

**THE HOPE OF DRAWING NEAR:  
A PASTORAL LOOK AT THE DEBATE BETWEEN OPEN THEISM AND EVANGELICAL  
CALVINISM IN NORTH AMERICA**

an Honors Thesis submitted by

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Approval Sheet

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America

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## I. Introduction

In 1994, Clark Pinnock and a group of like-minded colleagues co-authored *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. This book agitated the Evangelical Christian community through its proposal of a new understanding of God known as Open Theism. Not a theology composed entirely of *new* ideas, the proposal was certainly a new packaging of concepts that had appeared throughout the history of theology. Though many "hot-button" issues were associated with Open Theism, the idea that incited the most heated criticisms was the daring suggestion that God might not possess exhaustive knowledge of the future, yet still be God.

In short, the basic premise of open theism is that God is a triune, almighty, relational being who is, in essence, love incarnate. Open theism places an emphasis on God's love above God's other attributes since the love of God is not so much an attribute of God, as it is God's very being. God always has had a communal love relationship within the Trinity. God created humankind with the ability to choose to reciprocate God's love in an active relationship with God. In order for this interaction to be possible, God chose to allow humankind to influence certain aspects of God's will. This is not to say that humankind controls God, but rather asserts that God has in some ways partnered with God's creation to write the story of history as it unfolds. Open theists have not blocked out the idea that God has a plan and an ultimate end goal for history; they rather posit that God is capable of adapting God's plans in real time in the face of an entire cosmos of free agents in order to fulfill God's purposes.

Open Theism finds itself in opposition to what is best described as classical theology. Briefly defined, classical theology is a theology that emphasizes God's omnipotence (power over all things), omniscience (knowledge of all things), and impassibility (separation from feelings of suffering and pain). This view of God holds God's will as the ultimate explanation of every event that occurs. God holds full mastery and control over God's creation and does so in a way that is irresistible to humanity. Nothing happens that is not mandated by God and there are no events that do not contribute to God's glory, in fulfillment of God's will.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is devoted to exploring the discussion between two notable open theists: the late Clark H. Pinnock<sup>2</sup> and John Sanders<sup>3</sup>; and two classical theists: Bruce Ware<sup>4</sup> and John Frame<sup>5</sup>. While Pinnock and Sanders are solid representatives of Open theism, Ware and Frame represent of a particular "flavor" of classical theism; which, for

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 11-58.

<sup>2</sup> Pinnock was Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at McMaster Divinity College. His major works include: *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1994); *The Flame of Love* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1996); *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Sanders is a professor of Religion at Hendrix College. His major works include: *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998); *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Ware is a professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His major works include: *God's Lesser Glory*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000); *God's Greater Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004); *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Frame is J.D. Trimble chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary. His major works include: *No Other God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2001); *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 1994); *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2002).



the purposes of this paper, will be identified as Evangelical Calvinism.<sup>6</sup> Pinnock and Sanders both have contributed significantly to the pursuit of the Openness view of God, so the perspective they bring may be considered normative. From within the world of classical theism, Ware has been the primary voice against Open Theism, but Frame also has also written some pointed responses to Open Theism—their thoughts will be considered normative for Evangelical Calvinism.

Following a review of the theological debate, the paper will examine the pastoral perspectives of Gregory Boyd<sup>7</sup> and John Piper.<sup>8</sup> The Openness debate has grand implications for pastoral ministry. Where one lands in this debate affects how one approaches the question of theodicy,<sup>9</sup> and one's handling of theodicy will influence most aspects of personal faith. The answers a pastor gives to an individual in response to questions related to suffering will deeply affect that individual's life.

The position one takes in the Openness debate carries significant implications. This is not a dry theological discussion over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin—it is relevant to the very way in which Christians approach their God. If the Open

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<sup>6</sup> Ware and Frame will be identified with this heading. This application of "Evangelical Calvinism" is not absolute, but Ware and Frame fit more narrowly under this heading than they do classical theism. Any mention of Evangelical Calvinism in this paper refers to the thoughts associated with Ware and Frame.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Boyd is the senior pastor at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. His major works include: *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); *God at War* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997); *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> John Piper is the pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His major works include: *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2003); *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006); *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006); *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Theodicy is how one reconciles God's sovereignty, God's goodness, and the existence of evil. It is a common reason for individuals abandoning their pursuit of God.

Theists are correct, then many Christians actually approach God in a way that is not true to God's character. So, this question is not merely an academic endeavor. It carries the potential to define the integrity of the divine-human relationship.

### **An Overview of Chapters**

#### *Chapter 2*

Having introduced the basic premise of the paper, we will endeavor to better understand Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism. This chapter as a whole will be primarily descriptive. While it would be preferable to compile meticulous systematic theologies for the two groups, such a task is far beyond the scope of this paper. The chapter will contain sections on love; sovereignty; the trinity; creation; transcendence and immanence; and knowledge. It will be no quick endeavor to present the two views, but this task is not the primary focus of the paper as a whole; therefore, it will be a relatively brief summary.

#### *Chapter 3*

Having outlined the positions of Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism, we will then proceed to examine their conflict. The point here is not to chronicle every way in which the ideologies disagree, but rather to engage the main theological points of dissent between them. We will confront some specific questions they both have asked, yet answered differently; and we will investigate some biblical passages that they interpret differently. The questions themselves are posed in regard to three topics. The first topic is sovereignty. Both Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism affirm God's sovereignty, but God's sovereignty is much more poignantly integrated into Evangelical Calvinism. The questions addressed here are, "What does it mean to say that God is

sovereign?"; "How does God use God's sovereignty?" and, "Does God know the future?"<sup>10</sup> We will conclude this topic by investigating Genesis 22:12.

The second topic is prayer. While this is a discipline incorporated in some way by most people who claim to be Christians, the motivation for prayer and expected outcome differ between the Openness and Evangelical Calvinist views. The question in this section is simple: "What function does prayer serve?" We will conclude this topic by investigating Matthew 6:9-13.

The third topic is love. Love is paramount to the theology of Open Theism, and is also important to Evangelical Calvinism. The questions we will explore in this section are, "In what way does God love us?" and, "What kind of relationship does God have with God's creation?" We will conclude this topic by investigating 1 John 4:8.

#### *Chapter 4*

At this point in the paper, our focus will switch from academic theology to applied theology. Gregory Boyd and John Piper have entered the Openness debate on opposite sides, but they are both motivated by pastoral concerns. As an Open Theist, Boyd's pastoral theology is driven by emphasizing the comfort found in God's loving nature, as revealed in Christ, and the assurance that God is working to rid the cosmos of evil. As an Evangelical Calvinist, Piper's pastoral theology is driven by an emphasis on comfort found in the fact of God's control over everything. We will become acquainted with Piper and Boyd, investigate their pastoral methods, and examine their differing interpretations of Job.

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<sup>10</sup> While the final question could be a topic of its own, it is, in essence, an interaction between God's sovereignty and the presence (or absence) of human free will.

*Chapter 5*

Having become acquainted with Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism, along with their respective pastoral methods, we will turn our attention to evaluating their usefulness in relating to the God revealed in Scripture.

This paper is being written with the hope of painting accurate pictures of both Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism so that they may be accurately examined and understood, both theologically and pastorally, and thereby evaluated in light of the Gospel of Christ.

## II. Setting the Stage

Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism have many points of contention. Before exploring their direct clash, it is necessary to establish a working understanding of their theologies. In the coming pages, Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism will be given a relatively brief handling in order to convey their most essential beliefs.

### *Open Theism*

#### *Love*

The primary statement concerning the nature of God is that God is love. This very love is the characteristic of God's nature that governs and gives context to all of God's other attributes. Open theists arrive at this belief, in part, from a *prima facie* reading of 1 John 4:8, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." The statement "God is love" embodies an essential biblical truth and indicates that love is central, not incidental, to the nature of God.<sup>11</sup> God's love was the force behind creation, and it is the force behind the ends that God has in mind for the cosmos. God's love is the driving force behind all that God does. God's love is a completed love, and was completed in the sending of Christ. Richard Rice remarks:

The immediate context of these familiar words is instructive. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ...If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us" (1Jn 4:9-10, 15-16). As these verses show, God's love was completed in sending his Son.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 19. Although this is a quote from Richard Rice, one may assume both Pinnock and Sanders support the statement in light of the disclaimer of collective support in the preface of *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," *The Openness of God*, 19.

The love of God is embodied and most primarily expressed in the sacrifice of Christ. It is the Openness understanding of God's *love* that lies at the root of Open Theism. One can abbreviate the essential information about the Openness view of Love with ease, but it is of great importance to Open Theism.

