

The Openness of God

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**by
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The Openness of God seems to be a permeating topic in today's theological circles, as well as the general Body of Christ. First we will look at concise overviews of the Openness of God from Clark Pinnock. Following Pinnock's argument on each overview, we will look at rebuttal given by Bruce Ware, backing a traditional view of God. My leaning should be seen clearly in my presentation of each position, and where I have agreed with neither, my opinion will follow.

In opening, summary indictments, Pinnock states,

“It is hard to avoid the impression that, whereas openness theists are comfortable with the Biblical terms such as love, patience, wisdom, and repentance, traditional theists prefer abstract philosophical terms like aseity, simplicity, immutability, and impassibility.” (Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 26).

“...in Jesus Christ we encounter a God Who changes for our sake and suffers on our behalf... One Who humbles Himself and proves to be perfect in His changing, as well as in His not-changing... Whose very being is self-giving love... God's unity will not be viewed as a mathematical oneness, but as a unity that includes diversity; God's steadfastness will not be seen as a deadening immutability, but constancy of character that includes change; God's power will not be seen as raw omnipotence, but as the sovereignty of love Whose strength is revealed in weakness; and God's omniscience will not be seen as know-it-all, but as a wisdom which shapes the future in dialogue with creatures.” (Pinnock, 27)

Though Pinnock acknowledged that he hold to fundamental tenets of Historical Christendom, he vigorously opposes Hellenistic influences that he claims many early Church fathers presupposed before Scripture. “My faith too is in the triune God. I maintain that God and the world are ontologically distinct, that God interacts with the world and that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. I am a standard Christian theist, but I oppose a version of basic theism that incorporates certain Greek categories causing distortions in doctrine. I oppose the tendencies shaped by Greek assumptions about the divine.” (Pinnock, 73)

Pinnock appeals to commonality and acceptance citing many theologians who feel the need for change from these traditional Hellenisticly influenced models of God.

“Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem are good examples of theologians who accept the need to reformulate immutability, but refuse to surrender timelessness, all-controlling sovereignty and exhaustive omniscience. It remains a mystery how one can say that God acts and feels in response to different situations, whilst saying that He causes everything and knows everything... We need to let God's own self-revelation dominate our thinking, rather than what natural reason and tradition tell us that God must be like.” (Pinnock, 79)

“All of us worship one God: personal, self-existent, creator, separate from but active in the world, perfectly good, all-powerful, all knowing, and eternal.” (Pinnock, 105)

Freedom and Risk

Openness theists side with contemporary Arminians on the topic of mankind's free agency. The Openness theist will take this position much farther by stating that, “...God took risk. Risk is a function of the fact that God has limited the degree of His control over the world in granting the creature genuine freedom, and this is not without pain to Himself.” (Pinnock, 39) Pinnock states that, “in the Biblical narrative, one does not find a predestinarian decree operating behind the scenes, to ensure that God's will is always done. Rather, one sees God's response to a created partner. We see Him weaving into His own plans, the significant choices that creatures make... He is open to new experiences, has a capacity for novelty and is open to reality, which itself is open to change... God is unchangeable with respect to His character, but always changing in relation to us.” (Pinnock, 41)

Openness theologians will assert with tradition that God knows exhaustively all that has past, and all this is now. The primary objection to the above view of a risking God is that He does not exhaustively know the future. “Though God knows all there is to know about the world, there are aspects about the future that even God does not know.” (Pinnock, 32) For instance, regarding relationship and incident with Abraham, Pinnock

states that “it was a wrenching experience and both partners, God and Abraham, learned from it” (Gen. 22:12; 18:22) (Pinnock, 42) In their view, God really did not know the outcome until it happened, and really gained new insight into Abraham.

In response to an openness view of Gen. 22:12 (“now I know that you fear God”), Ware persuasively argues that if God, indeed, did not know Abraham's heart until the moment he raised the knife to kill his son, then this must deny God some knowledge of the present, for I Chronicles 28:29 states that “... the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts”. Openness theism accepts God's full knowledge of the present, thus making their argument using Gen. 22:12 internally contradictory. (Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 68ff.)

In response to Gen 18:9-22, Ware rightly argues that a faithful application of the 'straight-forward' hermeneutic appealed to by the Openness theologians would also require us to reject much more than the exhaustive foreknowledge of God. (Ware, 76-77)

Interaction with Creation

In place of traditional immutability, Pinnock would suggest, “changeable faithfulness” (Pinnock, 85) Challenging traditional impassibility, Pinnock sees God as personal, intimate with, and affected by His creatures. (Pinnock, 88)

“God is able, should He so choose, to become involved in the processes of a world and to enjoy the relative goodness of a world as He participates in it.” (Pinnock, 29)

