of Reformed theology, is a God who is immanent, compassionate and interactive. He shows his love to a thousand generations because he is the covenant keeping God. Yet this God is the almighty sovereign Lord who reigns over all! He is sovereign even in our salvation, and yet he calls us to believe the gospel and to take it to the ends of the earth that the world may know.

We encourage our leaders to learn more about this issue and the doctrine of God from the following materials.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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For Reformed sources which address the wider issues, see:

- Packer, J. I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961.
- *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, especially chapters 2, 3 and 5.

For Open Theism proponents, see the following:

- Boyd, Gregory A. *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000.
- Pinnock, Clark H. *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001.
- Pinnock, Clark, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
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