### *Sovereignty*

Open Theists affirm the sovereignty of God. Pinnock blatantly states, "As Creator, God is *unquestionably* the superior power."<sup>13</sup> He also points out that God exists free of dependence on any other thing—truly free at the most fundamental level.<sup>14</sup> Being ultimately powerful and free of dependence on anything else, God possesses an unbound power. Out of this perfect sovereignty, however, God wills to give created beings a degree of control. Pinnock suggests that this is the reflection of the triune community upon the Created order—a loving exchange of ideas; a real love relationship.

Sanders suggests that we expand our view of the omnipotent God by removing the idea of God as a "feudal king" and replacing it with the notion of a God of "powerful love."<sup>15</sup> Sanders goes on to tie God's omnipotence directly to the power of God's love.<sup>16</sup> God's choice to create humanity with the capacity to engage in a give-and-take love relationship with God was made completely freely and was not required in any way by a

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<sup>13</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 113 (emphasis added). This is indeed a use of the term "power," but one may observe the implications on this statement to an Openness understanding of sovereignty. Power and sovereignty will be viewed as synonymous for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 189-190.

<sup>16</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 190.

deficiency within God's being.<sup>17</sup> God is fully in control of God's actions, and is thereby able to do whatever God pleases.

Pinnock points out:

In ruling over the world God is not all-determining but may will to achieve his goals through other agents, accepting the limitations of this decision. Yet this does not make God "weak," for it requires more power to rule over an undetermined world than it would over a determined one.<sup>18</sup>

Pinnock often reiterates the fact that the relationship between God and man is the way it is because God decided it would be that way. God is powerful enough to delegate some of God's power among creation. There is nothing special about the ontological state of humankind that forces God into allowing for free will. If there is any freedom of choice in the being of humanity, it so exists because God, out of God's omnipotence, allowed it to be there. Open Theists say God did indeed choose to delegate God's power among the beings God created. This is central to Openness Theology.

### *The Trinity*

There is one God. Within this one being, there exist three persons woven together in divine community. This is not one being that has three *modes* of being-- Father and Son are persons and the Spirit is spoken of in personal terms in the Scriptures, therefore, it is appropriate to speak of God as a community of persons rather than as modes of being.<sup>19</sup>

This doctrine is central to Open Theism because the social trinity is an open and dynamic structure; it does not portray God as a solitary, domineering individual but as the

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<sup>17</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 108.

essence of loving community.<sup>20</sup> Sanders says of the Trinity: "The tripersonal God is the perfection of love and communion—the very antithesis of aloofness, isolation and domination."<sup>21</sup> God is self-sufficient in fullness and open to the world in overflowing love. This openness to Creation is not an unavoidable outcome of a deficiency in the character or fullness of God. As internally social and self-sufficient within the Trinity, God does not need the world but creates it out of the *abundance* of God's rich inner life.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Creation*

God is the Creator of the world out of nothing. As a result, God does not simply influence preexisting matter, but made every thing— everything depends on God for its existence. Of the relationship between God and Creation, Pinnock says,

Each being owes its existence to God whose own being is independent of any world making any relationship with the world voluntary, not necessitated. It also implies that God has the power to intervene in the world, interrupting (if need be) the normal causal sequences.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to the belief of some, this singular possession of responsibility for the existence of Creation does not necessitate that God controls every aspect of this Creation. It simply means that God may interact with this Creation *as God pleases*. By nature, God is certainly sovereign, but as Sanders notes, "The divine nature does not dictate the sort of world God must make."<sup>24</sup> One must not miss the fact that to insist that God *must* create a

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<sup>20</sup> Social Trinitarianism is not exclusive to Open Theism by any means. It is indeed a key aspect of their theology, nonetheless. For further reading on this idea, see: Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Daniel J. Treier (ed.) and David Laubner (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 175.

<sup>22</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 108.

<sup>23</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 184.



certain kind of world as an outpouring of a particular attribute of God's nature is *no less* a limitation than to say that God could not possibly create a realm in which God's attributes *were* exemplified.<sup>25</sup> God possesses the power to create whatever beings God pleases, and God has chosen to make some beings with the capacity for choice. The goal of creating free agents is to allow loving relationships to exist and flourish. The existing Creation is constructed in such a way that it may reflect the reciprocated loving nature of the Trinity. This reflection of the nature of God pleases God, and one may assume that Scripture speaks true in saying that God was proud of God's creative action.

One must keep a balanced understanding of the nature of God's creative act. Presumably, God created for a purpose. Pinnock suggests God made human beings because they are able to respond to God and to hear God's Word. Their lives, like God's own life, are dynamic and oriented toward fulfillment in the coming kingdom. God wanted a world where personal relations and loving communion could occur. Stated plainly by Pinnock, "The aim was to create an echo in space and time of the communion that God experiences in eternity, a reflection on the creaturely level of the loving movement within God."<sup>26</sup> In response to the notion that God created out of a lack within God's nature, Pinnock remarks, "God does not *need* a world in the sense of having a deficiency in his nature but wants one that delights his heart and pleases him."<sup>27</sup> Creation is an outgrowth of the primary element of God's nature: love.

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<sup>25</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 184.

<sup>26</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 110. (emphasis mine)

Sanders points out that this creative act was not without risk on God's part.<sup>28</sup> If an expression of love is God's purpose within the creative act, choice is a necessary factor in the substance of the created. The existence of choice in the hands of beings other than God presents the possibility of opposition. Sanders speaks thusly:

Love is given freely and is received freely. Prior to creation, even if God had no warrant to believe anything would go amiss, there existed the "implausible possibility" that resistance to the divine purpose might arise.<sup>29</sup>

### *Transcendence and Immanence*

Open Theism affirms God as a Trinitarian Creator who has established a specific kind of relationship with creation. Let us now turn our focus toward God's transcendence *of* and immanence *within* creation.

Pinnock speaks to this issue in his definitive book, *The Openness of God*. He attributes both ideas to the character of God, saying, "In a dialectical way, God both transcends the world and participates in it, is both high and lifted up and at the same time very close to it. Though transcendent, God is committed to us and wills to be in relation with us."<sup>30</sup> Pinnock affirms God's sovereignty and freedom, but observes that God has decided to establish an intentional communion with creation—"He has chosen to be God for us, even God for us in a human form."<sup>31</sup>

To illustrate his point, Pinnock incorporates the analogy of an artist. Though the artist transcends the literal painting and is creating it outside of herself, she still imparts a

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<sup>28</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 111.

part of who she is within it.<sup>32</sup> Pinnock posits the notion of a transcendent Creator who is *continually* choosing to further the creative process within the world through an ongoing immanent presence within the world. Speaking slightly more specifically in regard to God's relationship with humankind Pinnock says, "God chooses to express his deity not in the mode of aloofness, independency and total control but in creating free beings on the finite level and entering lovingly into their lives."<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, the Social Trinitarian metaphysic held by Pinnock leads him to acknowledge God's ontological otherness from the world, but still suggests God's ceaseless responsive relationship with creation.<sup>34</sup>

### *Knowledge*

God is an omniscient God—God knows all things that are knowable, or all that God wants to know.<sup>35</sup> Omniscience is certainly a necessary attribute of God, but omniscience does not have to presuppose absolute divine foreknowledge; if the future is yet to be determined—if there are legitimate choices to be made—the future does not yet exist, and is therefore unknowable.<sup>36</sup> Sanders supports the model of divine knowledge known as "presentism." The past is a concrete thing. It has been decided. The events were once in the present, reaching into the future, but were left behind in the past. God's knowledge of the past is absolute. The collection of choices made by free agents that

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<sup>32</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 111.

<sup>33</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 110.

<sup>34</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> John Sanders, "Of Heffalumps and Heresies," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 2 (2002), 3.

<sup>36</sup> This is the more common view of foreknowledge, there is also another which suggests that God has chosen not to know the future; still for the sake of freedom. Sanders, "Of Heffalumps and Heresies," 7.

makes up the past is fully knowable by God. God also has full knowledge of the present. God fully comprehends and knows all that is happening at this very moment.

The temporal knowledge of God is as complete as possible. God *does* have plans, and these plans are always brought to fruition. God has chosen to achieve God's goals through a partnership with a free humanity. As a result, God's plans are adaptive to circumstances where the free wills of created beings do not align with them: God's end goals are not contingent upon specific chains of events. The future is composed of both definite and indefinite events. This is the controversial part of presentism.<sup>37</sup>

God's creation of free agents assures the non-existence of the future. The choices the free agents make moment to moment, along with the choices of God, are authoring the future. This is the privilege God established that keeps the future from being fully definite. One may assume that God, being ontologically other than Creation, would have the understanding *closest* to foreknowledge—that is, having a full comprehension of all past events and all events that are presently occurring, coupled with a perfect understanding of any possibility that could arise.<sup>38</sup> In truth, God is never caught off guard by an event. God is aware of all possibilities and is able to adapt to any circumstance.<sup>39</sup>

Sanders views God as a risk-taker. The biblical narrative suggests that God freely creates a world and gets involved with its affairs. Sanders states, "There develops a give-and-take dynamic interpersonal relationship between God and humanity in which God

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<sup>37</sup> Sanders, "Of Heffalumps and Heresies," 6.

