

Evangelical Theology and Open Theism: Toward a Biblical Understanding of the Macro Hermeneutical Principles of Theology?

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The adoption by a number of evangelical theologians of the so-called “open theism” as a viable theological option alongside the traditionally adopted tenets of classical theism not only involves obvious theological disagreements but raises the question of its implications for evangelical theology as a whole. Is the disagreement between the open view of God and classical theism a minor theological issue, or does it affect the hermeneutical core of the evangelical understanding of Scripture and the Gospel? This paper attempts to evaluate the disagreement between the open view of God and classical theism from a hermeneutical perspective in order to understand its causes, adumbrate its consequences, and assess its promises for the future of evangelical theology.

I will start by (1) introducing the controversy as perceived by active players in the conversation. Then, I will briefly describe (2) the hermeneutical perspective from which I will analyze and evaluate what this controversy holds for the future of evangelical theology. Next, I will deal with the issue of the (3) nature and extent of the controversy by looking at its subject matter. After this, I will take a brief look at (4) the biblical evidence on which each party builds its proposal. Then, I will consider the (5) realm of presuppositions or fore-conceptions conditioning each interpretation involved in the disagreement. Following this point further, I will turn my attention to (6) the cause of the controversy. Moving ahead, I will evaluate (7) the open view claim to the status of “new theological paradigm.” This point opens the question about (8) whether or not evangelical theology requires an ontology. Finally, I will survey the sources from which evangelical scholars consciously or unconsciously derive their understanding of the macro hermeneutical principles of Christian theology. Due to the complexity

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of the issues and their interpretations, I will limit the analysis to the main issues involved in the conversation between classical and open theisms.

1. Introducing the Controversy

Even though evangelical theologies differ in many ways, they have always assumed a common understanding of God's nature and acts. The so-called "open view" of God (also called "open theism," "new theism," and "free-will theism") has disrupted this consensus. Not surprisingly, some leading evangelical theologians have strongly opposed the new view and defended the traditional evangelical consensus on God's nature and acts.¹

The open view of God has been around for some time now. Evangelical theologians could easily dismiss earlier expositions of the open view of God with the pretext that they were based on the ideas of process philosophy. However, six years ago a group of evangelical theologians, spearheaded by Clark Pinnock, radically challenged this perception by arguing for the open view of God from a biblical basis.² More recently, also arguing from a biblical basis, John Sanders³ and Gregory Boyd⁴ have made a case for the open view of God very attractive to evangelical minds.

A cursory overview reveals that the controversy between the classical and open views of God revolves around the way each camp understands the interface between divine activity and human freedom. On one hand, open theists are convinced that the classical view of God is incompatible with true human freedom (libertarian freedom). On the other hand, classical theists not only are persuaded that their view allows ample room for human freedom (compatibilistic freedom), but also consider the open view alternative as falling short of the biblical notion of God. Arguably, both parties understand the nature and acts of God in very different, even contradictory ways. But what is the controversy about? Not surprisingly, there is no agreement on this point. Rather, one gets the impression that open theists try to minimize the scope of their disagreement with classical theism as much as possible.

¹ Notably, Norman Geisler has criticized the open view in some detail in two books: *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997), and *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1999). Geisler, however, approaches the issue philosophically rather than biblically.

² Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994). These ideas were already in the making at least from the late seventies. See, for instance, Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review and Herald, c1980), and Clark Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1989).

³ John E. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

⁴ Gregory A. Boyd, *The God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

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The subtitle of Sanders's book, "A Theology of Providence," clearly shows that the open view of God is about divine providence, that is, about the way the Christian God relates to the world. Open theists challenge traditional theism's view on divine sovereignty-providence because it does not allow for "real" open historical relations between God and human beings. To them, classical theism has no place for true human freedom. Under fire from his own denomination, however, Gregory Boyd seeks to minimize as much as possible the extent and importance of the controversy generated by the open view of God within evangelicalism. He suggests that the debate, when properly understood, is not about God or His nature, but about "the nature of the future."⁵ Moreover, he is convinced that "next to the central doctrines of the Christian faith, the issue of whether the future is exhaustively settled or partially open is relatively unimportant. It certainly is not a doctrine Christians should ever divide over."⁶

From the classical theistic perspective, Norman Geisler has a different evaluation about the extent and importance of the controversy. He sees the challenge brought about by open theism revolving around the most fundamental question of theology, namely, the nature of God.⁷ "A person's view of God," Geisler explains, "is the most important thing about which he thinks. A true view of God has good consequences. And a false view of God has disastrous consequences."⁸ Consequently, open theism "is a serious challenge to classical theism and with it, a serious threat to many important doctrines and practices built on that view."⁹ Geisler summarizes some of the systematic consequences that follow from the open view of God as including "a denial of the infallibility of the Bible, the full omniscience of God, the apologetic value of prophecy, and a biblical test for false prophets. It also undermines confidence in the promises of God, his ability to answer prayer, and any ultimate victory over sin. Indeed, it leads logically to universalism and/or annihilationism."¹⁰

However, due to the recent publications by the open theologians mentioned above, classical theologians can no longer brush off on philosophical grounds the open view of God as an obviously heretical position. In a recent editorial, *Christianity Today* has recognized the importance of this debate and called theologians on both sides of the issue to do their "homework" and work hard "at checking and, if need be, adjusting the conceptual formulations of yesteryear."¹¹

