

RECONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: IS THE OPEN VIEW OF GOD A GOOD IDEA?¹

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Some colleagues in the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) have become concerned whether my work in general and the open model of God in particular merit the label “evangelical.” This is a fair question—if evangelical means anything theologically, it must be possible to go over a line and forfeit that name. If evangelical is compatible with anything and everything, it is meaningless. By no means do I treat lightly the fact that I am criticized by colleagues in the ETS whom I admire, e.g., Millard Erickson, Bruce Ware, William Lane Craig, John M. Frame, Norman Geisler, Robert A. Pyne, Stephen R. Spencer, John Piper, Robert E. Picirilli, Roger Nicole. Undoubtedly, some of the ideas I have advanced need to be critiqued. Daniel Strange writes:

Can Pinnock still be called an evangelical theologian? This depends on your definition of evangelicalism. Perhaps Pinnock should take solace from the adage that those you criticise most are usually the ones closest to you. If we are to take Pinnock’s sociological definition of evangelicalism as a loose coalition based on a number of family resemblances, then it will be easy to categorise his theology as evangelical.²

Although evangelicalism is a movement without a confession, it has theological interests and a theological ethos. One expects evangelical theologians (for example) to hold to sound teaching and contend for the faith once delivered, though in a transdenominational way. Differences can be expected, given the ecumenical character of the movement and experiments in theological reform in which new ground is broken. The movement is not stagnant theologically—new light still emanates from God’s holy Word (even in conservative circles), and at least a little room exists for theological creativity. Thus evangelical theology can be conservative and contemporary. In recent years, the antimodernist coalition has entertained a measure of rethinking of issues. For some, this is a sign of health and vigor—for others, it is a disaster. From my perspective, I see it as a search for a generous orthodoxy and an effective church-wide witness.

Theologically, this is possible because of the work of the Holy Spirit making possible a hermeneutic of Spirit, not merely of flesh. On one hand, the Spirit binds us to the definitive salvific action of God in Jesus Christ and, on the other

¹This paper was presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meetings in Colorado Springs, CO, November 14-16, 2001.

²A recent book of critical essays has appeared, edited by Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson, *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000). Daniel Strange’s comment is on p. 18.

hand, causes everything which Jesus said and did to be seen in a new light. According to John, the Paraclete guides the community into more truth on the basis of the original gospel, so that we can reproclaim it in timely ways.³ The Spirit does not add to or surpass what Christ has revealed, but causes everything to be revealed afresh. One could think of it in musical terms as improvisation, where the performer discovers in the score a range of fresh, unexplored possibilities.⁴ One can speak of a hermeneutic of the Spirit, not of the flesh.⁵

Thus, as we search the Scriptures, we strive to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches and discern what matters most in the present situation. What are the signs of the times telling us? What new treasures can be brought out of the storehouse? (Matt 13:32). This makes theology an altogether delightful activity and full of surprises.⁶ Stanley Grenz remarks: "Theology is progressive, in that it is an ongoing discipline that repeatedly gives rise to new ways of looking at old questions, brings into view previously undervalued aspects of the Christian belief-mosaic, and occasionally even advances the church's knowledge of theological truth."⁷

Fresh proposals in theology are always being made, even when it concerns the nature of God. The reality of God is, after all, deep and inexhaustible. St. Paul speaks of "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom 11:33) and of "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:19). God is an inexhaustible mystery and the ways of responding to him are innumerable. Though we "see in a mirror dimly" and "know only in part," the subject always invites fresh thinking in a spirit of cooperation (1 Cor 13:12). It is not enough just to rehearse the tradition—we ought to welcome fresh acts of interpretation. Let us not be afraid of such exercises, but hope for enrichment out of dialogue.⁸

The question before us now is whether the open view of God is a proposal that can be considered evangelical. The model was proposed seven years ago in my book *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*⁹ and since then has been widely discussed and represented in such books as

³James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975), 351-353.

⁴Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 191-203.

⁵Francis Martin, "Spirit and Flesh in Doing Theology," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18 (2001): 5-31.

⁶As in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), xiii-xiv.

⁷Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 243.

⁸S. Mark Heim has also applied this insight to an understanding of other faiths in *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Heim, like many others today, is an open theist without saying so. Other examples would include Richard Swinburne, Paul S. Fiddes, John Polkinghorne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ward.