<sup>38</sup> Sanders, "Of Heffalumps and Heresies," 7.

<sup>39</sup> Sanders, "Of Heffalumps and Heresies," 7-8.

does not always get what he desires."<sup>40</sup> God is adaptable to the circumstances that arise out of the exercising of free will by humans—there is no need to shy away from taking risks, God is able to work with them.

### ***Evangelical Calvinism***

#### *Sovereignty*

Bruce Ware makes the central point of his theology quite apparent:

The providence of God assures us that the universe is not spinning out of control, that human history is not unfolding contrary to God's purposes, and that God, ultimately, sustains and regulates all that he has made, to the glory of his great name, and in the fulfillment of his perfect will. Yes, our God—the true and living God—reigns over all!<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, the meticulous sovereignty of God is very important to Ware. He holds to the idea that God's will is absolute—that everything bows to it. God controls every detail, big and small—absolutely everything.<sup>42</sup> Humanity cannot step outside of God's control—God controls the full spectrum of the human experience, both the good and the evil.<sup>43</sup> Ware stands firmly by this. In regard to the inclusion of both good and evil, he says, "To deny God's control of both is to deny the very "Godness" of God and to remove from him his own stated basis for claiming to be the one and only true and living God."<sup>44</sup> In having meticulous control over the individual experience, God also has meticulous control of the nations. In speaking of the scope of God's sovereignty, John Frame includes every minute happening of the cosmos—every act of nature, every act of chance

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<sup>40</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 168.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 16-17.

<sup>42</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 71.

(throwing dice, etc.)—every single thing.<sup>45</sup> In response to the idea that anyone, individual or nation, could resist the will of God, Ware says:

How audacious to think that we human beings can resist, threaten, or jeopardize the will of God. The God of the Bible, the true and living God, simply cannot fail to accomplish his will, and the nations are subject fully to him, not he to them.<sup>46</sup>

Frame certainly shares Ware's sentiments. He says, "God never fails to accomplish what he sets out to do. Creatures may oppose him, to be sure, but they cannot prevail."<sup>47</sup> God has a specific end goal in mind, and though it may seem at times like God is legitimately resisted, even to the point of failure, this is not the case.<sup>48</sup> There are times when God's purposes seem to be defeated, but that is not what is actually happening.<sup>49</sup> God has simply decided to reach God's end goal with that particular set of events. The illusion of struggle makes God's final victory all the more glorious.<sup>50</sup> God does what God pleases for God's own pleasure. One may assume that all states of affairs are being worked to glorify God, and are for God's ultimate purposes.<sup>51</sup>

### *Love*

God possesses a powerful love—both for God's creation and, even more so, for Godself.<sup>52</sup> God's self-love is the standard for all other expressions of love. God loves God's people—at one time, this was exclusively for Israel but, through Christ, God's

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<sup>45</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 51-52.

<sup>46</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 67-78.

<sup>52</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 416.

covenantal love extends to anyone who calls upon Jesus. God's love has the ability to be coercive and used as a tool that will bring some people to judgment and ruin in order to exalt and reward God's people.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, it may serve coercive purposes in salvation—God's love brings people to Godself.<sup>54</sup> Love is an aspect of God's nature that God implements in interacting with Creation and furthering God's purposes within Creation.

### *The Trinity*

Frame offers a five-point statement about the Trinity: (1) God is one; (2) God is three; (3) The three persons are each fully God; (4) Each of the persons is distinct from the others; (5) The three persons are related to one another eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup> As in many Trinitarian views, one finds an interesting dynamic within Frame's concept of the Triune God. There is a hierarchy with the Father at its head. The spirit is an agent/vessel of God's glory, and an avenue of creation.<sup>56</sup> The spirit is a metaphysical transport of God's glory to earth, which allows for interaction between the holy and unholy.<sup>57</sup> The Son is the suffering servant—the "skin-wearing" aspect of God.<sup>58</sup> Ware suggests that the key in this seemingly unbalanced relationship within the Godhead is the unity of the Trinity. A direct tie exists among these three persons—they are the

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<sup>53</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 424.

<sup>54</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 424.

<sup>55</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 621-622.

<sup>56</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 633.

<sup>57</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 633.

<sup>58</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 634.

same thing; they are not jealous of one another's position and all are working for the same purpose.<sup>59</sup>

### *Creation*

Before there was anything, God was. God created out of the nothing. This creative act resulted in the inception of a great number of substantial processes that in turn created, and have continued to create more and more. Frame notes that those things which have been created since the initial creative act of God may trace their genesis back to God, just the same. Frame defines creation thusly: "Creation is an act of God alone, by which, for his own glory, he brings into existence everything in the universe, things that have no existence prior to his creative word."<sup>60</sup>

God's motive behind creation in this model is to glorify God. Frame states that God created the world as a temple for Godself.<sup>61</sup> This assertion certainly highlights the idea that the world was made as an avenue of praise to God. Ware concurs with Frame in this statement:

His Glory, and not the glory of any other, is the center stage in this story. We (sinners) must come to terms with the fact that God is central and all-encompassing, and that we exist by his will and good pleasure for reasons that have to do with the display of his glory.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, Frame capitalizes on the Lordship of God over creation. God made all that is and has the right to do as God pleases with it. There is no wrong on behalf of God, being Lord over all that is. The creative act expresses God's nature in showing God's

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<sup>59</sup> Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 20.

<sup>60</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 291.

<sup>61</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 291.

<sup>62</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 58.



control, authority, and covenantal presence (God's relationship with the created order).<sup>63</sup> Every *thing*, both living and nonliving expresses the glory of God in its very being.<sup>64</sup>

*Transcendence and Immanence*

Ware contends that it is necessary to hold God's transcendence and God's immanence in tension. He does not consider the option to exalt one and denigrate the other. He says: "God's transcendence must be upheld, but in ways that agree with and support meaningful immanence; immanence must be upheld, but in ways that agree with and support meaningful transcendence."<sup>65</sup>

Speaking of transcendence, Ware points out that God has always existed independent of the world—fully self-sufficient in an infinitely perfect self-existence.<sup>66</sup> God requires nothing from God's creation. The only reliance that exists is the reliance of the created order upon God. Humanity depends upon the grace and mercy of God, but God does not depend upon humanity at all.

Ware also holds that there is something fundamentally different in the essence of God that humanity does not possess. God is not the ontological peer of humanity. God possesses a transcendent purity that humans are incapable of encountering directly (Moses in Ex. 33:20; the seraphim are the same way in Is. 6:2). There is a separation of the existence of God from that of the world. Scripture never suggests that God relies upon the world in order to have God's being.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 294.

<sup>64</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 291.

<sup>65</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 57.

<sup>66</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 46.

Despite the fact that God does not need humanity, God loves humanity—humanity can do nothing for God, yet God can and *does* do everything for humanity.<sup>68</sup> Humanity relies upon God for its existence. Frame says that God is the "supremely relevant one," and that "without him, nothing else could exist."<sup>69</sup> The love that God has for humanity is a primary expression of God's immanence. The relationship humans have with God is unlike any other relationship they experience. This is the only relationship they have with someone who has no need of anything and is *completely* self-sufficient. This is also the only opportunity for humans to be truly loved unconditionally.<sup>70</sup>

Frame sees great significance in the immanence of God. As a central theme of "covenant Lordship," immanence is a primary characteristic of God. God did not create the world, only to then relinquish God's power over to it to govern itself. God created the world and remained heavily involved with its creatures. God gave Godself a name so that God's creatures could interact with God. Also, God is actively involved in the events that take place on earth. God has taken an interest in the comings and goings of humanity and is pursuing some sort of end goal through human history.<sup>71</sup>

### *Knowledge*

Ware adheres to an understanding of God's knowledge that is an adaptation of Luis de Molina's concept of "middle knowledge."<sup>72</sup> Middle knowledge is God's

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<sup>68</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 54.

<sup>69</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 58-59.