⁵ Boyd, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Creating God in the Image of Man?*, 73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹ Editorial, "God vs. God: Two Competing Theologies Vie for the Future of Evangelicalism," *Christianity Today* (7 February 2000): 34-35. See also, Roger Olson, Douglas F. Kelly, Timothy George, and Alister E. McGrath, "Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy? [a discussion of *The Openness of God*], *Christianity Today* (9 January 1995). Most recently, *Christianity Today* has published, over two months, a series of e-mails between John Sanders and Christopher A. Hall in which

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Agreeing with *Christianity Today* on the need to use the controversy as an opportunity to grow theologically, my goal in this article is not to take sides, but to explore the nature of the issue at stake, the extent of the “conceptual adjusting” required, and the “homework” needed to clarify the issues within the evangelical theological community.

2. Hermeneutical Analysis

We must start by recognizing the hermeneutical nature of the debate. Clearly, classical and open theists differ in their interpretation of the same issue. Be it the “nature of the future,” as Boyd claims, or the “nature of God,” as Geisler sees it, open theism has disrupted the inertia of traditional thinking on these issues. A conflict of interpretations calls for a hermeneutical analysis. The hermeneutical approach allows us to see the reasons behind conflicting interpretations. In other words, it helps us become aware of the basis from which each interpretation is made. This procedure not only helps us understand each position better, but also helps us make up our minds on controverted issues. We may decide for one of the two views under evaluation here, or we may decide there is a need to develop a new understanding.

Let us consider, first, the notion of hermeneutics as I will use it here. Traditionally, evangelical theologians have associated hermeneutics with biblical interpretation.¹² However, the act of understanding involved in theological thinking goes beyond the interpretation of texts to include the cognitive process through which theologians reach their conclusions and formulate their views.¹³ In this broad sense, then, hermeneutics is the technical name philosophers give to the study of the human process through which we understand each other.¹⁴ Of

they debate God’s openness [“Does God Know Your Next Move?” (21 May and 18 June 2001)]. The fact that this is the cover story [“An Openness Debate”] indicates the topic’s importance to evangelical scholars and pastors.

¹² See, for instance, David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994); Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1985); Henry Al Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991); and Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, however, has underlined the universality of hermeneutics as present in all human understanding. Hermeneutics, in this general sense, considers the way in which human beings think (“The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge [Berkeley: U of California P, 1976], 1-17; and idem., *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989).

¹⁴ For an introduction to hermeneutics as the general theory of interpretation see Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1980); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*; F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and

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course this broad notion does not deny the hermeneutics of the text, but includes it in its universality.¹⁵

The study of the human act of understanding reveals the presence of a few necessary components. Human understanding moves from the subject that interprets to the issue or thing that is interpreted. The human act of interpretation, then, has a beginning, a movement, and an end (*telos*). The end is the issue (objective) interpretation seeks to understand.¹⁶ The movement is the process through which we interpret the issues.¹⁷ The beginning includes the thing (reality)¹⁸ and the perspective (presuppositions)¹⁹ from which we start the interpretive act.

To facilitate our analysis I am going to borrow from the language of Hans Küng and speak of three hermeneutical levels, namely, macro, meso, and micro hermeneutics.²⁰ While micro hermeneutics refers to textual interpretation and meso hermeneutics to issue or doctrinal interpretation, macro hermeneutics deals with the interpretation of the first principles from within which doctrinal and

Jack Forstman (Atlanta: Scholars, 1977). From a theological perspective see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); idem., *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and idem., "Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 520-537.

¹⁵ For an introduction to the development of philosophical hermeneutics see Raúl Kerbs, "Sobre el desarrollo de la hermenéutica," *Analogía Filosófica*, (1999): 3-33.

¹⁶ Gadamer describes the objective to which the act of interpretation aims in various ways, including, for instance, "meaning," "content," and "subject-matter." Gadamer sees that the task of all hermeneutics is "to bring agreement in content" (*Truth and Method*, 293; see also 270 and 324, emphasis supplied).

¹⁷ "[I]nterpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes *the movement of understanding and interpretations*. A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things' themselves, is *the constant task of understanding*" (*Truth and Method*, 267, emphasis supplied).

¹⁸ "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze 'on the things themselves' (which, in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts, which themselves are again concerned with objects). For the interpreter to let himself be guided by *the things themselves* is obviously not a matter of a single, 'conscientious' decision, but is 'the first, last, and constant task'" (*Truth and Method*, 266-267, emphasis supplied).

¹⁹ "A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the texts with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there" (*Truth and Method*, 267).

²⁰ Hans Küng uses the "macro, meso and micro" categorization to speak about the scientific paradigm in theology (*Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg [New York: Doubleday, 1988], 134).

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textual hermeneutics operate. Macro hermeneutics is related to the study and clarification of philosophical issues directly or indirectly related to the criticism and formulation of concrete heuristic principles of interpretation. Meso hermeneutics deals with the interpretation of theological issues and, therefore, belongs properly to the area of systematic theology. Micro hermeneutics approaches the interpretation of texts and, consequently, proceeds within the realm of biblical exegesis. Let us analyze the controversy between the classical and open views of God from the hermeneutical perspective.

3. Meso Hermeneutics: Identifying the Issues

The existence of an interpretive process becomes obvious when two parties interpret something in different ways. In order to understand and eventually overcome a disagreement, we need to become aware of what the quarrel is about.