⁹Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994; and Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994.

my *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*,¹⁰ in the dialogue between John Sanders and Christopher Hall in *Christianity Today*,¹¹ in John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*,¹² and in Gregory S. Boyd's *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*¹³ and *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.¹⁴

Exposition

The open view of God is a trinitarian theology in which Father, Son, and Spirit eternally give and receive love. Not a philosophical speculation, it lifts up the heart of the biblical faith and projects a vision of God's gracious, relational nature. It affirms that God, in love and by his sovereign power, created the world, making human beings capable of experiencing love. To this end, God gave them the capacity to enter into relationship with him and fellow creatures and granted them the freedom necessary for such relationships to develop. Despite the fact that we abused our freedom by turning away from God, he remains faithful to his intentions for creation. This reading of Scripture directs us away from abstract, impersonal, and relationally detached approaches to the divine mystery and toward interactive and personal categories. Sanders summarizes: "Whereas classical theism's root metaphor is God as the pillar around which all else moves, the root metaphor for relational theism is a personal God in loving relations with creaturely persons."¹⁵

To speak of God as triune suggests that God is not a solitary monad, but self-communicating love; not the supreme will to power, but the will to community. It sees God as the ultimate power, whose very being consists in giving, receiving, and sharing love. Thus the reign of the triune God is a rule of sovereign love, not a rule of brute force. God is not absolute power, infinite egocentrism, or majestic solitariness. The triune God is creative, sacrificial, and empowering love, whose glory consists not in dominating others, but in sharing with them. In our experience of it, love is accompanied by vulnerability. Inauthentic love seeks control like a possessive parent holding on desperately to a child and denying it room to grow. Authentic love is precarious and brings with it the risk of rejection.

To introduce new terminology, one could think of the open view of God as a theology of self-emptying (or *kenosis*). The term is often associated with Christology, but it has wider implications. It was first taken up to express the notion of the Son of God surrendering the divine glory in order to become a human being. He chose to enter fully into the human condition and to share

¹⁰Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001; and Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001.

¹¹May 21, 2001, 39-45 and June 11, 2001, 50-56.

¹²Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998.

¹³Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.

¹⁴Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001.

¹⁵Sanders, 175.

in human suffering. There was a self-limitation of the divine Word in taking flesh and becoming a human being. What a mystery—God wanting to be loved by us and willing to make himself vulnerable! The eternal Son became a fragile child, dependent on human care. Though we are completely dependent on him, God is willing to be dependent on us.¹⁶ The open view of God sees self-giving and self-sacrificing action for the good of others in Jesus Christ, who is the very self-expression of the Father (Heb 1:3). It is characteristic of love to be self-emptying and self-sacrificing, and the incarnation reveals to us how God likes to use his power not to dominate, but to love.

Though God could at any time destroy or modify the world, he has decided to let himself be affected by creation, delighting in its beauty and grieving over its tragic aspects. God freely chose self-limitation for the sake of a covenant with humankind. Not the God of Aristotle, indifferent to the world, thinking of nothing but himself, the God of the gospel is completely aware of the finite world and intimately involved in its flow of events. Indeed, God is the supreme actor on the stage of history. God's experience of the world is such that he deals with us in temporal ways and experiences events as they occur. It means that our actions impact God and affect the future. In creating, there was a *kenosis* of omnipotence. God allowed a created order to exist alongside himself and let it function so that while all that happens is permitted by God, not all that happens is in accordance with God's will.

We would speak also of a *kenosis* of eternity. By bringing into being a temporal creation whose nature is expressed in unfolding history, the Creator granted reality to time and actualized in his nature a temporal pole such that he knows things as they really are, temporally in their succession. God knows how to be involved with time and history, indicating that there must be in God both that which is wholly free from variation (so that God's character is eternally unchangeable), but also that which corresponds to the varying circumstances of a temporal creation. The eternal God evidently can embrace the experiences of time. The incarnation involves so drastic an involvement with temporal reality that we can only conclude that time is not foreign to the divine nature.

A controversial aspect of the open view of God lies in its speaking of a *kenosis* of omniscience. If God does not control the future in exhaustive detail, the open view of God takes it as unlikely that he would know the future in exhaustive detail either. If this is a world of real becoming, open to a future that is being brought about both by causal principles (such as natural law) and by human agency and divine providence, it seems likely that the future of the world would, to some extent, still be in the process of being decided. (This is an intellectual decision, but it enjoys a certain amount of support from the OT in particular.¹⁷) We take it that God's close engagement with time implies that

¹⁶Ronald J. Feenstra takes the first step: "Reconsidering Kenotic Christology," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 128-152.