<sup>71</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 110.

understanding of all possible outcomes in all possible situations. God knows how one would react in any situation and knows the situations which one's actions would create in the world. Ware weds this idea of God's knowledge to a compatibilist view of human freedom—a freedom of inclination. This is the idea that one may do whatever one pleases, as long as that is what one most desires. The assumption is that one will always do what one most desires in any situation—that is why one does that particular thing. Through God's knowledge of every human inclination, God is fully aware of any act, good or evil, before it occurs. God also knows what could have been, and God draws from this wellspring of knowledge in assessing one's character.<sup>73</sup> In terms of God's judgment, humanity is not only held accountable for what *has* been done, but also by what *would* have been done.<sup>74</sup>

The combination of middle knowledge and compatibilistic freedom allows God to pilot history in an interesting way. Knowing that one will exercise freedom and always act upon one's greatest desires, God may prevent/instigate a given situation by changing one's circumstances to capitalize on a different desire. In this way, God may allow one to act upon one's greatest desire, while all the while influencing one's actions. God's control of history initially seems subtle in this system, yet Ware also affirms that God indeed has specific plans for the cosmos and an absolute sovereignty that makes possible God's bringing those plans to reality.<sup>75</sup> Ware's primary motivation in his synthesis of middle knowledge and compatibilistic freedom is to explain how God can remain unstained from

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<sup>73</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 115-119.

<sup>74</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 118.

<sup>75</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 97.

evil while still being the one to exercise sovereignty and control over a reality that clearly includes evil. Ware points out:

By controlling human sinful choices and actions in this manner, it never is the case that God does evil directly (as he does good directly), nor is it the case that he causes a person to do evil (James 1:13).<sup>76</sup>

The source of evil lies within the evildoer. The evildoer chooses the evil acts as his greatest desires, and those actions come from his nature, which is also presumably evil.<sup>77</sup>

God is in full control over evil—from what happens, to where it happens, to whether it happens at all.<sup>78</sup> Through God's foreknowledge, God fully controls evil without ever actually committing evil.

This is an area where Frame does not fully agree with Ware. Frame's understanding of God as Creator involves God's full comprehension of creation. God knows what one will do in a given situation not because God knows what one is likely to choose, but because God knows what one *will* choose.<sup>79</sup> Frame says:

God creates the world according to his eternal plan, but that plan presupposes his knowledge of creatable, possible worlds and, indeed, his foreknowledge of the actual world. God foreordains everything that comes to pass, but he does not foreordain in ignorance.<sup>80</sup>

### *Summary*

It should be apparent at this point that Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism have many points of contention. Open Theists view God as primarily loving, while Evangelical Calvinists view God as primarily sovereign. Open Theists approach Creation

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<sup>76</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 122.

<sup>77</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 122.

<sup>78</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 124.

<sup>79</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 501-505.

<sup>80</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 505.

as an outpouring of God's Love, while Evangelical Calvinists approach it as an instrument of God's Glory. Open Theists believe absolute divine foreknowledge is contradictory to God's nature, while Evangelical Calvinists believe absolute divine foreknowledge is essential to God's nature. It is a battle of understanding between love and glory—humility and supremacy. Both ideologies aim to have a biblical theology that is rooted in scripture. It is now necessary to examine three of their primary areas of contention.

### III. THE CLASH

The key tenets of Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism differ widely at some vital points, so their advocates often strongly clash with one another. To explore every detail of their differences is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, what follows is a fairly brief summary of their primary theological points of argument coupled with a look at thematically applicable biblical texts which they will exegete quite differently.

#### **Sovereignty**

*What does it mean to say that God is sovereign?*

Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists both affirm that God is sovereign; they do, however, disagree on what that actually means. Bruce Ware says of God: "The God of the Bible, the true and living God, has ultimate and specific (or exact, or precise, or detailed, or meticulous) control over all that occurs."<sup>81</sup> Ware's meaning seems clear enough: God is sovereign in such a way that nothing happens, nor has ever happened, that God has not directly controlled. Frame concurs with Ware, and speaks further of God's will as active and effective: "To say that God's controlling power is efficacious is simply to say that it always accomplishes its purpose. God never fails to accomplish what he sets out to do."<sup>82</sup> Frame's understanding of God's efficacious control extends to everything that happens in the entire universe—it is universal. Like Ware, this is a specific and intentional sense of control.

Frame goes on to qualify this statement of absolute sovereignty with the explanation that there are times when God's purposes seem to have been defeated, but

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<sup>81</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 24.

<sup>82</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 47.

God has actually orchestrated God's purposes to be accomplished by means of seeming defeats and miraculous surprises.<sup>83</sup> Collectively, one may refer to the Evangelical Calvinist view of God's sovereignty as "specific sovereignty."

From the Open Theist perspective, on the other hand, Pinnock states that God was at one time the only power in the universe, until God chose to create other agents of power. As a result of this shared power, Pinnock goes as far as to say, "There is no single and all-determining divine will that calls all the shots."<sup>84</sup> Pinnock holds to an idea of "general sovereignty"—God controls some things, but not everything.<sup>85</sup> God has put certain processes into motion on the universal level, and God lets those processes function as they are designed to function. God has likewise created humanity with the capacity for choice, and God allows that system to stand. God is the source of all power but God has delegated this power away from Godself in the act of creation. Sanders describes it this way: "God has sovereignly decided to enter into a project in which he desires reciprocal loving relationships and so does not control everything that happens."<sup>86</sup>

Knowing that the Open Theist definition of sovereignty differs from the traditional view, Pinnock clarifies his view: "The term 'sovereignty' is not synonymous with 'all-controlling.' God is under no obligation to exercise all-controlling sovereignty if that is not what he wants to do."<sup>87</sup> Pinnock arrives here by acknowledging instances in

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<sup>83</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 53.

<sup>85</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 53.

<sup>86</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 208.

<sup>87</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 53.

the Bible where God is described as responding to changes in circumstance and things not going the way God seems to prefer them. After all, the fact that God is sovereign does not automatically mean that nothing can go contrary to God's will (our sins go against it) but rather that God is able to deal with any circumstance that may arise.<sup>88</sup>

If God were in possession of exhaustive meticulous sovereignty, it would make no sense for God to be disappointed with the way something happened.<sup>89</sup> As previously mentioned, Sanders holds a risk model of God. The God who risks does not possess absolute sovereignty—not because, on an ontological level, God is unable to meticulously control everything, but because God has established a relationship with creatures whom he made to possess the power of legitimate choice.

*How does God use God's sovereignty?*

As previously mentioned, Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism both affirm that God has the ability to exercise omnipotent, absolute, sovereignty. However, Open Theists believe that God has chosen to place a limitation upon Godself in order to allow for the existence of free will, the reflection of the triune community in the world, and, ultimately, love. With similar conviction, Evangelical Calvinists believe God actively exercises absolute sovereignty without so much as a thought to limit this power in favor of anything—keeping in mind that the ultimate goal for the existence of everything in creation is to bring glory to God.

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<sup>88</sup> Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 114.

<sup>89</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 53.



Open Theists believe that, while God limits an aspect of God's sovereignty, God in many ways creates an environment in which God's perfect sovereignty is exercised all the more. As noted in the previous chapter, Pinnock asserts that "it requires more power to rule over an undetermined world than it would over a determined one."<sup>90</sup> God is consistently exercising God's sovereignty in the world through interacting with literally billions of free agents. Furthermore, God's method of employing God's sovereignty is adaptive. Pinnock points out an example in the redemptive act of Christ:

God manifests his power paradoxically in the cross of Christ. What an astounding way for God to deploy power, in the form of servanthood and self-sacrifice. This was the mode of power God knew in his wisdom to be appropriate for bringing about reconciliation, and it reveals that love rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God. When love says that power will not work in a situation, power is allowed to withdraw in favor of powerlessness. God does not overcome his enemies (for example) by forcing but by loving them. God works, not in order to subject our wills but to transform our hearts. Love and not sheer power overcomes evil—God does not go in for power tactics.<sup>91</sup>

This is a use of sovereignty that is responsive—a use of sovereignty full of wisdom, rooted in love.

Ultimately, the way in which God uses God's sovereignty is God's own sovereign decision. Richard Rice points out:

The fact that God foreknows or predestines something does not guarantee that it will happen, the fact that God determines part of history does not mean that he determines all of history, and the fact that God extends a specific call to certain people does not mean that he similarly calls all people.<sup>92</sup>

There are occasions in which God chooses to cooperate with humans to exercise the sovereign pursuit of God's goals. In these situations, it is within the realm of possibility that the human agent(s) could refuse to cooperate. Remembering that "A" is not always

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<sup>90</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 113.

<sup>91</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 114.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Rice, *The Openness of God*, 55-56.

obligated to indicate "Never A," let it be understood that the Openness view does not support a God whose will is always contingent on the wills of human beings.