In section 1 above we identified some issues. We may classify them according to their scope and influence, beginning with the narrower issues and moving to the broader and more influential ones. We have, from the open view perspective, Gregory Boyd emphasizing (1) “the nature of the future” and John Sanders addressing the broader issue of (2) divine providence. From a classical perspective, Norman Geisler suggests the controversy revolves around the even broader and more influential topic of (3) the nature of God.²¹ The central controverted issues, then, are very broad and influential: the nature of God and the way in which He relates to His creatures.

So far, however, open theists have shown more interest in reflecting on the concrete relation of God with creatures than in the somehow more theoretical question of the nature of God. Still, as they explore the doctrine of divine providence from the nonnegotiable conviction that God enters into “a give-and-take-real-open relationship” with his creatures,²² other issues are unavoidably included. Due to their systematic links with the question of providence, open theologians address issues such as divine activity, foreknowledge, predestination, and human freedom.

These issues are important not only because of their broadness, but also because of the central systematic role they play in the task of conceiving and formulating the entire edifice of Christian theology. Few theologians would deny

²¹ Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger clearly affirm that the open view of God advances a new understanding of “God’s nature and relationship with his creatures” (Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 8). They also understand the issue under discussion is the nature of God: “[N]o doctrine is more central than the nature of God. It deeply affects our understanding of the incarnation, grace, creation, election, sovereignty and salvation. Moreover, the doctrine of God is full of implications for daily living. One’s view of God has direct impact on practices such as prayer, evangelism, seeking divine guidance and responding to suffering.” *ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

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that “Christian doctrine is systematically presented by the relating of all individual themes to the reality of God.”²³ This controversy, then, has the potential to affect the whole range of Christian teachings and interpretations of Scripture. Boyd’s attempt to reduce the importance and systematic effect of the controversy does not match the systematic role built into the issues themselves.

4. Micro Hermeneutics: The Biblical Evidence

In solving theological questions, evangelical theologians are supposed to give primacy to biblical data. Consequently, open view theologians argue their case for a new notion of divine providence from scriptural evidence. Not surprisingly, classical theists attempt to refute their opponents on the same basis and to build a biblical foundation of their own. There is no doubt that both parties understand biblical evidence in different and mutually exclusive ways.

Open theologians challenge classical theism on account of their interpretation of selected biblical texts that seem to imply that God enters in a “give-and-take-real-open” relation with human beings. Before analyzing the biblical evidence in favor of the open view of God, Richard Rice correctly reminds us that “it is not difficult to surround an idea with biblical quotations.”²⁴ The crucial test to say that a notion is biblical, Rice argues, is whether or not “the idea is faithful to the overall biblical portrait of God.”²⁵ On this basis, Rice contends that classical theism “does not reflect faithfully the spirit of the biblical message, in spite of the fact that it appeals to various biblical statements.”²⁶

Open view theologians survey biblical evidence thematically. Rice organizes his analysis of biblical data in favor of the open view around the concept of God. He starts by underlining that, according to the Bible, we should think of God from the perspective of love rather than power. “To be faithful to the Bible we must put love at the head of the list.”²⁷ Sanders, who so far has provided the most detailed analysis of biblical evidence supporting the open view of God, organizes his study around the notion of divine providence.²⁸ More recently,

²³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), I: 59.

²⁴ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21. Rice also deals with divine feelings, intentions, actions, the incarnation and death of Jesus, and passages that seem to support the classical view (divine changelessness, prophecy, foreknowledge, and predestination), *ibid.*, 21-58.

²⁸ Sanders, 39-139, surveys the biblical evidence following a chronological order beginning with creation and following with issues like the fall, divine suffering (God regretting previous decisions and changing his mind), God testing Abraham’s faith, human beings prevailing upon God, Joseph’s story involving risk, divine human relations within the covenant, intercessory prayer, divine repentance, the presence and absence of God, the potter and the clay texts, divine life and humiliation, Jesus’ birth and the Bethlehem massacre, his baptism, temptation, confession, transfiguration,

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Boyd organizes his analysis of biblical evidence around the issue of divine foreknowledge. Centering on this issue, he argues that the biblical evidence favors the open view of divine providence and lends no support for the classical view.²⁹

From the classical theistic perspective, Norman Geisler deals with biblical evidence in order to show the inadequate biblical basis on which open theism builds. He organizes his survey thematically around the notion of the being and actions of God.³⁰

Why do open theists dismiss the classical view's appeal to biblical evidence as invalid? According to Rice, because it is not based on the "broad sweep of biblical testimony."³¹ Geisler, recognizing that in this controversy "the biblical arguments are fundamental,"³² concludes that open theism "fails to establish a biblical basis for its beliefs."³³

Would a more complete analysis of the biblical evidence help evangelical theologians overcome this controversy? I personally do not think so. Our brief reference to the way each party deals with the biblical evidence suggests that the cause for disagreement lies somewhere else. Both parties use the same biblical evidence (micro hermeneutics) to provide different views of the same theological issues (meso hermeneutics). My conviction is that more biblical evidence will not move the parties to accept each other's point of view or lead to a new theological position that is grounded on the hermeneutical nature of the process through which the evidence is handled. Our analysis of biblical evidence is never a "neutral" process of discovery yielding the "objective" meaning that everyone will understand in the same way. On the contrary, the interpretive process is always conditioned by hermeneutical presuppositions that may be

compassion, dialogue and healing grace, Gethsemane, the cross, the resurrection, the church, Rom 9-11, eschatology and providence, predictions and foreknowledge.

