

# *Is the Future Open to God?*

## INTRODUCTION

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.”

—A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 1.

## TEXT

Jonah 3:1-10 (NKJV)

*1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. 4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*

*5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?*

*10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.*

# WHAT IS OPEN THEISM?

## Basic Beliefs:

1. God not only created this world *ex nihilo* but can and at times does intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs
2. God chose to create us with libertarian freedom--freedom over which he cannot exercise total control
3. God so values freedom--the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible--that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results
4. God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately and thus is affected by what happens in our lives
5. God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although he may very well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make (Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, 76-77)

## Key Proponents:

1. Gregory Boyd
2. Clark Pinnock
3. John Sanders
4. Richard Rice
5. William Hasker
6. David Basinger
7. Charles Hartshorne
8. Andrio Koenig
9. Terence Fretheim

## Others Who Have Defended Open Theism:

1. Stephen T. Davis
2. Peter Geach
3. Peter Lang
4. J.R. Lucas
5. Thomas V. Morris
6. Ronald Nash
7. A.N. Prior
8. Richard Purtill
9. Richard Swinburne
10. Linda Zagzebski

## Other Terms for Open Theism

Neotheism, Free Will Theism, Arminianism on Steroids (my personal term for it!)

# CHURCH FATHERS CORRUPTED?

Boyd/Pinnock and other advocates of Open Theism attribute the traditional view of God to philosophical influence on the church fathers.

## **A. John Sanders claims that the church fathers adopt the Demiurge of Plato and the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle as models for the Christian God.**

1. Ignatius regarded God as immutable, timeless, and invisible.
2. Justin viewed God as unchangeable and eternal.
3. The Nicene Fathers wholeheartedly bought into the Greek philosophical view of God.
4. Sanders regards Augustine as the popularizer of this view.
5. Pinnock calls this view "excessive Hellenization."
6. According to Freddoso, Bill Hasker regards Neo-Platonism as the primary influence on developing a Christian view of God.
7. Hasker releases God from the so-called classical metaphysical presuppositions and re-imprisons God in the metaphysical pre-suppositions of a postmodern world.
8. To quote Boyd: "The most fundamental challenge this shift poses for Christian theology is this: The classical view of God and of creation was thoroughly influenced by, and logically tied to, the old understanding of reality. Hence, the more influential the dynamic understanding of reality becomes in our culture, the more out of sync classical theology will be with our culture." (NOTE: In English--theology is loosed from historical biblical interpretation and moored in the shifting sands of postmodern thought!)

## **B. Geisler nixes this as a misunderstanding of Greek philosophy.**

1. The Greeks never identified their ultimate metaphysical principle with God.
2. Furthermore, the early Christians derived their view of God far more from the Jewish Scriptures than they did from the Greek philosophers around them.
3. Also, they rested their view of God heavily on the teachings and model of Jesus Christ. Jesus presented a sovereign God, not as a limited deity.
4. Geisler notes that God's eternity (infinity) is absolutely essential to any concept of *ex nihilo* creation. He could not have created from nothing if he was bound by anything.

# SPECIFIC TEXTS EXPLAINED

Because of their evangelical roots and culture, Boyd and Pinnock et al. attempt to devise a biblical basis for open theology.

## **A. Neotheists believe that petitionary prayer implies the openness of God.**

1. Genesis 18:16-33 describes Abraham's intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah.
2. The presupposition is that Abraham was in a position to persuade God to change his mind, to override God's will to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.
3. The result of the story proves the opposite: Abraham's prayer did not change God's will.

**B. Psalm 139:16 declares that all of our days were ordained for us before we were born.**

1. This certainly looks as if God is in control and sovereign.
2. Boyd explains this to mean that God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge of our days.
3. We are free to choose every day what does or does not occur.
4. Incidentally, Ephesians 2:10 even declares that our good works are ordained before we are born.

**C. In Genesis 6 we have the story of the Noahic Flood.**

1. It says that God regretted having created such a rebellious people.
2. Boyd explains this by saying that God didn't know how his creatures would turn out.
3. For this reason, he sends a flood to make up for his mistake.

**D. Genesis 22 contains the story of God's test of Abraham to offer Isaac on Mount Moriah.**

1. Boyd sees this as an open-ended test to determine the character of Abraham.
2. He implies that God did not know in advance the outcome of this test.
3. Nevertheless, God did provide the Lamb, and Abraham and Isaac by faith trusted God to do just that.
4. If God did not foreknow this situation, he was taking a huge risk with his prophetic plan.
5. In fact, God did foreknow the result.

