

Openness of God Theology: Deconstructing the God of the Bible

I. Introduction

- A. Is a theological position held by professing evangelicals heretical if it espouses the following positions: God does not know everything; He sometimes makes mistakes and regrets His actions; He may have a material body; He is not unchanging; He suffers like us; He takes risks; His sovereignty is limited; He does not punish people eternally in hell; devout people of other religions who have not heard of Christ will be saved; the Bible is not error free; Christ's death did not pay the penalty for man's sins; Love is God's primary attribute?
- B. The above collection of unorthodoxy is known variously as: *Openness of God Theology* (OGT); *Finite Godism*, *Neotheism*, *Free-will Theism*, *Relational Theism*, and *Evangelical Process Theism*. The major professing evangelical theologians and philosophers advocating the above tenets are: Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Gregory Boyd, David Basinger, Randall Basinger, Richard Rice, Robert Brow, and William Hasker. To be fair, it should be noted that the men just listed may not subscribe to all of the above. However, all would agree to at least two of the above: (1) that God's knowledge of the future is limited because mankind has libertarian free will, and (2) God is omnibenevolent.
- C. The major ideas of Openness of God theology (OGT) began to be debated in the early eighties. At the beginning of the new century, this debate, which centers largely on the nature of God, rages mainly in the halls of academia and via scholarly publications and books. However, these ideas are rapidly showing up in popular books and in sermons as the above professors train new ministers who have become converts to OGT. To the theologically unsophisticated these ideas have appeal in the prevailing postmodern culture. Hence the purpose of this briefing.

II. The Major Ideas and Assumptions of Openness of God Theology

A. God Limits His Knowledge of the Future and Man Has True Free Will

For most Openness of God theologians this is the first and foremost tenet of their belief (an absolutely nonnegotiable presupposition!). By true free will

they mean libertarian free will whereby a decision is not determined by any prior causative factors. Hasker says: “*An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.*” (*Openness of God*, p. 136-137). They therefore contend that individuals choose from a variety of options none of which are necessitated or compelled by some predetermined plan of God. OGT believe that God so values the free will of man that He takes risks and makes Himself vulnerable. History becomes a joint venture between God and man. The attribute of omniscience is not denied by OGT, but is redefined to say that God only knows what can be known; the future cannot be known until it happens! God does however, know possibilities and probabilities. According to their claims, if God decrees everything and knows all future events then man cannot be free.

To support their case, OGT quote passages in the OT which appear to show that God is sometimes surprised by the choices made by men. For example, see Genesis 6 where God says He regrets making man, and I Sam.15, where God confesses that he made a mistake in “allowing” Saul to be king.

B. God’s Main, or Central Attribute is Love (Omnibenevolence)

The second major focus of OGT is the attribute of love being God’s most important quality as expressed in I John 4:8. OGT see this as important because they believe strongly that God wants a genuine relationship with people He created in His own image. This is only possible, they propose, if man is truly free (as they define it) and God himself is within the realm of time and has a personality with legitimate emotions and feelings. “A timeless, transcendent deity who micro manages every detail of the cosmos as in the classical view of God, (read Calvinistic) cannot be a relational God,” they claim. To support their thesis they refer to the many dialogue passages in the OT where God expresses His emotions.

C. A Literal, Straight-forward Interpretation of the Bible

OGT assert that passages in the OT where God dialogues with humans be taken literally. If the passage states that God changes His mind, or that He experiences emotions, we should not try to twist the Scriptures to make God be other than He is. They deny that any of these passages should be interpreted figuratively as anthropomorphisms (an anthropomorphism is when

God is seen as having human body parts, i.e., “the hand of God,” whereas an anthropopathism is when God has human-like emotions). To be a truly relational God He must have true personality whereby He experiences a full range of emotions, and mental states, even growing in knowledge. They maintain that only through their view of God does prayer make sense. By our petitions to God, and when it is in our best interests, God can be persuaded to change His mind. OGT scoff at the traditional view which resorts to antinomies or mysteries to resolve difficult passages where God’s absolute sovereignty (as in predestination) and man’s will seem to conflict. They accuse classical theists of being too influenced by Greek philosophy which saw God as unchanging, impassible (without passion) and outside of time.

D. The Openness of God View Provides a Solution to the Problem of Evil.

OGT are very desirous to present a God who is palatable and relevant in our modern world (postmodern, that is). Historically, one of the knottiest problems in the Christian worldview is the problem of evil. If God is all good, all-powerful, and created all that is, how do you explain the origin of evil in the world? OGT believe their view of the libertarian freewill of man yields a more satisfactory explanation of the existence of evil while exonerating God from being the source. See *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, by Gregory A. Boyd.

E. God is Time-bound

While OGT give credence to the transcendence of God they stress His immanence and the fact that He is time-bound like His creation. In addition, He is contingent in that His actions depend on the actions of His free creatures. In other words, what God experiences in and outside of Himself changes Him. See Gregory Boyd in *Trinity and Process*, pp. 232, 386. Going even further (since God is time-bound), Pinnock speculates that God may have a body (*Most Moved Mover*, p.33-34).