²⁹ Boyd, 24-87, shows that the classical view which revolves around the notion of exhaustive divine foreknowledge has no real biblical foundation. To that end he deal with texts on divine Sovereignty of history, foreknowledge of chosen people, of individuals, of Christ's ministry, of elects, of end times, in Isaiah 46, and 48, of Israel future, in individual prophecies, of Peter's denial, of Judas' betrayal, implied in the divine setting apart from the womb, in our days being recorded in God's book, in prophecies of kingdoms, in divine ordaining of national boundaries, in the predestination of the Messiah and the church. In favor of an open future (against foreknowledge) Boyd deals with texts on divine regret of previous decisions, on God asking questions about the future, on God confronting the unexpected, on God getting frustrated, on God testing people to know their character, on God speaking in terms of what may or may not be, on believers hastening the Lord's return, on the potter and the clay, and on reversed divine intentions.

³⁰ Geisler deals with texts on divine aseity, eternity (timelessness), simplicity, immutability, on divine changeability, on petitionary prayer, on divine repentance, the allegation that divine repentance implies God ignorance of the future, and the question of anthropomorphisms (*Creating God in the Image of Man?*, 75-91).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 75.

³³ Ibid., 90. See also Geisler's argument, 75-91, against the proper biblical foundation of open theism.

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defined in various ways. Thus, the micro and meso hermeneutical levels where the controversy between classical and open theisms takes place is conditioned by the deeper and foundational macro hermeneutical level.

5. Macro Hermeneutics: Causes of Theological Disagreement

Theological controversy takes place when various parties understand the same issues in different, even mutually exclusive, ways. This seems to be the case in the classical theism-open view of God controversy we are analyzing. We should ask, where do diversity of interpretations come from? Are they always the result of faulty evidence or reasoning? Or do they follow from the normal exercise of our rational faculties?

Obviously many, but not all, disagreements result from faulty evidence and/or reasoning. When this is the case, overcoming disagreement requires a careful review of all the relevant evidence and the rational processes through which we arrived at our conclusions. However, more serious disagreement takes place when the controversy is grounded in different perspectives (fore-conceptions or presuppositions) that involved parties bring to the table.

Human understanding operates by projecting pre-understandings on its objects. As different persons attempt to understand the *same issue* (in our case, the nature and relation of God to the world), they project different perspectives on the *same evidence*. From this unavoidable rational procedure a variety of interpretations come forth. Yet variety of interpretations reached from a variety of perspectives do not necessarily lead to controversy or debate. A variety of interpretations may be complementary or contradictory. Serious theological controversy takes place when the parties realize that their views are not complementary but contradictory. Perceived nonreconcilable interpretations often originate from mutually exclusive pre-understandings.

Controversy is not necessarily a bad thing. Controversy can lead the entire community of faith to improve its understanding of the controverted issues. One way to deal constructively with controversial issues is to overcome them hermeneutically. This requires an open conversation in which both parties take a closer look at their own pre-understandings in hope of eventually overcoming the controversy. However, in changing some pre-understanding the parties could develop their thinking on the issues, mostly by uncovering, evaluating, and explicitly deciding on the various levels of pre-understanding operative in the debate. As the parties move their attention away from the results to the causes of their controverted theological positions, they might find a way of modifying their views and coming to an agreement. Unfortunately, the same process may draw them further apart. All depends on whether the parties evaluate and formulate their pre-understandings from the same or different sets of evidence.

6. Macro Hermeneutics:

The Philosophical Ground of the Controversy

The source of the controversy between the open and classical views centers on the understanding at the macro hermeneutical level. Traditionally, Christian theology in general and evangelical theology in particular have defined the macro hermeneutical principles of interpretation from philosophical interpretations of being. Philosophical interpretations about ontology and epistemology have directly conditioned the way in which evangelical theologians have understood God.

Of course we want to believe our views are at the same time objective and biblical. Yet this is a point in which both parties agree: Traditionally, evangelical understandings of biblical evidence (micro hermeneutics) and theological issues (meso hermeneutics) have been directly conditioned by philosophy.

Geisler probably represents most theologians on both sides of the debate when he unambiguously states, “There is nothing wrong as such with having a philosophical influence on biblical and theological studies. Again, philosophy is necessary to do both exegesis and systematic theology. One need only be sure that he is utilizing good philosophy. Whether it is ‘platonic’ or ‘process’ is not the question, but rather whether it is *true*.”³⁴ Theologians, however, disagree regarding what philosophy is “true” and what should inform the macro hermeneutical principles of Christian theology.

Geisler maintains that classical theism and evangelical theology build their view of God on the basis of Plato’s and Aristotle’s ontological views rather than Whitehead and Hartshorne.³⁵ According to him evangelical theologians should not only recognize this dependence but embrace and defend it as a foundational component of the evangelical system of theological truth.