In sharp contrast, Evangelical Calvinists believe that God uses God's sovereignty without limitations. God is in control of every detail in the universe. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ware supports compatibilistic freedom—that is, humans are free to do what they most want to do in any given situation, but cannot choose what they do not most want. God uses God's sovereignty to pursue God's will by controlling the influences around each individual in such a way that what she most wants in any particular moment is exactly what God wants her to want. Ware highlights God's control over our choices thusly:

is it not clear that God is able not only to know what impact a certain set of influences will have upon our decisions, but that since he is God, he is able to adjust and regulate the influences that come into our lives, so that by controlling the influences he can regulate the choices we will make? Yet, when we make those choices, since we choose and act according to our deepest desires and strongest inclinations, we act freely. Therefore, the picture is complete: God's sovereign control of human choice and action is fully compatible with our freedom in choosing and acting in accordance with our strongest inclinations and deepest desires.<sup>93</sup>

This use of God's sovereignty is meticulous; in control of every detail—every bit of sense datum that may influence an individual's wants.

It is God's sovereign power that holds the universe together. God uses God's sovereignty to specifically bring about God's will. God's ultimate will is to glorify Godself, and therefore the ultimate use of God's sovereignty is to express God's glory.

*Does God know the future?*

The answer that Open Theists give to the question of whether or not God knows the future is one of their most distinguishing and widely known characteristics. As a result, it is one of the strongest points of contention between Open Theists and

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<sup>93</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 82.

Evangelical Calvinists. As previously mentioned, Open Theists hold that God's foreknowledge cannot be absolute because the future is a nonentity—it is yet to be written. This "open" future is a consequence of God's partnership with God's creation in authoring history. If humans actually possess a legitimately and completely free will, then their choices cannot be known already, not even by God. Aside from the direct conflict with free will, the Openness understanding of the divine-human relationship is at stake when discussing God's knowledge of the future. Pinnock says:

Total foreknowledge would jeopardize the divine-human relationship. What kind of dialogue is it when one party already knows what the other will say and do? I would not call this a personal relationship.<sup>94</sup>

In the Open Theist view, God *cannot* know the future—not because God is too weak to do so, but rather because of the system God has established between Godself and humanity. God not only has given humans the power of free choice, but powerful choices. One may view history as a series of decisions winding together and moving onward. God completely knows that which has been decided; but that which is yet to be decided is not known—it does not exist.<sup>95</sup>

The Open Theist view of limited divine foreknowledge does not mesh with Evangelical Calvinism at all. The God of Evangelical Calvinism has a full comprehension of the future—after all, God authored the future. It is not within the character of God to be without knowledge. God's will exists, and its very existence thus mandates the future. God cannot fail, and God's plans are absolute, unchanging. There is no room in this system for the Open Theist understanding of God's limited foreknowledge.

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<sup>94</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 122.

<sup>95</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 123.

*Genesis 22:12*

Open Theists use Genesis 22:12 as an example of God gaining new knowledge from acts of human freedom. Abraham's assignment to sacrifice Isaac is cited as an example of God's discovering whether Abraham will be a sufficient partner in the covenant God wishes to fulfill in him. The opening verse of the passage identifies to the reader Abraham's assignment as a test from God, and the concluding verse (v. 12) affirms to the reader that this was a test—presumably a legitimate test—and informs Abraham of the motive behind God's request. John Sanders says, "It is often suggested that the test was for Abraham's benefit, not God's. It should be noted, however, that the only one in the text said to learn anything from the test is *God*."<sup>96</sup> Sanders goes on to point to the concern on God's part that Abraham will be strong enough to embark on the covenantal project with God, relating this search for assurance on God's part to Abraham's search for assurance in chapter 15.<sup>97</sup>

For Pinnock this interaction goes far beyond God acquiring knowledge. This interaction is a key element in the divine-human relationship; it is an emotional exchange that would be tainted if God already knew what Abraham would do.<sup>98</sup>

The Evangelical Calvinist system is quite different. Ware and Frame both approach this passage as anthropomorphic—they do not interpret it as speaking literally of God's actions, but rather as offering a characterization of God as human-like.<sup>99</sup> Ware

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<sup>96</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 52.

<sup>97</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 53.

<sup>98</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," *The Openness of God*, 122.

<sup>99</sup> John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2001) 47.

refers to Romans 4:18-22 for his interpretation. In Ware's mind, God has known of Abraham's faith long before the events of Genesis 22. God knew of Abraham's faith when Abraham, in his old age, trusted for years that God would give him and Sarah a son.<sup>100</sup> Ware also turns to Hebrews 11 for insight into the relationship between Abraham and God. Abraham showed that he feared God from the very beginning of their relationship when he packed up his life and moved everything towards an undetermined goal. The Hebrews passage leads Ware to believe that Abraham had faith that God would raise Isaac from the dead even after he killed him. Ware does not accept the notion that this is the first time God learns of Abraham's faith in God, saying:

It is clear, then, that the openness interpretation fails. Because God knows our hearts intimately, he knew previously every hope and fear, every thought and inclination of Abraham's heart as Abraham ascended Mt. Moriah and proceeded to bind his son.<sup>101</sup>

In Ware's mind, the Openness understanding of God's knowledge defeats the Openness interpretation. If God fully comprehends all that has happened and *is* happening, it would not be the moment Abraham raised his blade that God knew he feared God. And, given the Openness assumption of libertarian freedom, this one act could not possibly guarantee that Abraham feared God with any finality.<sup>102</sup>

Despite Ware's critique of the Openness interpretation, he does agree that this narrative refers to a significant occurrence in the divine-human relationship. Ware suggests that God enters into relationship with humanity already knowing all that would occur in the life of each individual, yet still experiences a mutable aspect of this

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<sup>100</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000) 70.

<sup>101</sup> Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 72.

<sup>102</sup> Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 73.

relationship.<sup>103</sup> In this encounter on Mt. Moriah, God is experiencing temporally an event God always knew would come to be. The event is still significant to the relationship between God and Abraham, but God already knew exactly what Abraham would do. God sees Abraham's faith and fear of God afresh and anew, but certainly not for the very first time.<sup>104</sup>

## **Prayer**

*What function does prayer serve?*

Both Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists affirm prayer as a necessary spiritual discipline, but they have much different opinions about the function that prayer serves. The Openness view of God centers on the idea of a *real* divine-human relationship—complete with *real* communication. The classic simplified explanation of prayer is that it is a conversation with God. The Openness understanding of prayer is that it is an actual conversation happening in real time between a human creature and her Creator. The words spoken by the one praying are chosen independently and are not predetermined by God. As previously mentioned in the section on sovereignty, the Openness understanding of God does not include exhaustive foreknowledge. In spite of this, it would be a stretch to say that the created human at any point during prayer will inform the Creator of any *new* information. God's perfect knowledge of the past and present keep that "surprise" from being possible.

The Openness view understands prayer to be an interaction with God in which the one praying has legitimate "influence" on God. To be clear, Open Theists do not assert

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<sup>103</sup> Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 73. For further reading on Ware's idea of "relational mutability," see: Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 (1986), 431-446.

<sup>104</sup> Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 74.

that humans have *control* over God, but merely the ability to have important input. They are able to have input because God gave them that ability. A helpful illustration is a conversation between husband and wife. If the husband would like the wife to do a given thing, he may influence her in that direction. It is no secret, however, that the wife is fully capable of doing whatever she wants. The husband clearly has influence, but not control. He only has influence because the wife loves him. This may oversimplify, but it does illustrate the central idea behind the Openness view of human influence on God through prayer.

In essence, the Openness view of prayer supports a model of prayer that is beneficial for both God and humanity. It is essential in the God-human relationship—it makes the God-human relationship possible. It is the avenue by which humans perform an aspect of their role as co-authors of history with God. Once again, the fact that prayer serves the communicative role that it does is not a product of God being too weak to foreordain or foreknow the thoughts and hopes of humanity. Rather, God, in God's sovereignty, has established a relationship with humanity that operates in this interactive and personal way. It is in favor of the existence of a real love relationship with Creation. In the Openness view, the old adage, "Prayer changes things," proves actually to be true.

Evangelical Calvinists have a different approach to prayer. Ware's understanding of prayer is tempered by his understanding of God as both omniscient and self-sufficient.<sup>105</sup> God learns nothing new from a praying creature. God indeed even *knew* beforehand that the creature would pray and what the creature would pray. Prayer has nothing to do with informing God of anything, for God already knows everything

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<sup>105</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 183

perfectly. Despite this reality, prayer does serve a purpose. Prayer is an avenue by which humans may actively show that they recognize God as in control and high above them. It is a symbol of active dependence on the will of a great and glorious God. To pray is actively to put oneself in a place of servitude. God has designed prayer like this, in part, because God wants God's creation to come to him with burdens and the hope of reassurance.<sup>106</sup> Ware expresses this idea thusly: "God has devised prayer as a means to draw us into close and intimate relationship with him, the self-sufficient God who possesses all."<sup>107</sup> This understanding of the thrust of prayer is similar to the understanding of prayer in Open Theism. Prayer is established for the sake of the God-human relationship. That being said, it may be the only similarity between the two camps.