¹⁷Terrence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), chap. 4.

God does not yet know all that will eventually happen. If the future does not yet exist, God may not yet know all of it. He knows all that can be known but, because he is engaged with time, does not know all that will eventually be known. If God's project is dynamic and the future open to what creatures (as well as God) will decide, then the future is not yet fixed and may not be exhaustively foreknown. This does not imply that God is unprepared for any future or would be incompetent in facing it. God knows every possibility, but perhaps not as actualities. Practically speaking, the advantage of the open view at this point is that if we thought the future was still open to being changed, we might take a little more responsibility for it. This may explain why it is that practically oriented people seem to accept the open view more readily than those who hang on to the old traditions.¹⁸

Let me pause to say that all evangelicals affirm that God is omnipotent and omniscient. There is no disagreement *that* God is omnipotent and omniscient, but only *how* God is omnipotent and omniscient. If it is OK to discuss how God is omnipotent, why isn't it OK to discuss how God is omniscient? It would seem perfectly legitimate. In this matter, the open view of God is a version of free-will theism, not identical with classical Arminianism. For this reason, it should perhaps be called neo-Arminian since it shares a great deal with Arminianism, e.g., God's universal salvific will, genuine interactivity, real freedom. In our view, it is a stronger and more radical form of that position. Further, it is more of a threat to the Augustinians, provoking a stronger reaction from them than to the Arminianism with which they are familiar. The Arminians, for their part, have to decide whether they think the open view of God is a legitimate extension of their position or a danger to it. What the Augustinians' hope is, is that the classical Arminians will join them in condemning the open view of God and shut it out of the evangelical discussion once and for all. I sincerely hope this does not happen.¹⁹ I do, however, have a question for all critics. I would like to ask them, Do you think it is possible for God to create a universe, the future of which he would not exhaustively foreknow? If it is possible, doesn't it look as if this is such a world? If it is not possible, who is limiting divine sovereignty?

Open theists believe that they embrace a beautiful vision of God. Though self-sufficient in glory and lacking in nothing, God nevertheless gives room to creatures and deploys his power on their behalf, not against them. For the sake of love, God self-limits and even self-sacrifices himself. If he had only love without power, as in process theism, God would be a compassionate but

¹⁸Some critics ask how we can hold to biblical inerrancy if we deny the clear teaching of Scripture that God knows all the events of the future. The reason we can do so is that we do not find the Bible to be clearly teaching any such thing. It would be a dark day if the ETS began to expel members for holding biblical interpretations of which the majority disapprove. We would be saddened, for example, if Roger Nicole were to be expelled for his feminism.

¹⁹See Tony Gray, "Beyond Arminius: Pinnock's Doctrine of God and the Evangelical Tradition," in *Reconstructing Theology*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 120-146.

impotent spectator of the world. If he had only power without love, as in deterministic theology, God would be a cosmic tyrant, holding the whole of history in an unrelenting grasp. As it is, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is neither a bystander nor the director of a puppet theater. God is love and deploys his power for the good of humanity. God permits the wayward freedom of his creatures and enters into their pain in order that, finally, they might share his bliss. The history of the world is the movement from divine self-emptying to creaturely fulfillment in God. Open theists rejoice in the freedom to understand God not as an indifferent metaphysical iceberg or a solitary narcissistic being who suffers from his own completeness, but as a free and creative trinitarian person.

Although this way of thinking is more developed in open theism, it is not as if other evangelicals have not noticed problems in the traditional approaches. They too are revising conventional theism, but hope that no one will notice. Most of the issues, apart from the question of omniscience, are discussed by critics of the open view, e.g., the nature of divine immutability (Bruce Ware), the divine pathos (Wayne A. Grudem), and divine temporality (Ronald Nash). John M. Frame wants to speak of God's "temporal immanence" and "real interaction in time." Remarkably, Frame says that God can feel, as do human beings, the flow of time from day to day. He can mourn one moment and rejoice the next. There is a give-and-take relationship between God and creatures. He can change in some respects, but not in others. Frame agrees with Jürgen Moltmann that God suffered in the suffering of Christ. In saying so, Frame may have opened up a rift between his Calvinist version and the Thomistic version of classical theism. (Norman Geisler will not like it and neither will Paul Helm, I'd judge.)²⁰ It is important to say that the issue is evidently not whether we should revise classical theism, but how we should revise it in ways faithful to Scripture.