Open theologians recognize Geisler’s point: Classical theism builds on Greek philosophical insights. However, they do not see this as the correct basis on which to build, but as “a certain theological virus that infected the Christian doctrine of God.”³⁶ They have also recognized that assumed ontological and epistemological ideas (macro hermeneutics) determine the classical interpreta-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

³⁵ Geisler is among the “silent minority” among evangelical authors that recognize the formative influence of classical philosophy in evangelical theology. With the disclaimer that he does not agree with everything that Aquinas ever wrote, Geisler tells us that he agrees, among others, with Aquinas’ views on the nature and interpretation of Scripture, apologetics, ontology, epistemology, doctrine of analogy, reason and revelation, faith and reason, and human freedom and divine sovereignty (*Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 21-22). Regarding God’s being, he affirms: “Aquinas can provide a philosophical answer to the growing influence of the finite god of process theology. There is no better philosophical system capable of answering the threat raised by process theology and defending the traditional theistic and biblical view of God as an eternal, unchanging, and absolutely perfect Being” (*ibid.*, 21). Obviously, Aquinas built his views on Aristotelian and Platonic philosophical ideas.

³⁶ Pinnock, et al, 9.

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tion of controversial biblical texts (micro hermeneutics), particularly in relation to the question of analogy and biblical anthropomorphisms. Unfortunately, they seem to believe that the biblical view of God is free from ontological preconceptions.³⁷

Open theism, consequently, claims to reject not only classical, but also process philosophical approaches on the ground that they do not match Scripture's views on God. Clark Pinnock boldly claims that "classical theists and process theologians, both sometimes speak as though they have the only two models of God. . . . We claim, however, that the open view is a superior paradigm in the light of the relevant biblical, theological, philosophical, and practical material."³⁸ This opens up the notion and function of theological paradigms.

7. A Paradigm Change?

Thomas Kuhn has described and analyzed the notion and function of paradigms in the area of contemporary science.³⁹ German theologian Hans Küng has argued correctly that paradigms also play a significant and analogous role in the area of theological research. According to Kuhn, a paradigm is the "entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community."⁴⁰ Paradigms help us understand new phenomena and solve new problems.⁴¹ "As in natural science," explains Küng, "there is a 'normal science,' with its classical authors, text books, and teachers, that is characterized by a cumulative growth of knowledge, a solving of remaining problems ('puzzles'), and resistance to everything that might lead to the alteration or replacement of the established model of understanding or paradigm."⁴² Yet when the operative paradigm in normal science cannot deal with significant phenomena and puzzles, the need for a paradigm change becomes apparent.⁴³ A paradigm shift takes place when a new one is produced and accepted by the community.⁴⁴

In our case classical theism plays the role of "normal science," which tries to solve remaining problems from its assumed paradigm and resists its alteration or replacement. Open view theists play the role of challengers uncovering facts and puzzles the reigning paradigm leaves unresolved. Simultaneously, Geisler as

³⁷ Commenting on the interpretation of biblical texts, Boyd, 119-120, remarks that passages speaking about God changing his mind "strike some [classical theists] as ridiculous because these readers bring to the text a preconception of what God must be like. Once one is free from this preconception, these passages contribute to the exalted portrait of the longingly sovereign God in the Bible."

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d. ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴² Küng, 138.

⁴³ Kuhn, 66-91.

⁴⁴ Küng, 147.

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defender of “normal science” (classical theism) tries to show there is no need for a paradigm shift because the classical paradigm is able to include all the facts and solve all the puzzles.⁴⁵

The burden of proof obviously fall on those who dare to challenge the reigning paradigm. Sanders and Boyd are conspicuously aware of the tall order before them. They read the Bible in an apologetic mode in order to show that the classical paradigm cannot possibly account for the biblical facts. They know that in so doing their views run against centuries of reading Scripture from the classical philosophical-theological perspective.

So far, however, open view theologians are far from having produced a new alternative paradigm. In spite of their claim to provide a “superior paradigm” for the doctrine of God, they still work by assuming, at least partially, the old paradigm.⁴⁶ This takes place, probably, because so far open theists have not seriously dealt with the philosophical ground of the classical paradigm and its macro hermeneutical role.⁴⁷

8. Theology without Ontology?

The controversy between open view and classical theologians makes the question of philosophy [macro hermeneutics] and its role in the interpretation of biblical texts [micro hermeneutics] and doctrines [meso hermeneutics] unavoidable for evangelical theologians. A close look at the controversy reveals the subtle, but pervasive way in which nonbiblical hermeneutical principles have shaped evangelical exegesis and theology.

The vortex of the controversy, thus, revolves around the way in which the parties conceive the ground and role of philosophy in theology. So far, however, both sides have fought the battle mostly within the meso and micro hermeneutic level. Consequently, open view theologians have not yet grounded their challenge to the classical and process views of God at the foundational philosophical level. Thus, their claim to provide a “superior paradigm” remains incomplete and truncated.

It is true that by arguing from a “literal,” “face value” reading of Scripture, open view theologians make ontological claims such as the temporality of God, the relatedness of God to human freedom within the flux of historical causality, the rejection of divine foreknowledge, and the grounding of divine omniscience on present knowledge. However, they fall short of explicitly replacing the on-

⁴⁵ Geisler’s role as defender of “normal science” comes across clearly when we notice that he is not just against the open view of God, but also against process theology, which also challenges the classical paradigm.

⁴⁶ When open theists deal with the biblical motive of partial predetermination of the future, they build, by default, on the classical view of God and, therefore, on its macro hermeneutical ontological principles.