III. The Roots of Openness Belief

A. Theological: Most of the ideas expressed by OGT have had advocates at some point in Church history. Particularly in the 16th Century Lelio and Fausto Socinus (uncle and nephew) denied that God either foreknew or foreordained future events. They also took issue with the harsh trinitarian

view of God held by the reformers who considered their views heretical. The Socinians also proposed the idea that God's main attribute was love, and that a loving God could merely forgive sin if he chose to do so. Hence the death of Christ was not a payment for sin, but an example. Nowhere do the OGT appeal to this 16th Century heresy, but at some points there is similarity (For more discussion of the beliefs of the Socinians see: M. Erickson, in *Christian Theology*, p. 783ff.).

- B. Philosophical: Very early in the debate OGT were sometimes called Process theists much to their dismay. More recently, however, some are now admitting that they *do* find an affinity with some aspects of Process Theism (See Clark Pinnock in: *Process Theology*, pp.313ff.) Process theology, according to Royce G. Gruenler, formerly a Process theist "is the idea that God is engaged in the time sequence. He doesn't know the future. He has ideals for the future, and he tries to lure us to actualize those ideals, but he does not control each individual or occasion on the atomic scale. God needs us because without us he's not concrete. He sets the ideals, but then we create the content and God expands his actuality through us. We add to him" (*Christianity Today*, Mar. 5, 2001). For more comparisons between OGT and Process Theism see: Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left*, Chapter 4, and for a concise survey of Process Thought see: *God the Father Almighty*, by M. Erickson (Chapter 3).
- C. Cultural: There is ample evidence that OGT has also been deeply influenced by our postmodern cultural milieu. Pinnock says, "Maybe modern influences, which create a distorting tilt in the direction of divine immanence, are present in my work." *Most Moved Mover*, p.141.
- D. Experience: It is very difficult to totally divorce our beliefs from our experiences. None of us are exempt, though our goal is to be objective, especially when dealing with Scriptural data. Several of the OGT have acknowledged that their views have been somewhat shaped by deep traumatic experiences. Two mention the untimely death of loved ones as having a significant impact on their view of God. Another notes that his agnostic father rejected Christianity because of the intellectual problems he had with the classical view of God. See: *Letters from a Skeptic*, by Gregory A. Boyd.

IV. The Major Problems and Consequences of Openness Theology

- A. Its main presupposition of libertarian free will is assumed without much attempt at proof. Not only does it fail to deal with the Biblical data about the will of man, but it fails to deal with evidence from the behavioral sciences, and modern genetics. Other critics have pointed out that there is almost no interaction with Luther, Calvin, or Edwards who wrote extensively on the subject of the will (e.g., the monumental *Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards). It does, however, bear a striking resemblance to the view of 20th century existentialist philosophy (see Briefing Paper #50). It is as though OGT are attacking a straw-man. The classical view is often derided with pejorative language such “the computer wizard and his robot,” or, “the ventriloquist and his dummy.” Classical theism *does not deny* that man is a free-agent who is responsible for his acts. Though he acts freely, his freedom is limited, however, in that there are a string of causative factors which affect his every choice. For example, man’s freedom is limited by the laws of nature, genetics, and his desires. The classical view emphasizes very strongly that fallen man is under the bondage of a sinful nature and a man always chooses according to his strongest desire or inclination (Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Edwards). Everyone is well aware that he is *not a robot*; he knows that he acts freely and has the accompanying guilt when he knows he’s made a foolish choice. Libertarian free will is not all it’s cracked up to be. In heaven, the consummate state of human existence, will be a state where man cannot sin. So in man’s highest estate he will not have libertarian free will! He will, however, make choices freely based on his strongest desire, now as a redeemed moral agent. Redeemed citizens of heaven will not only not be able to sin; *they won’t want to!* See the excellent article by renown theologian, Geoffrey Bromily, “*Only God is Free.*” *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 2002, p. 72.
- B. It fails hermeneutically, i.e., it is inconsistent in its interpretation of Scripture. OGT do attempt to state their case by arguing from Scripture texts but they are guilty of using selective texts while ignoring a great quantity of passages that support classical theism. For example, there are passages that clearly teach that God does not change (See Mal. 3:6; Heb. 1:12; and James 1:17), and clear passages that teach that what separates the one true creator God from all others is the fact that He knows the future exhaustively (especially Isa. 40, 46:10). These passages in Isaiah do not seem to teach that God and man are cooperating in making history! There are dozens of detailed prophecies that were fulfilled literally both in the

OT and NT.

It should also be noted that Pinnock and others appear to propose that there can be more than one meaning to the text, a major departure in the science of interpretation, and a giant step toward a postmodern view of texts (see Briefing Paper #52). Here are Pinnock's own words: "I accept diversity among the biblical witnesses and recognize the dialogical character of the Bible.... The Bible does not speak with a single voice for the Bible is a complex work by many authors whose views may vary and... the text is open to many plausible interpretations." (p.21) "In fact, biblical authors do not merely vary in their viewpoints; they made many mistakes in offering prophecies that did not come true." (p. 50-51) Quotes are from *Most Moved Mover*. Elsewhere he writes: "The meaning of the Bible is not static and locked up in the past but is something living and active." (*Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings, Wesleyan Theological Journal*, p.140).