More interestingly, if they keep making such changes, these critics may end up open theists themselves! If scholars want to put aside, for instance, the traditional concept of impassibility, make no mistake they are on the path toward the open view of God. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer observe that Charles Hodge thought that God experiences changing emotions, but they do not seem aware of the fact that if Hodge did so, he was not thinking coherently, given the other things that he held to. How can God be timeless and, at the same time, be experiencing changes of emotion?²¹ At one level, evangelicals know that God loves and is loved, acts and is acted upon, moves and is moved, but on another level they have trouble admitting it theologically. Somehow, and I think this gets to the heart of it, we must learn to elucidate our belief in the incarnation so that we capture the beauty of

²⁰John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 157-159, 175, 187.

²¹Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer, "A Critique of Free Will Theism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 276-277.

God's perfection in changing as well as in unchanging terms.²²

Interaction

Reception of the open view of God covers a broad spectrum from Peter Wagner's hailing it as one of the most important theological discoveries since the Reformation, to Ware's judging it to be a diminishing of God's glory.²³ Some acknowledge that the open view of God has strengths. They see it bringing out the truth of God as a triune person. They often agree with us that God is moved by the suffering of his people, that God interacts dynamically with creation, that God accommodates himself when relating to his people, that God holds human beings accountable for what they do.²⁴ Frame admits that open theism influenced him, forced him to think harder and do greater justice to the responsiveness of God.²⁵ On the other hand, critics rightly point out that the open view of God raises a lot of important questions and requires considerable rethinking of issues. They understand the paradigm-like shift that it requires in our thinking and worry about the ramifications of the change. At the same time, they want to engage open theism in respectful dialogue, drawing upon the centuries of reflection on behalf of more traditional views; and they appreciate the discussions that the open view has been stimulating.²⁶ Some even leave the impression that the discussion we are having is generally positive.²⁷

²²Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 79; Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 125-127.

²³C. Peter Wagner has come out publicly in support of the open view of God, saying that he considers it the fourth most important theological insight since the Reformation because of its implications for world missions. The other three insights are Wesley's teaching on holiness, Wagner's sense that God needed people to evangelize, and the recovery of the charismatic dimension (and Elizabeth Alves, *Destiny of a Nation: How Prophets and Interscissors Can Mold History*, new ed. [Colorado Springs: Wagner Publications, 2001]). Others like R. K. McGregor Wright and Robert A. Morey have had an "existential fit."

²⁴William T. Chandler speaks of strengths in open theism in *A Description and Assessment of Clark Pinnock's Openness View of God* (M.Th. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000). Terrance Tiessen also models the kind of civil discussion we ought to be having (*Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000]). Jon Balsersk is also helpful ("The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's Understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with His People," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 [2000]: 177-195).

²⁵Frame, 211.

²⁶Cf. Christopher A. Hall and John Sanders, *Divine Debates: A Dialogue on the Classical and Openness Views of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002); and Paul R. Eddy and James K. Beilby, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

²⁷My impression of Terrance Tiessen is that he regards it in this way (*Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000]). I have also noticed Tiessen trying to do justice to the idea that God "responds" to what happens. This is a key point and might lead him to the open view of God. Should his own middle-knowledge version of Calvinism fail, the open view might become even more attractive.

There are other critics who attack us mercilessly. Albert Mohler writes concerning the open view of God: "Evangelicalism faces a crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The denial [*sic*] and redefinition of God's perfections will lead evangelical theology into disintegration and doctrinal catastrophe. The very identity and reality of the God of the Bible is at stake."²⁸ Such critics issue severe judgments. Royce Gruenler says that we are Pelagian, even though we affirm that grace precedes and fosters faith in us.²⁹ Robert Strimple says that we are Socinians, even though we are social trinitarians.³⁰ Picirilli criticizes us for revising classical theism, not altogether aware that he, as an Arminian, is also revising it.³¹ Timothy George repeats the charge that we are process theists, in spite of our insistence that God's limitations are self-limitations and not necessary limitations.³² Michael Horton repeatedly charges that we are driven by modern culture, not by a sincere attempt to interpret the Bible. I expect Geisler in his forthcoming book, *The Battle for God*, to repeat his charge that any theologian who espouses a suffering God must, perhaps unintentionally, advocate a panentheistic notion of God because, if the cosmos impacts God in this way, God does not transcend the world. Evidently, we have touched a raw nerve and have threatened to disestablish a theological ideology or two. Apparently the idea that God suffers or shares sovereignty or can be surprised are notions badly conceived and wreak havoc upon the gospel.³³ Nicole calls the open view a "cancer on evangelicalism" and D. A. Carson says it is "amateurish" and dressed-up Socinianism.³⁴ If we are