⁴⁷ I have dealt partially with the relationship between philosophy and paradigm in “Paradigm, System and Theological Pluralism,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, 70 (1998): 195-218.

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tologies they dismiss. Thus, they attempt the impossible—namely, to work without ontological presuppositions.⁴⁸ A new paradigm requires a new ontology as its macro hermeneutical ground.

Open view theologians do not seem to realize yet that their claim on divine providence requires a consistent ontological doctrine. One gets the impression that they see their claim as required by “neutral-objective” exegesis of the biblical texts (micro hermeneutics) and believe the ensuing doctrinal modifications (meso hermeneutics) can be integrated back into classical ontological teaching (macro hermeneutics). Yet that is not philosophically possible. For instance, classical ontology does not make room for a divine being who is simultaneously temporal and timeless. Process philosophy, however, has developed a bipolar ontology according to which God is simultaneously timeless and temporal. In the absence of an ontology built from biblical thought, process ontology appears as a logical candidate to ground the open view of God.

The suspicion that open view theologians assume a modified version of process philosophical thought increases, for instance, when we see them consistently replacing divine foreknowledge with present knowledge. One has the impression that the whole case for the open view of God hinges around the affirmation or denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge of human free actions.⁴⁹ In the mind of open view theologians the affirmation of divine foreknowledge automatically grounds the classical view of God and makes the open view of God impossible. Not surprisingly, then, the denial of divine foreknowledge becomes a necessary condition for the open view of God. The denial of divine foreknowledge, thus understood, finds its ontological pre-understanding in the temporality of God, as taught by process philosophy. When we understand the temporality of God’s being from process philosophical teachings, it becomes clear that God cannot know the future simply because it does not yet exist. This ontological presupposition is so strong that it requires evangelical open view theologians to engage in exegetical gymnastics to explain away the biblical affirmation of divine foreknowledge of future free acts.⁵⁰

Arguably, open view theologians implicitly assume a dipolar ontology. They do not say it in so many words, but their view of providence requires it. Gregory Boyd’s rendering of the open view of God seems to require a bipolar divine ontology. In Scripture, he argues, we find two types of texts, one speaking about future determinism and the other speaking about future openness.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Kuhn, 79, states: “To reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself. That act reflects not on the paradigm but on the man. Inevitably he will be seen by his colleagues as ‘as the carpenter who blames his tools.’”

⁴⁹ From now on I will use the word “foreknowledge” to mean “exhaustive foreknowledge of human free decisions.”

⁵⁰ See, for instance Boyd, 47-48, who assures us that when Paul uses the word foreknowledge (*proegnō*) in Rom 8:29, he in reality means “forelove.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

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The two sets of texts, he argues, must be understood literally; in other words, as describing things as they really are (ontological import of Scripture).⁵² One group of texts (pole) has God determining history in the same way the classical God does—namely, by his powerful will which from eternity settles history and gives direction to the divine plan. The other group (pole) has God relating with human beings in space and time and, therefore, is unsettled. The first pole, according to Boyd, requires the notions of limited predestination and foreknowledge, while the second pole accounts for relational biblical passages.⁵³ Boyd does not speak of or recognize an ontological bipolarity in God, yet, arguably, his view of God assumes or may lead to a bipolar ontology.

Geisler has clearly perceived this striking blind spot in theologians claiming to advance a “superior paradigm.” In spite of their express rejection of process philosophy as their ontological basis, Geisler finds open view theologians implicitly assuming what they explicitly deny—that is, dependence on the process philosophy paradigm. He concludes his philosophical evaluation of open view theism by remarking that:

There are serious logical flaws within neotheism. On the one hand, it affirms in common with classical theism certain attributes and activities of God (such as transcendence, uncausality, necessity, and creation *ex nihilo*). But each of these logically entails some attribute of God that neotheism rejects. In point of fact, they lead to classical theism. Which neotheism labors to avoid. On the other hand, neotheism denies certain attributes of God (such as nontemporality, unchangeability, and pure actuality). Significantly, the affirmation of temporality, changeability, and potentiality in God lead logically to a process, bipolar theism, which neotheists claim they wish to avoid. But logically they cannot have it both ways. Both classical theism and pantheism are self-contained models in which the basic attributes stand or fall together. Therefore, if one accepts some of them, the rest come with the package, whether they are wanted or not.⁵⁴

Yet open theism explicitly denies building on process philosophy’s ontology.⁵⁵ William Hasker explains that open view theologians cannot adopt process philosophy because it advances the notion that God and the world are interde-

⁵² Boyd’s emphasis on the reality of things as described in Scripture betrays an ontological level that is not technically addressed by open view theologians.

⁵³ Boyd, 14-15, 31, characterizes his view of providence and foreknowledge as “limited.” However, I find this characterization does not fit the general tenor of his argument.

⁵⁴ Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man*, 125-126. He states further: “One thing seems certain. If the logical consequences of neo-theists’ unorthodox beliefs about God are drawn out, they will be pushed more and more in the direction of process theology and the liberal beliefs entailed therein. Only time and logic will tell in which direction neotheism will go” (*ibid.*, 12; see also pg. 72).

⁵⁵ William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. et al Clark Pinnock (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 138-141.

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pendent, thus limiting divine omnipotence and unilateral actions in history.⁵⁶ However, this argument only bans a wholesale adoption of process philosophical thought. It does not eliminate the fact that the general bipolar pattern of process ontology can still help to ground the open view of God, while the Greek ontology assumed in the classical view cannot.