**E. In Isaiah 5:1-30 we have the story of the vineyard, an analogy to the Chosen People of God, Israel.**

1. Boyd says God is "surprised" by the wild grapes in the vineyard.
2. God did not know that they would emerge.
3. The text does not bear out this interpretation, because the text only speaks of God's disdain for the sin of Israel.

**F. In Jeremiah 18 we have the metaphor of God the Potter shaping people as the pottery.**

1. This picture recurs in Romans 9 and even by extension in 2 Corinthians 4.
2. In Jeremiah 18 God discovers that the clay is in fact flawed, and he destroys the vessel to make a new one.
3. Boyd declares that God did not know the clay was flawed. This becomes a paradigm for the unlimited freedom of God's creation.
4. In reality, God knew it all along.

**G. In Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:12-13 the pity of the Lord on repenting peoples is described as a prime example of God's openness.**

1. In fact, this only reveals that God responds to repentance.
2. God's holy character has not changed, but changing people have changed in their attitude towards God.
3. A metaphor may be clay and butter in the sun. When the hot sun shines on clay it hardens, and when it shines on butter it melts. The sun's essence of heat has not changed but the object is different.

**H. Dr. Geisler is helpful in a summary of prophecies, which demonstrate the exhaustive foreknowledge of God.** (see Norman L. Geisler. *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God--Neotheism's Dangerous Drift.* Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997.)

1. Isaiah 44:28; 45:1 predicted that Cyrus would be King of Persia some 150 years before Cyrus was born.
2. Isaiah 11:1 (Deut. 28:1) predicted the return of Israel to the land, which was accomplished in 1948.
3. Ezekiel 44:2 predicted the closing of the Golden Gate, which occurred in 1543 under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.
4. Ezekiel 26:3-14 predicted the destruction of Tyre two centuries before Alexander the Great was born.
5. Jeremiah 49:16-17 predicted the doom of Edom several hundred years before it occurred.
6. Ezekiel 36:33-35 predicted the flourishing of the desert in Palestine thousands of years before it happened.
7. Daniel 2, 7 predicted the course of human history including the name of Greece, which did not exist.

## **AGREEMENTS**

1. God is personal
2. God is transcendent
3. God is the all-powerful Being who created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing)
4. God can and does perform supernatural acts within creation (e.g. miracles)
5. God is in charge of the universe
6. God has given human beings the power to make free choices

## **DISAGREEMENTS**

1. God does not have an infallible knowledge of future free acts
2. God can and does change His mind in response to our prayers
3. God is not absolutely simple (indivisible)
4. God is not eternal
5. Thus, God is not able to completely control or predict exactly the way things will turn out

# EVALUATION

## 1. Open Theism is unbiblical

- a. Ex. 3:14
  - i. And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."
- b. Mal. 3:6
  - i. "For I am the LORD, I do not change;"
- c. Heb. 1:12
  - i. Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail.
- d. James 1:17
  - i. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.
- e. Is. 46:9-11
  - i. Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, "My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure," Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.
- f. Ps. 147:5
  - i. Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite.
- g. Rom. 8:28-29
  - i. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.
- h. 1 Peter 1:1-2
  - i. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father
- i. Acts 2:23
  - i. Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;
- j. 1 Sam. 15:29
  - i. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.
- k. Numbers 23:19
  - i. God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?
- l. Titus 1:1-2
  - i. Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began.

m. Hebrews 6:18

- i. It is impossible for God to lie.
2. Open Theism undermines the infallibility of the Bible
  - a. If God cannot know the future infallibly, then the predictions in the Bible that involve free acts (as most do) cannot be infallible. Some may be wrong, but we have no way of knowing which ones.
3. Open Theism destroys a biblical test for false prophets
  - a. The Bible declares (in Deut 18:22) that a false prophecy is a test of a false prophet. But just as noted, according to Open Theism there may be false predictions in the Bible. If this is so, then a false prediction cannot be a test of a false prophet, since even God Himself could make false predictions.
4. Open Theism undermines confidence in unconditional promises
  - a. If Open Theism is correct, even God's unconditional promises cannot be trusted, including the answer of prayer. As well-meaning as God may be in making the promise, if the fulfillment in any way depends on human free choices (which most do), then God may not be able to deliver on His promise.

## PARTING SHOT

Jeremiah 23:29

*"Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD,  
"And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"*

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#### **4. For the best study...enroll at Southern Evangelical Seminary!**

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