More than existing simply for the sake of the God-human relationship, prayer focuses on a single longing of God. Ware states that God "longs for us to demonstrate our dependence upon him and our absolute trust in his character by coming to him in petitionary prayer."<sup>108</sup> Prayer exists to glorify the glorified God. Ware later attaches another reason for the design of prayer:

God loves to share the bounty. He loves being the Giver. He loves granting to his humble and dependent children what is best for them. He takes Great pleasure in being the source of "every good gift and every perfect gift," and he is lavish and generous and gracious and compassionate so that "no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11). Therefore, he summons his people... to pray.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 186.

<sup>107</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 186.

<sup>108</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 186.

<sup>109</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 188.



God takes pleasure in being a giver; therefore, God sets up prayer to maintain recognition of that giving role. God has established prayer both to glorify Godself and to sanctify creation by reminding creation that God is the One in control.<sup>110</sup>

*Matthew 6:9-13*

When considering prayer, one must address the biblical text of the ever-popular Lord's Prayer. Naturally, Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists interpret this passage very differently. The Openness interpretation of this text is fairly straightforward. Sanders views Jesus' structuring of this prayer as an encouragement for believers to engage in a filial relationship with the Father.<sup>111</sup> There is a legitimate loving interaction between the believer and God. The elements of both petition and praise serve to draw the one praying into a close communion with God.

Ware deals with the prayer in Matthew 6 much more thoroughly. The opening appeal to the Father is not designed to emphasize the relationship between the believer and God, but to emphasize God's authority over God's children. Ware speaks of God's "rightful position of authority that he has over our lives."<sup>112</sup>

In Ware's interpretation of "Your will be done," this line cannot refer to a will that is unformed. It must be a divine will that predates the prayer itself. Believers in no way help to shape God's will through their prayers.<sup>113</sup> The place of the believer in prayer is to acknowledge God's authority and will—to follow and not lead. The line in verse 11,

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<sup>110</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 194.

<sup>111</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 91.

<sup>112</sup> Ware, *Their God Is Too Small*, 89.

<sup>113</sup> Ware, *Their God Is Too Small*, 89.

"Give us this day our daily bread," does not refer to bread, but to the will of God.<sup>114</sup> We are to seek sustenance from the authority and will of God. We are to be utterly dependent upon God's will.

The greatest difference between these two interpretive approaches is in how literally the two sides interpret the Lord's Prayer. Sanders has a straightforward "it is what it is" kind of interpretation, while Ware looks for imagery and allusion. One is hard pressed to discern which would be appropriate for this particular passage. That being said, Jesus' preface to this model prayer seems to indicate it is a prayer of simplicity—that is, simplification of what one is praying. With this in mind, one may be inclined to read this passage more like the Open Theists do—simply.

Ware's interpretation of this passage occurs in a chapter of *Their God Is Too Small* that is intended to debunk the Openness view of prayer. As a result, Ware's interpretation is focused on the primacy of God's will in the prayer.<sup>115</sup> While God's will is certainly addressed in the prayer, Jesus seems to approach it differently than Ware. The line that Jesus attaches to the end of verse 10, "on earth as it is in heaven," presupposes that God's will is *not* already being done on earth in the same way it is done in heaven.<sup>116</sup> Ware's approach to interpreting this passage is a reaction against his

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<sup>114</sup> Ware, *Their God Is Too Small*, 90.

<sup>115</sup> In other words, Ware appears to emphasize the will of God in response to the perceived notion that Open Theists intend to control the will of God through prayer.

<sup>116</sup> There is much more to say concerning this passage, but to do so is beyond the scope of this paper. For further reading on the Sermon on the Mount, see: Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); David C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1989); John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7: Christian Counter-Culture)* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1985); D.A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004); Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of Discipline* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006); James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

understanding of the Openness view of prayer in which, when one prays, God is simply waiting on one's final word before God acts. Ware rejects his understanding of the Openness view of prayer: that God waits patiently on humans to pray so that God may formulate God's will. Open Theists would reject such a notion as well—this is a caricature of the Openness view of prayer.

### **Love**

*In what way does God love us?*

Open Theists base their entire theology on the primacy of love in the nature of God.<sup>117</sup> God loves us absolutely and God's love is the motivating force behind all that God does. God's love is powerful and tempers God's ultimate power. As Sanders says, "The way of God in the world is not a display of raw omnipotence—a love of power—but the power of love."<sup>118</sup> Pinnock states that, "love is the mode in which God's power is exercised. God neither surrenders power in order to love nor denies love in the need to rule, but combines love and power perfectly."<sup>119</sup> One may say that God loves us as an expression of God's power, and certainly of God's character.

God loves humanity to such a degree that God is willing to enter into the realm of risk. In order for God to share God's love with humanity, it was necessary for humanity to have the legitimate choice whether to love God. God first loved humanity enough to create the world with the risk of rejection in order to allow the potential of a collaborative love relationship.

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<sup>117</sup> John Sanders has an entire article, written to explain Open Theism, where this idea is the primary focus: John Sanders, "Of Heffalumps and Heresies," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 2 (2002), 3.

<sup>118</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 95.

<sup>119</sup> Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 114.

Evangelical Calvinists see the love of God differently. Bruce Ware finds God's love for humanity evident in the generosity of God letting humans serve God. Ware explains why humanity's role to serve God is evidence of God's generous love:

First, as the *sovereign Ruler* over all, he calls us to serve on the side that wins, with orders and commands that advance kingdom purposes and that also result in our greater well-being. In other words, it's a win-win-win situation: we're called onto the winning team, commanded to do a winning work in kingdom advance, performing a winning service for our own well-being, both now and for the age to come. Second, since the God who calls us to serve is himself the fully *self-sufficient Giver*, everything needed for the completion of our work—yes, everything! —is provided by him. His empowerment for our service means that a calling and commandment that otherwise would have been impossible for us to do is now not only possible but cannot, in the end, fail. How gracious and kind and caring, and yes, generous of God to call us into this glorious service.<sup>120</sup>

God shows God's love by including humanity in a work that God could do Godself. God not only includes humanity in the carrying out of God's plan, but also gives them the tools to succeed. God allows them to provide service that is non-essential so that they may have the opportunity to serve God.

Frame distinguishes between two primary categories of God's love. The greatest aspect of God's love is self-love.<sup>121</sup> This love predates everything else, and is the standard of God's love. The other category is love directed outside Godself. God loves the world, but it is fundamentally different from the way God loves Godself. Frame says, "God does not need the world in order to love. He is not relative to the world. Thus, his love is fully sovereign. *He loves us as the Lord.*"<sup>122</sup> To be clear, of the two categories of love, Frame recognizes the former as the love defined in Scripture through descriptions of the love within the Trinity.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 196.

<sup>121</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 416-417.

<sup>122</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 417. (emphasis added)

<sup>123</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 417.

More than loving humanity as their Lord, God loves humanity in such a way that God influences how humanity loves. God's love is the ultimate example of love. Frame says, "God's love is also the *authoritative norm* for our behavior, for we are to image God's very redemptive love in Christ. And it is his love that leads him to be *present* with us."<sup>124</sup> God's grace is irresistible. It is God's grace that allows humanity to respond to God's love. It is God's love that changes the heart of the individual and brings her into relation with God. God loves humanity in a way that intercepts one's will and conforms it to God's own.

*What kind of relationship does God have with God's creation?*

The Open Theist idea of God in relationship with humankind is centered entirely on God's love for humankind. It was out of love that God created. It was out of love that God established a connection with humanity. It is out of love that God chose to co-author history with humanity. The relationship between God and humanity is a give-and-take relationship. God interacts with humanity this way without truly having a need of any of it. The divine-human relationship is established as a collaborative relationship by God's love.<sup>125</sup>

It is by God's love that God exercises God's relentless pursuit of God's people. The Old Testament consistently shows God pursuing a relationship with Israel even when they repeatedly lose sight of God.<sup>126</sup> The covenant that God established with them was not flippant, and their state of chosenness was a product of God's love for them.

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<sup>124</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 424.

<sup>125</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 40.

<sup>126</sup> This is a theme found all throughout the Old Testament; specifically (but by no means exhaustively) in Exodus 32, Numbers 14, and the minor Prophets.