Open view theologians seem to forget that theologians usually modify the philosophical thought on which they build. For instance, classical theologians adjusted the general ontological patterns suggested by Plato and Aristotle for their theological purposes. In other words, they took Greek ontology as their basis and adjusted it to fit Christian revelation. Describing how classical theism began, Jack Bonsor remarks that biblical and philosophical thought changed. “Neither lost its soul. Something new emerged.”⁵⁷ Theologians engage, then, in creative philosophical reflection, which produces the macro hermeneutical principles they will explicitly or implicitly assume when interpreting Scripture and formulating the doctrines of the church.

David Basinger, one of the leading philosophers of the open view of God, recognizes three major theological paradigms on divine providence: classical, process, and the open view.⁵⁸ Thus the open view of God seemingly appears as a “free standing” proposal with no ontological assumptions.⁵⁹ At the foundational ontological level open view theologians are, so far, noncommittal. Do they mean to say that Scripture’s view of God is “nonontological”? Moreover, is a theology without ontology possible? Obviously, open theism needs to deal seriously with the philosophical question of ontology, both divine and human.

But how do we decide among competing philosophical ontologies? More importantly, how can we gain knowledge about the being and acts of God? This brings us to the question of the sources from which evangelical theologians decide their understanding of God’s being and actions.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 138-141.

⁵⁷ Jack Bonsor, *Athens and Jerusalem: The Role of Philosophy in Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 26.

⁵⁸ David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 11-14.

⁵⁹ Open view theologians do engage with philosophy, but only at the level of analyzing the inner consistency and outer coherence of the classical and open view theologies. Thus long and complicated rational arguments are analyzed to decide which proposal is more “rational.” Introducing his brief comments on the philosophical side of his proposal, Boyd, 120, remarks that “[i]f one wants to add philosophical proof on top of this [the open view of God], things get a bit more complicated (to no one’s surprise). There are plenty of brilliant philosophers defending the view that God *can*, in principle, foreknow future free actions and plenty who argue that he cannot, since this constitutes a logical contradiction. I personally am convinced that the best arguments lie in the second camp, but I’m also aware that this isn’t an open-and-shut case.” Thus, in addressing the philosophical question, open view theologians do not make their ontological presuppositions explicit. Eventually, unless they make their ontological views explicit from Scripture, the inner logic of the open view will decide this issue by default.

9. The Sources of Macro Hermeneutics and Evangelical Futures

Is the open view of God fully scriptural? Do open view theologians ground their new paradigm squarely on the full extent of scriptural evidence? Or does the open view of God also involve a nonbiblical macro hermeneutics? The following tentative answer to these methodological questions are intended to foster reflection on the important theological issues within the evangelical community.

In my opinion the open view of God rises from the classical paradigm's failure to account for human freedom (understood in a libertarian sense), both in Scripture and experience. The rise of historical consciousness during the twentieth century has made compatibilistic solutions to the predestination-free will debate increasingly unsatisfactory. Simultaneously, Alfred Whitehead readjusted classical ontology to the new historical and scientific consciousness.⁶⁰ His proposal, known as process philosophy, presents a bipolar god who is both eternal and "open" to the temporal process of the world.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, by the end of the twentieth century liberal theologians began to explore the hermeneutical possibilities of the new ontological framework. Of course, evangelical theologians could not justify a change in the classical view of God from the starting point of process philosophy because it includes several features incompatible with the biblical notion of God.⁶²

Fully aware of these developments, some evangelical theologians noticed that the classical view of God did not satisfactorily square with biblical evidence about God's acts in history. They also noticed the existence of biblical support for the classical view. Claiming faithfulness to Scripture, open view theologians seem to work within the same methodological paradigm used by classical theology. Accordingly, philosophy can help evangelical theologians define the macro hermeneutical principles of interpretation. The key here, as Geisler says, is to find the "true" philosophy.

Classical and open view theologians use different biblical texts to justify different ontological teachings as "true" and, therefore, as useful for evangelical theology. Thus classical theism uses texts that seem to require a timeless ontology of God over texts that point to divine change. Conversely, open theism gives primacy to biblical texts that point to divine temporality, change, and relatedness over texts that point to divine foreknowledge.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, neither side in the controversy justifies its unilateral choice of biblical data. This unilateral choice becomes the pretext each side uses as a biblical mandate to develop its distinctive "view of God" and its implied ontological patterns. From these pre-understandings each

⁶⁰ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

⁶¹ For a brief introduction to the notion of a bipolar god see Geisler's *Creating God in the Image of Man?* 49-51.

⁶² For a detailed comparison between the views of God according to theism, the open view of God, and process philosophy see *ibid.*, 76-77.

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party interprets the set of biblical data on which the opposite view builds its case.

In the case of open view theologians, their implicit temporal ontology (macro hermeneutics) affirms that God cannot know future things because they are not yet in existence. Moreover, God cannot know humans' future, free-will decisions because they are by definition unpredictable.⁶³ This ontological conviction requires a reinterpretation of the traditional understanding of divine foreknowledge (meso hermeneutics) and biblical evidence affirming the existence of divine foreknowledge (micro hermeneutics).⁶⁴ In addition, they reinterpret the meaning and function of biblical prophecy⁶⁵ and even feel the need to rewrite at least one key biblical passage.⁶⁶ These reinterpretations may very well be only the beginning of what most probably will entail a wholesale reinterpretation of biblical Christianity.