While both camps would see God as Sovereign Lord, the Openness theist (and the Arminian, as well) would not see Him exercising meticulous determinism. “We must not forget that God is 'sovereign over His sovereignty' and can make the kind of world He likes-- in this case, a world with free creatures in it.” (Pinnock, 92) But once again, the objection to orthodoxy comes at the extreme. “How weak God would be if His sovereignty were threatened by any element of risk or uncertainty? Only a pathetic god

would reign over the world in dictatorial ways. Imagine having to control everything in order to be able to achieve anything!” (Pinnock, 95) “Often we stress creation as a power move, which it surely was. But, in a sense, creation was also an act of self-limitation, not of self-expansion. Creating human beings who have true freedom is a self-restraining, self-humbling and self-sacrificing act on God's part... The world is dependent on God but God has also, voluntarily, made Himself dependent on it in some important respects. God affects the world, but God is also affected by the world. God is sovereign, but He has also given power to creatures. Though Lord of time and history, God has also chosen to be bound up with time and history. Though unchangeable with respect to His character, and the steadfastness of His purposes, God changes in the light of what happens by interacting with the world... In short, the world is a dynamic project and God is very much involved in it. Over against traditional theism, the open view regards world process as more closely integrated with God than theology has ordinarily been willing to admit.” (P31-32) Prayer is often used to highlight the fact that God does not chose to rule the world without our input. It also is used to suggest that the future has not been exhaustively settled. (Exod. 32:11-14) (Pinnock, 42-43) “Divine repentance is an important Biblical theme. At the time of the great flood, God said that He was sorry that He had made humankind and decided to judge the whole world and start over again (Gen 6:8). I Sam. 15:35 is proposed to show that it appears God is willing to change course, especially where judgment is concerned, because He loves to be merciful and to relent from punishing Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2

In response to the 'Divine repentance' passages, Ware proposes a logical axiom which states that “[a] given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to Him.” (Ware, 86) He then goes on the show that I Sam. 15:29, Num. 23:19, and, to an extent, Hosea 11:8-9, all “contribute a varied yet

uniform testimony to the fact that the Creator God, Who is not a man, is, in Himself and His own actions, above the moral lapses and changeability of character and purpose that characterized the world of humanity. Scripture, then does in fact present God as transcending the human and finite qualities of changeability that it elsewhere attributes to Him.” (Ware, 90) In cases of pronounced destruction and subsequent relenting-- as in Jonah-- Ware argues that God's “broader purposes include[d] God telling others in order to elicit their response. Since the response of the people is part of what God intends, it appears that His “changed” course of action is the one He intended all along.” (Ware, 93)

Both camps would agree that God relates to us from within space and time (Pinnock, 32), but again the Openness would push the boundary of traditional orthodoxy, and say that He *only* does such from within. “Scripture presents God as temporally everlasting, not timelessly eternal”¹ (Pinnock, 96)

Personal, Not Absolute

Openness theologians often stress the importance of God's personal communion with us over and above His absolute attributes. “We ought to view God in personal, not absolutist terms” (Pinnock, 79) “God enjoys loving communion.” (Pinnock, 83) “...love is the very essence of [God's] being.” (Pinnock, 81)

Openness theists contend that God is faithful to His goals, but flexible as to how to fulfill them specifically. (Pinnock, 43) They stout a partly settled future: “Perhaps they will understand... (Ezek. 12:3), Jer 3:7, 19; 26:3” God's foreknowledge, it seems, is not exhaustive in detail. (Pinnock, 47-48)

It seems all of these points culminate in the Openness theists' thesis on inexhaustive Divine foreknowledge. Ware does well in his response to hinge the entire

1 Cited Scripture from Pinnock on Space: Ps 115:16, Ps 104:2, Deut 26:15, Jer 23:24, Eph 4:6, Eph 2:22, Rev 21:3-4;
Time: Jer 18:11; 29:11, Jer 4:14; 13:27; Hos. 8:5

debate on the exhaustive foreknowledge of God. He responds by saying, to conclude from the use of 'conditional futures', or words like 'may' or 'perhaps', God's ignorance of the future actions of His people, in the light of many other texts in which God declares just what His people will do, is a dangerous conclusion to draw. Ware suggests that God's purpose in the use of these words might be simply a reluctance, in this instance, to reveal His insight to His creation beforehand. (Ware, 80-81)

Ware also answers the claim that God cannot emotionally respond in relationships with His creation if He had known, all along, what would happen before the event. He cites (in response to an openness view of Isaiah 5:1-7) Deut. 31:16-21, which tells of God's complete foreknowledge of the event and also pronounce what His emotional response will be to the event. (Ware, 122)

While insisting on a 'straight-reading' of texts which openness theologians use dealing with God's future knowledge, the same concede that some passages that deal with our God's knowledge of the past and present must be taken anthropomorphically. (Gen. 3:8-13) (Ware, 82)

Ware also sites both Jer. 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-36 which “stress God's new covenant promise that in the time that God chooses, He will so transform His people that they will fully and completely walk in His statues and obey His ordinances. They will fully know the Lord.” (Ware, 84)

Summary Arguments

To prove his position, that God, indeed, has exhaustive foreknowledge over all creation, Ware sites 9 accounts in Isaiah 40-48, in which God chooses to establish His Deity by the very fact that He can tell what will come to pass. Boyd seems to site that these passages are merely stating what God will, Himself, bring to pass, which does seem to me the intent of the passages. However, Ware responds articulately that even if this

was so, God would still have to know immense future choices taken by His freewill creatures, for even the stage to be set for Him to fulfill these events. This argument seems, to me, most weighty. (Ware, 101-119)