²⁸In a comment supportive of Bruce A. Ware's book, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000). Since Ware's work, two more books hostile to the open view have appeared: Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); and John Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001). Geisler's and Houses's title brings to mind Robert A. Morey's *Battle of the Gods* (1989), a much earlier critique which foresaw what he calls "the gathering storm." Also Gary W. Johnson and R. Fowler White state in the introduction that the open view is heretical (*Whatever Happened to the Reformation?* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001], 14). See also Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer for a calmer, though still negative, view ("A Critique of Free Will Theism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 [2001]: 259-286; 387-405).

²⁹*Christianity Today*, March 5, 2001, 58. If the truth be told, we are semi-Augustinian synergists like most Christians. Some evangelicals who look to Edwards and Hodge espouse soteriological monergism, but many who look to Wesley and Finney consider evangelical synergism a valid option (Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 595).

³⁰John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), chap. 8; and Johnson and White, chap. 2.

³¹Robert E. Picirilli, "An Arminian Response to John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*," *JETS* 44 (2001): 467-491.

³²Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative—Our Response* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2000), 37-38. Thankfully, Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer rebut the charge: *op cit* n. 5 (see n. 21 above).

³³Even Thomas G. Weinandy, no rabble-rouser, speaks strongly against us: "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (2001): 36. To think of God suffering diminishes God—a step which evangelical critics generally do not blame the open view for taking.

³⁴Comments in support of Frame's book, *No Other God*.

Socinian because we share one point with them (present knowledge), then Calvinists are astrologers because they share one point with them (a definite future).

In thinking about the interaction, I have formed some impressions. First, we appear to have run afoul of a group of sectarian evangelicals. I have always known there was a vigorous paleo-Calvinist credalism in evangelicalism, which places a great deal of stock in being intellectually and doctrinally precisely right. Open theists have collided with devotees of a narrow branch of the Reformed faith, who not only claim to speak on behalf of the whole Reformed tradition, but also presume to speak for all evangelicals. They seem to be of the opinion that God has little or no more light to bring forth from his Word, other than what they themselves have received. One senses a hardening of the categories typical of fundamentalism and an excessive traditionalism. They find it difficult to admit that a number of different views might be valid at least as positions to discuss. They find it difficult admitting that their tradition might have erred. Is it too much to ask for a little less arrogance and zeal devoted to sorting out the true evangelicals in contrast to the pretenders, the deviants, and the apostates?³⁵ In a recent letter I was called a blasphemer, a cult leader, and a poisonous influence. Wouldn't it be nice if these people would stop talking about non-Augustinian, non-Reformed theologies as necessarily flawed guides, even at their best? Is not the hallmark of authentic evangelicalism not blind submission to tradition, but fresh biblical study?³⁶ I wonder, who is it really troubling Israel (1 Kgs 18:18)?³⁷ The flesh rather than the Spirit can sometimes also dominate theology. The desire for power, an unwillingness to learn, a refusal to change, and egotism can lead to bad judgments. Living experience of the Spirit in community is essential to good interpretation.

Let me make a plea for theological flexibility. Trees look strong when compared with wild reeds, but when the storm comes, it is the trees that are uprooted, not the reeds, because the reeds, due to their flexibility, remain rooted. If in theology we cling to our own positions and are not willing to learn or be influenced by the beliefs of others, we may be overcome. Being a reed need not mean being wishy-washy, but moving a little with "the times and seasons" while being solidly anchored. An intense, humorless, opinionated rigidity about matters can break the spirit and make us bitter, ugly people. Let's be flexible, while being deeply rooted.

³⁵John G. Stackhouse, *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 49-50, 57.