As previously mentioned, God enters into the realm of risk in relationship with humanity. As a result of this, God experiences suffering because of, with, and for, humanity.<sup>127</sup> In partnering with humanity, God accepts the potential that humans will choose to do things other than what God would have them to do. This happens again and again in the Old Testament. In choosing against God (through sin), humanity upsets God. When humanity cries out in oppression and desolation, God hears their cries and suffers *with* them. God suffers *for* humanity in adhering to the relationship God has with humanity. Pinnock describes God as a husband who suffers as a result of not fully controlling his bride, yet holds to the commitment of marriage.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, God suffered *for* humanity in the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>129</sup> God suffered in this profound way for the sake of God's relationship with humanity. God suffers because God's relationship to humanity is most important to God.

Evangelical Calvinists approach the divine-human relationship differently. God is Lord over creation and relates to humanity as such. Frame notes that in one's conversion experience, God invades one's personal will in order to have one choose to follow God.<sup>130</sup> God employs God's absolute sovereignty to guide humanity on an individual basis to bring about what God wills. God shows God's love for humanity by including them in the story of history *at all*, and by allowing them to have the honor of being used by God

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<sup>127</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 56.

<sup>128</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 57.

<sup>129</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 58.

<sup>130</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 424.

to glorify God. In love, God disrupts nature and history to accomplish God's goals in God's people.<sup>131</sup>

Ware sums up God's relationship with humanity thusly:

God rules *over* creation with sovereign authority and exhaustive, meticulous governance, regulating the affairs of men by granting them a freedom of inclination by which God's sovereign control and their genuine freedom are rendered fully compatible. And God rules *through* creation, controlling both good and evil, but in asymmetrical ways, often using his compatibilist middle knowledge to steer the course of history, yet never violating the integrity of the free choices of his moral creatures by which they choose and act according to their strongest inclinations.<sup>132</sup>

Ware's understanding of God's compatibilist middle knowledge was discussed in the previous chapter, but here it represents a driving point in Ware's understanding of how God interacts with humanity. God sovereignly guides the course of history. Human freedom is, in essence, an aspect of the human makeup—doing what one most wants to do in any given situation. God influences the conditions of one's life in such a way that one will always choose what God has determined is best. God is the sovereign Lord over the will of humanity.

Despite God's sovereign Lordship over humanity, Ware *does* affirm that humanity has an affect on God. While God is "ontologically immutable" and "ethically immutable," God is "relationally mutable."<sup>133</sup> This balance between mutability and immutability is relevant to the relationship God has with humanity because it accounts for God exercising certain emotions in relation with humanity that would otherwise be inexpressible. Ware notes, for instance:

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<sup>131</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 43.

<sup>132</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 131.

<sup>133</sup> To describe this system in depth is far beyond the scope of this paper. Ware's discussion of this concept is found in his, *God's Greater Glory*, 139-148.

God is eternally passionate for his glory, and now in the context of a fallen creation, when that glory is despised, eternal passionate jealousy gives rise in God to a new and contingent expression of white-hot anger against sin.<sup>134</sup>

While humanity offers nothing to God, God's creation of humanity provides God with the opportunity for certain emotional expressions.

*1 John 4:8*

1 John 4:8 is a typical verse that leads Open Theists to adhere so consistently to the notion that love is the essence of God. The concluding statement of the verse, "God is love," is read literally and definitively. While this direct statement only occurs in this verse, Open Theists view it as a succinct statement of a central theme found throughout Scripture.<sup>135</sup> This statement signifies that love is "central, not incidental to the nature of God."<sup>136</sup>

Frame agrees that the statement, "God is love," means what it says, but he contends that this does not have to be taken as a definition of the supreme nature and character of God. Frame cites other instances where similar statements are made, such as "God is Spirit," and "God is light."<sup>137</sup> Frame's primary rejoinder to this notion is his belief that God does not have one primary attribute—God has many attributes that are interconnected to one another and compose a multi-faceted divine essence.<sup>138</sup> Frame also uses the term "perspectival" to describe how God's various attributes relate to one

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<sup>134</sup> Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 151.

<sup>135</sup> Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," *The Openness of God*, 18-19.

<sup>136</sup> Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," *The Openness of God*, 18-19.

<sup>137</sup> Frame, *No Other God*, 50.

<sup>138</sup> Frame, *No Other God*, 51-52.



another—each has a significance all its own that is tempered by the other attributes.<sup>139</sup> Despite this variety in God, Frame contends that God's "Lordship" is mentioned most often and should be taken as more essential than God's love.<sup>140</sup>

Sanders posits that many Western thinkers have trouble placing the claim that "God is love" at the center of their theology of God's attributes because they have failed to place this discussion within the theological category of a Personal God carrying out a divine project.<sup>141</sup> Sanders supposes that the notion of God being primarily loving is neglected in favor of focusing on God's less personal attributes (such as lordship, sovereignty, etc.).<sup>142</sup> Sanders blames the "Hellenization" of Christian theology as the culprit for this problem.<sup>143</sup> He traces the development of this "Hellenized" Christianity out of Greek Christians engaging their environment like this:

They saw a need to proclaim that the Father of Jesus was the universal God and not merely the ethnic God of the Jews. Hence, they sought to demonstrate that the Christian God was the author of all creation according to the idea of the universal God articulated by the philosophers. In seeking to accomplish these objectives the early fathers did not sell out to Hellenism, but they did, on certain key points, use it both to defend and to explain the Christian concept of God to their contemporaries.<sup>144</sup>

Sanders goes on to suggest that the resulting theological synthesis became the standard for interpreting Scripture and for evaluating Christian theology.<sup>145</sup> The synthesis that

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<sup>139</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 393.

<sup>140</sup> Frame, *No Other God*, 54.

<sup>141</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 175.

<sup>142</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 175.

<sup>143</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," *The Openness of God*, 59.

<sup>144</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," *The Openness of God*, 60.

<sup>145</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," *The Openness of God*, 60.

once served as a way for one to cross ideological borders eventually became a hindrance to acknowledging the character of the God revealed in Scripture.<sup>146</sup>

1 John 4:8 legitimately seems to make the same claim that the proponents of Open Theism have asserted. 1 John 4, as a whole, carries the theme of God *being* love. It seems appropriate to take the claim at face value. Beyond the direct context of 1 John, love is at the heart of Jesus' mission and teaching. To love one's neighbor is commanded in close tandem to loving God. Ware is correct to point out other "God is" statements in scripture, but they are fundamentally different from the claim that God is love. To say that God is light or that God is spirit is to make a claim about the state of God's being, but there is a different connotation found in these claims than in the notion that God is love. One would not maintain that God's "light" is God's fundamental characteristic, motivating God's actions in the same way that one would say that love is God's primary motivation. No text in Scripture asserts that "God is power and if you are not powerful, you do not know God." Likewise, one will not find the statement, "God is glory and if you are not glorious, you do not know God."

The thrust of 1 John 4 is blatant. If one is to assume that the author is reliable or that God in some way has held a manner of influence or support over the writing of the book, one should also be prepared to acknowledge that the passage might actually be making the claim that it appears to be making. Perhaps if the notion of God being love was not a theme found anywhere else in Scripture, then one might be apprehensive. But this is not the case. God's love is woven into the entirety of the biblical text. It is

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<sup>146</sup> There is much more to Sanders' observation, but unfortunately it is superfluous to the purposes of this paper. The entire work is located in: Sanders, "Historical Considerations," *The Openness of God*, 59-100.

fundamental to who God is, and one may understand all of God's other characteristics through the lens of God's love.

### **Summary**

In short, Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists agree upon very little (namely, the divinity of Christ), and they disagree about many things. Interestingly enough, if one polled a group of Open Theists and a group of Evangelical Calvinists for support of a list of key terms, the two groups would probably score similarly. Both Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists affirm that God is sovereign, loving, and omniscient. The debate is joined in their diverging understandings of what these words mean. In truth, both Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists hold extremely high views of Scripture. Their arguments are assembled accordingly. Their debate serves as a reminder that the meta-narrative of Scripture is not necessarily a "cut-and-dried" list of doctrines. An element of mystery still is involved in the pursuit of God, as difficult as that concept may be for some in the twenty-first century.

Now that the background of the theological clash between Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism has been examined, we shall turn our attention to the pastoral discussion.

#### IV. THE SHEPHERDS BRANDISH THEIR STAVES

Thus far, this paper has considered the discussion of Open Theism in a primarily academic theatre. But the focus eventually will shift into a more pastoral realm.

Theological concerns that endure will have great significance in pastoral circles. Open Theism is such a concern. Whether one advocates it or rejects it, Open Theism raises issues that are relevant to both how one may counsel another on a pastoral level and how one may cope with an issue on a personal level. One's understanding of who God is directly affects how one interacts with that God. One may consider, beyond counseling situations, the way one listens to or preaches sermons. There is a fundamental difference.