In conclusion, Ware makes a controversial statement which, not only Openness theists, but also a majority (I think) of traditional theists, would discount: "...one can ascribe to moral creatures the significance, value, and shaping importance of their freedom only at the expense of God's glory." (Ware, 226) His argument goes such: "It is impossible for the actions of human freedom to be outside of God's control and for God, nonetheless, to get the credit for what good effects were produced by those free actions. If the problem of evil is solved (in Arminian and openness theologies) by appeal to human freedom, such that God is not responsible for the evil done by free creatures over whose actions He had no control, then one may regard this as the "problem of goodness." That is to say, if God should not take the blame for the evil done by human freedom, then correspondingly He should not get the credit for the good done equally freely and fully outside of His control." (Ware, 226)

This statement rests on the very inadequate *a priori* assumption that the single factor to be considered is our freedom. Sin, indeed, may very well be attributed to our freewill, and also the glory of goodness, just as well, attributed to God, for what do we have that was not given to us by God. The very endowment-- not of merely our freewill-- but of our entire lives, gives all rights to our Creator for any good done. Is not the Prodigal to blame for his waste, and the Father for the ring and robe his servant placed on his hand.

Matters of such Divine element as per understanding God's exhaustive foreknowledge in light of the freedom He's given mankind, elusively escape comparison to qualities of our common world. Sometimes they require anthropomorphism, myths, and symbols to expression to us even the idea. A Christian author once questioned:

Is the enemy easily answered when he says that all is without plan or meaning? As soon as we think we see one, it melts away into nothing, or into some other plan that we never dreamed of, and what was the centre becomes the rim, till we doubt if any shape or plan or pattern was ever more than a trick of our own eyes, cheated with hope, or tired with too much looking. To what is all driving? What is the morning you speak of? To what is it the beginning of?

To which he was given the reply:

The Great Dance does not wait to be perfect until the peoples of the Low Worlds are gathered into it. We speak not of when it will begin. It has begun from before always. There was no time when we did not rejoice before His face as now. The dance which we dance is at the centre and for the dance all things were made. Blessed be He!

All which is not itself the Great Dance was made in order that He might come down into it. In the Fallen World He prepared for Himself a body and was united with the Dust and made it glorious for ever. This is the end and final cause of all creating, and the sin whereby it came is called Fortunate and the world where this was enacted is the centre of worlds. Blessed be He!

(C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 213-215)

Appendix: Additional Quotes

On God's Embodiment: Ex 24:10-11; 33:11, 23; Is 6:1; Ezek 1:28; rev 4:2, 1:12-16

... it is a fact that God loves to take on forms to facilitate His self-revelation and redeeming agency. (Pinnock, 35)

On Creation: Yahweh also takes on partners who affect Him and agents who go face-to-face with Him in dynamic, not controlled, relationships... It is not the situation of omnicausalism where even the input of the creature is predetermined....although God has the upper hand, He is not now totally in control... Creation is God's partner, not just a passive product....God delegated sovereignty to creature...God is not now in complete control of the world and that genuine evil, which God does not want, exists... God's plans at this point in history are not always fulfilled.” Jude 6 (Pinnock, 35-36)

...He already consists of a tri-personal community in which each gives and receives love (Pinnock, 28)

On God's Omniscience: “He knows everything that has existed, everything that now exists, and everything that could exist in future... He also know what He will do... But no being, not even God, can know in advance precisely what free agents will do, even though He may predict it with great accuracy.” (Pinnock, 100)

“History is not yet completely settled, but is still being actualized...God is still deciding exactly what He will do in matters of detail, but not overall.” (Pinnock,102)

Gen 18; Exod. 34; Hosea 6:4

Ware poses that “...Arminians may respond to this critique by claiming that, since God is eternal and therefore exists outside of time, it is possible for God to “see” all of time as one eternal and non-sequential “now.” Or, some may say, it simply is part of God's perfection to know everything that is and will be; we may not be able to comprehend just how it is that God can know what are to us future free choices and actions, but we must not limit God simply because we cannot grasp His fullness. Scripture's assertions that God's knowledge is infinite and that God knows the future teach this truth which we must affirm, even if how God knows future free actions is something of a mystery.

“Wisdom is only required if God is governing a world with free creatures in it who have to be responded to moment by moment as time goes by” (Pinnock, 102)

Application:

Pinnock asserts that extreme Calvinism "...can mak prayer meaninglss and evangelism unnecessary and undermine one's will to live and act... Suppose, in particular, that God decided from eternity to save a certain number of people unconditionally and will not fail to do so whatever they do or do not do. It would be better to live as if this were not true, not only because it would make God a respecter of persons, deliberately giving to one the mercy He withholds from another, but because it subverts any motive for seeking God since the outcomes are settld, and undermines any mission to preach the Gospel to every creature. If one must believe in such a doctrin, it would be advisable not to give it much thought for practical purposes. It would be better to operate on the asis of God's love for all humanity as constant and sincere, which, thankfully, most convntional theists do.” (Pinnock, 155-156)