³⁶A similar situation crops up in the evangelical defense of the traditional view of the nature of hell—the argument seems to be tradition-driven, not Scripture-driven. A very few texts control the interpretation of a large number of texts (Cezar R. Luchian, "Hell, Hermeneutics, and Theology: A Methodological Appraisal of the Contemporary Evangelical Debate on the Duration of Hell" [MA Thesis, Andrews University, 2001]).

³⁷So asks Olson, in Stackhouse, 205-206. See Stanley J. Grenz on "The Question of Evangelical Boundaries" in *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 175-183.

Second, an important theological issue has become central. Ware put his finger on it in the title, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*.³⁸ What is the nature of God's glory? Does it consist in his exercising total control over the world or in his self-giving and self-sacrificing? Evangelicals of a certain type are strong on divine transcendence, but weak when it comes to the divine condescension. I think we want to say that God is free and sovereign and does not need us, but also that God has decided not to be alone. This too he is free to do. Can we not recover the balance? Does God have to be presented as far away, aloof, and as cold as possible? I frankly worry about theologians who admire a God with the properties of a tyrant and seem to dislike a God with the properties of a lover. My critics sometimes remind me of Peter when he resisted the self-sacrificing vocation of Jesus (Matt 16:21-23).

God's weakness was and is a scandal and an offense, but it is also the true glory of God and the heart of the gospel. Luther warned against a theology of glory and advocated a theology of the cross. It is a serious error to resist the gracious condescension of God. While God is the "most" and the "best," there are different kinds of goodness and greatness. Therefore, when we ascribe maximality to God, we need to understand what is involved. Is it divine perfection to be vulnerable? Is it not God's glory to want a relationship with creatures, a partnership in which God makes himself weak and even suffers? Do not some of my critics lessen God's glory with their concept of an all-controlling and unconditioned deity? J. R. Lucas remarks: "Instead of the impassible Buddha, untroubled by the tribulations of mortal existence, Christians see God on a cross. Instead of the Aristotelian ideal of a self-sufficient God, who devotes his time to enjoying the contemplation of his own excellence, Christians worship a God who shared the human condition and came among us."³⁹ The issue is not how much power God has—we agree about that—but how God chooses to use it. If God wanted to control everything, he could. But he also has the power to create a world with free agents in it, as every Arminian admits. To be glorious in power, God does not have to be a dictator.

Third, I sense a degree of fear and even fear-mongering on the part of some. Confronted with the truth of God's self-sacrificing and self-limiting nature, they try to stir up in people's minds an uneasiness about God's ability to reign over a world in which he does not exercise total control and does not have exhaustive foreknowledge. They ridicule the notion that God might actually have chosen to take risks for the sake of love. How, they insinuate, can God cope with a future that is partly open and unsettled? How could God be competent in the absence of a predestinarian blueprint? I believe that many reject the open view of God not because it does not make good biblical, theological, philosophical, and practical sense, but because of the insecurity of trusting a God who has created a truly dynamic universe. What if God is not able to cope with a future that is partly open? What if his wisdom is not up to

³⁸Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000.

³⁹J. R. Lucas, *Future: An Essay on God, Temporality, and the Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 232.

it? What if we can't trust him? I say shame on critics who play upon people's fears. I say it is a (carnal?) desire to want a God completely in control of everything who can make no room for relationships of love. Why should control be considered the highest form of sovereignty? Isn't the need to control everything a sign of weakness rather than strength? No—it takes a truly self-confident God to give away some of his sovereignty and create a world with free agents in it. Fear can hide the glory of God, and insecurity can drive the critique of the open view of God. Fear is also visceral and may explain the hard-to-understand misrepresentations and lies.

Of course, God cannot be ignorant of anything that he must know in order to realize his objectives, but that does not require that his foreknowledge be complete in every detail, which might imply that the future is already determinate and human freedom illusory. The open view of God does not strike fear in us. It tells us that our lives and our prayers matter to God and may contribute to the victory of God. According to the open view of God, God knows a tremendous amount about the future, perhaps most of it. He knows everything that will happen on the basis of what has already happened. He knows everything that could happen and might happen. He knows the whole range of what is possible and the relative likelihood of any particular event occurring. And God knows what his future plans call for and what things he intends to do which are not contingent on human decisions.⁴⁰

What Now?