From what we have said so far, it becomes apparent that both classical and open view theologians use biblical evidence selectively. As classical theism interprets freedom in a way that does not fit the face-value meaning of relevant texts, so does open theism's interpretation of divine foreknowledge. Clearly neither classical nor open theisms build their views of God on an ontological basis equally responsive to the full extent of biblical evidence. Moreover, the principles guiding the selection and interpretation of biblical evidence are, in both cases, derived from ontological philosophies.

Can evangelical theology overcome the disagreement between the classical and open view paradigms? To devise another paradigm will only increase our theological fragmentation. Yet there may be another way. Perhaps evangelical thinkers may want to consider the possibility of doing theology within a new methodological matrix. Briefly put, instead of following the traditionally unchallenged methodological paradigm according to which theologians define their macro hermeneutical principles from philosophical and scientific teachings, we may try something different: Why not define our macro hermeneutics from Scripture? Instead of choosing our macro hermeneutical pre-understandings from the ontological teachings of some school of philosophy, why don't we attempt to build them from the ontological teachings explicitly or implicitly present in the full range of biblical evidence?

⁶³ Richard Rice, "Divine Foreknowledge and Free-will Theism," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 129.

⁶⁴ For a synthesis of the open-view reinterpretation of divine foreknowledge see *ibid.*, 134.

⁶⁵ For a summary of the reinterpretation of the notion of biblical prophecy advanced by open view theologians, see *ibid.*, 134-136.

⁶⁶ I am referring to Boyd's suggestion, 47-48, that in Rom 8:29 Paul did not mean foreknowledge, but forelove.

10. Conclusion

The controversy between classical and open theisms does not revolve around minor exegetical or doctrinal issues, but relates to the hermeneutical core from which evangelical theologians understand Scripture, the Gospel, and the entire sweep of Christian theology and practice.

The clash between the classical and open views of God are not caused by the introduction of new evidence from Scripture, but rather from the introduction of new macro hermeneutical principles of interpretation. On one side, classical theism builds its view of God on the basis of classical Greek ontological understanding. On the other side, open theism explicitly rejects classical Greek ontological patterns and implicitly, perhaps by default, builds its alternate view of God from modern process ontological patterns.

Perhaps classical and open view theologians may continue to build and clarify their theological proposals without scrutinizing their assumed macro hermeneutical presuppositions. On this basis, further discussion of biblical data will never lead to theological agreement because both sides will continue to interpret the same data and theological issues from different macro hermeneutical perspectives.

Our analysis reveals that the ongoing debate between classical and open theisms has at least two important consequences for the future of evangelical theology. First, the debate helps us realize that evangelical theology builds its interpretation of Scripture and doctrines on the basis of Greek ontological patterns. For evangelical thinkers doing theology from a high view of Scripture this may be a very upsetting realization. After all, we implicitly assume our theology stands on a “neutral” or “objective” understanding of Scripture (micro hermeneutics). At least I remember how upset I was when I discovered this fact in my own theological understanding. We may try to deny this fact. But denial will not exorcize its presence nor its leading influence in the formulation of evangelical theology.⁶⁷

Open theology also works within the same methodological paradigm. However, open view theologians explicitly deny any indebtedness to process philosophical patterns. Will they back up their alleged independence from Greek and process philosophies with an independent overall biblical ontology? Only time will tell. In the long run, however, the most significant contribution of open view theologians may reside not so much in their alternate interpretation of divine foreknowledge and sovereignty, but in their attempt to develop evangelical theology in faithfulness to biblical thought.

This brings us to the second consequence that this debate may have on the future of evangelical theology. As open theologians argue their views of God and the future from Scripture, they have implicitly uncovered the ontological

⁶⁷ This point is forcefully argued by Norman Geisler (*Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991]).

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import of biblical thinking. If biblical thought can be taken seriously to define some points regarding God's being, why couldn't we build our entire ontological thinking from Scripture? As both parties in this debate continue to strengthen their cases by going back to the Old and New Testaments, the long forgotten philosophical import of Scripture may become increasingly clearer to us.

Some among us argue that if evangelical theology is to survive and become relevant in our postmodern, post-denominational, post-theological, and post-Christian times, we should accommodate the macro hermeneutical principles of theology to tradition and to contemporary trends in philosophy, science, and culture.⁶⁸ However, why should we continue to define our macro hermeneutical principles from forever—evolving extrabiblical, philosophical, scientific, and cultural patterns of thought? Why should we insist on building on the same methodological paradigm that is a root cause of our present theological crisis? Could there not be a better way?

By arguing for the relatedness of God in human history, open view theologians have uncovered the ontological import of biblical thinking, thereby stumbling upon an idea that suggests the possibility of a better path. Macro hermeneutical principles for biblical theological interpretation may be defined also from biblical thinking. Though so far open view theologians seem unaware of the hermeneutical revolution adumbrated in their argumentation, we may want to give biblical thought a chance to shape the macro hermeneutical principles of evangelical theology. This paradigmatic move will not only help us overcome the classical-open view controversy on divine interaction with the world, but to rethink the entire scope of evangelical theology for the third millennium. Perhaps this is the time to think in the light of Scripture.

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⁶⁸ See, for instance, Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).