- C. It does not establish its case that God does not know the future. If God does not know the future how does he know that good will ultimately prevail? From our perspective they have not established their case. OGT claim God sometimes acts unilaterally. But if this is the case, then they have violated their number one thesis that God does not override the sanctity of man's free will. The classical view does not believe God coerces man to act contrary to his desires. Pharaoh was not a puppet. At least he never complained about some outside force causing him to act the way he did. His decisions were his own, but his actions were compatible with God's plan. Classical theists explain that God has two wills: what He *decrees* and what He *desires*. OGT scoff at this explanation but cannot deny that it is readily obvious in the crucifixion of Christ. See: *Bound Only Once*, p.188ff.
- D. It is deeply influenced by Contemporary Philosophy. OGT claim the classical view has been unduly influenced by Greek philosophy. Most theologians admit that some of this has occurred. However, there is nothing wrong about agreeing with philosophy if it is in harmony with biblical teaching. Ironically, while OGT charges that the classical view is based on Greek philosophy, OGT shows the heavy influence of contemporary philosophy, namely process philosophy. One only has to read *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Harold S. Kushner, a

- book written to popularize the Process view of deity, to see the resemblance. Also, note this quote: “*But how is it if God is the supreme, however, benevolent, tyrant? Can we worship a God so devoid of generosity as to deny us a share, however humble, in determining the details of the world, as minor participants in the creative process that is reality.*” This was written by a well-known process theist (Hartshorne), but it could as well have been written by an OGT in our opinion.
- E. Because of a faulty view of the nature of God some have also departed from an orthodox view of the atonement. It almost totally ignores biblical passages teaching about the holiness, wrath of God, or of future judgement of God, a doctrine upon which the vicarious atonement is based. Because of this serious departure from classical theism, some OGT now affirm that a God of love can simply forgive sin, agreeing with the ancient Socinian heresy. Logical consequences of this departure from orthodoxy are also a denial of eternal punishment and that all men must come to salvation through Christ. I personally heard Clark Pinnock say that he did not believe that God would torture in hell forever the sincere Buddhist who had not heard of Christ. (For more on Pinnock’s view of salvation, see his book: *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, and for a brief critique, see John MacArthur, Jr. in *Bound Only Once*, p. 95ff. For a full treatment, see *Who Will Be Saved?* and *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*
- F. It does not eliminate the problem of evil. At the very minimum it makes God indirectly responsible for the origin of evil since he created beings who could fall from innocence. Even a deity with diminished omnipotence must have some culpability in allowing holocaust type events.
- G. OGT promote their view of God as being more practical. One OGT writes: “There are certain risks involved. Things do not always turn out as expected or desired. But the God to whom we are committed is always walking besides us, experiencing what we are experiencing when we are experiencing it, always willing to help to the extent consistent with our status as responsible creations of his.”(Basinger, *The Openness of God*, p. 176). There is a certain sadness to this admission. God feels our pain but has little ability to help. Since many of our prayers have to do with other people (who have *free will* one wonders why this God should be appealed to? For additional information see: *Bound Only Once*, Chapter 10, an excellent article by Thomas Ascol.

V. Summary and Conclusion

The classical view which has reigned for 2000 years of church history is that God has exhaustive knowledge, not only of the past and present, but also of all future events. This has been expressed as God's all-knowing or omniscience. It is very difficult to conceive that the Holy Spirit would allow the church to hold a false view of God for two millennia, a subject that could not be more basic to one's worldview! Rather, it appears that OGT is an attempt to make God in man's image, a more user-friendly, touchy-feely deity, in an effort to appeal to the sensitivities of postmodern man where each individual creates his own reality. In our opinion OGT *is* a serious departure from orthodoxy. More and more, theologians are calling it heresy. Gene Edward Veith, a critic of contemporary culture writes:

*The 'openness of God' theologians are jettisoning the attributes of the transcendent God who has always been worshiped by Christians in favor of a lesser god who is not all-knowing, outside of time, or all-powerful. Just as the warlike Greeks projected their cultural values into deities constructed in their image, this new god turns out to be very similar to the contemporary intellectuals who are making him up—omni-tolerant, liberal-minded, soft-hearted about human suffering, though wholly ineffectual in doing anything about it. This god is a far cry from the transcendent, incomprehensible Holy One of Israel who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. **World**, (May 6, 2000)*

For Further Study:

Books Defending Open Theism:

Basinger, David. *The Case For Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment.*

Basinger, David, and Basinger, Randall. *Predestination & Freewill* (Contains arguments for both a

Beilby, James K., and Eddy, Paul R. editors. *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*
(Contains arguments for both sides)

Boyd, Gregory A. *God of the Possible*.

Ganssle, Gregory E. editor. *God and Time: Four Views*. (Contains arguments for
both a classical view and the OGT)

Pinnock, Clark H. *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*.

Pinnock, Clark H. et al. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the*

Rice, Richard, *God's Foreknowledge & Man's Free Will*.

Sanders, John. *The God Who Risks*.