In an early review of *The Openness of God* in 1994, Roger Olson wondered how evangelicals would handle the proposal. He thought it might be a test of the maturity of their work. In retrospect, I would say that we have not handled it very well. But we could handle it better if we would commit ourselves to “open evangelicalism.” Our movement is a loose family or coalition, centering upon several key commitments: commitment to the biblical message; belief in a transcendent, triune God, who interacts with creation and acts in history; celebration of the transforming grace of God in human life; and the importance of mission to bring the good news to the whole world. Evangelicalism, says Paul Hiebert, is not so much a bounded set as a centered set, involving an openness to the wider church and the practice of civility.⁴¹

Evangelicalism is a transdenominational and multiconfessional group. Let Calvinists take seriously what Arminians say, and let the Dispensationalist listen respectfully to the Anabaptist. Writes John G. Stackhouse:

⁴⁰In a certain way this dialogue puzzles me. If my critics are correct, all of us do what we are disposed to do and believe what we are disposed to believe. So what's the point of discussing anything? I have been predestined to believe this very error, have I not? Also, if they are right, how could I be guilty of diminishing God's glory, when the whole point of their position is that nothing can possibly diminish it? Even the open view, despicable though it is, contributes to God's glory.

⁴¹Clark H. Pinnock, “Evangelical Theology in Progress,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology*, ed. Roger A. Badham (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), chap. 6. Robert K. Johnston, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Problem for Modern Evangelicalism,” *EtC* 69 (1997) 7-38.

A perspective that starts from a given position but is inclined to appreciate, not merely guard against, other evangelical traditions, might lift us beyond inherited impasses and draw on fresh light regarding perennial mysteries such as original sin, the relation of the human will and divine providence, and the nature and scope of the atonement.⁴²

The theological boundaries of evangelicalism have always been broad. They allowed a Zwingli to trash a 1,500-year-old conviction about sacraments, a Calvin to devise a new theology of infant baptism, and a J. N. Darby to invent a new dispensational theology. The boundaries of evangelical theology have been flexible and should remain so. Are critics unaware of the paradigm shifts that have taken place in Christianity over the centuries? Do they think it has been smooth sailing?⁴³ The open view of God is just a variant of age-old free-will theism in theology. Why pick on it?⁴⁴

There have always been two kinds of evangelical theology: one which promotes the orthodoxy of old Calvinism (Puritan-Princeton; cf. George Marsden) and one which gravitates to pietism, evangelism, and spirituality (Pietist-Pentecostal; cf. Don Dayton). Those who look to Calvin regard monergism as the norm, while those who look to Wesley hold synergism to be an equally valid option. This debate, now having opened a new front, is not going away—we might as well get used to it.⁴⁵

Second, let's also commit ourselves to what Millard Erickson calls "open scholarship, a strange term but a welcome one."⁴⁶ This is the idea that scholars, being limited in knowledge, ought to be able to learn from others, whatever their own convictions. Theology is an unfinished business. Even if we think that God has given us a set of propositions, there would still be much more to know about God than we presently know. Let's have new proposals and test them. Let's set for ourselves and for all people a rich feast. Let's not merely rehearse traditions, but welcome fresh acts of interpretation. Let's continue to reform theology. Doesn't one good reformation call for another?⁴⁷

Let's also learn to disagree better. G. K. Chesterton once said that the trouble with quarreling is that it spoils a good argument. We need to learn to disagree civilly and learn from each other. Let's stir each other up to better ways of thinking. Let not the eye ever say to the foot, "I have no need of you." Even theologians need one another as members of the one body of Christ. It might be wise to invoke the golden rule: "In everything, do to others as you

⁴²Stackhouse, 57.

⁴³To correct this mistake, Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future* (New York: Continuum, 1996); and Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999).

⁴⁴Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 104-111; and Gray and Sinkinson, 120-152.

⁴⁵Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 594-655, 612.

⁴⁶See the inside front cover of the program book of the ETS, November 14-16, 2001.

⁴⁷Roger Olson, "Reforming Evangelical Theology," 201-207.

would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12). For the Augustinians and the Thomists I have the highest respect. May I not expect at least a measure of toleration? If we want an open evangelicalism and an open scholarism, we have to allow the open view of God a place at the theological roundtable as an evangelically possible point of view.⁴⁸

⁴⁸A doctrinal analogy might be the way the Evangelical Alliance (UK) has insisted on a place at the table for the proponents of the annihilational approach to the nature and duration of hell.