Pinnock, Sanders, Ware, and Frame will move to the background in this chapter. They will be replaced by two pastors—Gregory Boyd, an Open Theist, and John Piper, an Evangelical Calvinist. Boyd and Piper both bring strong pastoral concerns about Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism, respectively, to this discussion. For the most part, their respective personal theologies will follow the theologies outlined for each side in the previous chapters. But each has his own extra emphases with which he operates as a pastor-theologian. What follows is a review of the essential theological motivations behind Piper's and Boyd's pastoral approaches.

##### **Piper**

Piper's theology centers upon one basic idea: above all else, God is most passionate for God's own glory. Everything that God does is done in the pursuit of glorifying Godself. Piper is heavily influenced by the theology of Jonathan Edwards, and looks to him as mentor of sorts:

Alongside the Bible, Edwards became the compass of my theological studies. Not that he has anything like the authority of Scripture, but that he is a master of that Scripture, and a precious friend and teacher... One of my seminary professors suggested to us back in 1970 that we find one

great and godly teacher in the history of the church and make him a lifelong companion. That's what Edwards has become for me. It's hard to overestimate what he has meant to me theologically and personally in my vision of God and my love for Christ.<sup>147</sup>

Edwards' life and writing has been of great interest to Piper, and Piper has endeavored to make Edwards more available to new readers. Edwards left a multifaceted legacy in both pastoral and academic circles that is observable in most varieties of Calvinism. Edwards is a source of the glory-centered divine motivation of Evangelical Calvinism.

### *Christian Hedonism*

In the opening chapter of *Desiring God*, his book advocating the notion of "Christian Hedonism,"<sup>148</sup> Piper states, "The ultimate ground of Christian Hedonism is the fact that God is uppermost in His own affections: *The chief end of God is to glorify God and enjoy Himself forever.*"<sup>149</sup> God's ultimate goal is to glorify God, and Christians should have this same goal—Piper says of the essence of Christian Hedonism, "the chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever."<sup>150</sup> Christians are to find their only true pleasure in God. There is no shame in throwing all of oneself at this end in the pursuit of pleasure—God does the same thing.

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<sup>147</sup> John Piper, "The Pastor as Theologian," n.p. [cited 7 February 2011]. Online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/the-pastor-as-theologian>.

<sup>148</sup> Piper defines "Christian Hedonism" in five points: 1) The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful. 2) We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead, we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction. 3) The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God. 4) The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love. 5) To the extent that we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: The pursuit of pleasure is a necessary part of all worship and virtue. That is: *The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.* John Piper, *Desiring God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2003), 28.

<sup>149</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 31.

<sup>150</sup> Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 80.

God is in control of all things and is working everything out to the benefit of God's pleasure—this includes things perceived as evil by humankind. Without delving too deeply into theodicy, a brief explanation of Piper's approach to answering that question is necessary. In Piper's view, which echoes in large part Jonathan Edwards', God *ordained* evil, as God *ordained* everything. Piper does not, however, affirm that God is the doer of evil—evil is done at the hands of Satan and sinners. God is the author of evil in the sense that God wills evil into being.<sup>151</sup> Piper says, "God does not commit sin in willing that there be sin. God has established a world in which sin will indeed necessarily come to pass by God's permission, but not by His 'positive agency.'"<sup>152</sup>

God wills evil to exist in favor of the consequences of evil actions that may perhaps be good.<sup>153</sup> Evil is a stepping-stone in this regard. Taking God's relation to evil further, Piper says:

When God looks at a painful or wicked event through His narrow lens, He sees the tragedy of the sin for what it is in itself, and He is angered and grieved... But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through His wide-angle lens, He sees the tragedy of the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out from it. He sees it in relation to all the connections and effects that form a pattern, or mosaic, stretching into eternity. This mosaic in all its parts—good and evil—brings Him delight.<sup>154</sup>

Evil is present in the world as a result of what God has willed. This fact should not serve to devalue the glory of God in the mind of the Christian, however, for "God is more glorious for having conceived and created and governed a world like this with all its

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<sup>151</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 347.

<sup>152</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 347.

<sup>153</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 348.

<sup>154</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 39.

evil."<sup>155</sup> Christians should rejoice in the glory of God that is shown through any circumstance they experience.

For instance, Piper speaks of cancer being a tool designed by God for God's glory; one should embrace the experience of cancer for the glory of God.<sup>156</sup> If a favorable series of events comes to pass in one's life, it is God's will and work. In the same way, if something horrible occurs in one's life, it is part of God's will and work, and one should glorify God all the more.

Suffering is a necessary element in the life of a follower of Christ. It is something used by both God and Satan. Satan exacts suffering on individuals for evil purposes, but God allows Satan to do so in the name of a greater purpose. The Christian should embrace suffering as Paul did and count it as something to uphold as a tool for the furthering of the Gospel.<sup>157</sup> God is, after all, the one who is truly in control of all things. Piper's notion of Christian Hedonism is a lifestyle of unabashed, limitless joy in what God does—that is, everything.

## **Boyd**

Gregory Boyd's theology centers on the idea that God is love. God is not only love, but also a good, wise and loving teacher.<sup>158</sup> In terms of the future, one may say in a broad sense that it is "open." Boyd describes it as "partly open and partly settled."<sup>159</sup> In

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<sup>155</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 350-351.

<sup>156</sup> Piper, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 207-208.

<sup>157</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 266.

<sup>158</sup> Gregory Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>159</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 32.

other words, there are events and outcomes that have been determined by God, but not *every* event. This is what most people, practically speaking, believe every time they make a decision. Boyd's view of the future is driven by the idea that it takes a much more powerful being to steer a universe of free agents than it does to steer a universe of pre-programmed automatons, and to say that God has established a universe where everything is pre-determined would undermine the sovereignty of God.<sup>160</sup> In speaking of God's foreknowledge, Boyd makes a distinction between the known and unknown; specifically addressing God's seeming prediction of the future captivity of Israel:

Since freedom is always restricted in certain ways, there's no reason to assume that God would have to control or foreknow *all* the future decisions people would make in order to prophesy that the Jews would be in captivity for a particular period of time. This is simply a matter of the Lord defining the parameters within which human freedom will occur.<sup>161</sup>

Boyd spends significant effort outlining what is and is not foreknown by God, but a thorough exploration of this idea is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, although humans have a free will, God has a will of God's own and is able to bring those things about without literally forcing humans to do anything. God limits options and invades history at times, but the story of history is not a pre-determined thing. Furthermore, there are some instances in which God has pre-determined a given event to occur, but the specific people involved are not set.<sup>162</sup>

God's interaction with free agents sometimes leads God to regretting making certain decisions. Boyd specifically cites pre-flood humanity and the kingship of Saul as

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<sup>160</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 31.

<sup>161</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 34.

<sup>162</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 44.



two Old Testament instances where God thoroughly regrets certain past decisions.<sup>163</sup>

This regret is not born out of a lack of wisdom, but rather interaction with unsettled variables (e.g. free will). Not only does God regret certain decisions, but God also has changes of mind, frustrations, and unfulfilled assumptions (Gen 6:6; Gen. 22:12; Is. 5:4-7; Jon. 3:10).<sup>164</sup> Despite what may be a serious barrier to a human free agent, God is legitimately able to allow for free will among humans and still steer the universe toward God's determined ends. This is the sovereignty of God at work. Boyd speaks further of God's sovereignty:

He is *so* confident in his power and wisdom that he is willing to grant an appropriate degree of freedom to humans (and angels) to determine their own futures. In my view, every other understanding of divine providence to some extent diminishes the sovereignty and glory of God. It brings God's wisdom and power down to the level of finite human thinking. *We* would need to control or possess a blueprint of all that is to occur ahead of time to steer world history effectively. But the true God is far wiser, far more powerful, and far more secure than we could ever imagine.<sup>165</sup>

### *Boyd's Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy*<sup>166</sup>

Boyd's understanding of the implications of Open Theism has led him to develop an in-depth warfare worldview—that is, there is constant warfare taking place in the world occurring between unseen forces of good and evil who act independently of God as free beings.<sup>167</sup> Of this worldview he says, "The warfare worldview is not only shared by

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<sup>163</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 55.

<sup>164</sup> These topics are dealt with in depth in Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 59-63.

<sup>165</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 68.

<sup>166</sup> An exhaustive representation of this in-depth theodicy is beyond the scope of the present endeavor, but further reading may be found in Boyd's *God At War* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); and *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

<sup>167</sup> Boyd includes a set of assumptions that are necessary in order for one to accept this worldview as valid: (1) One must understand the radical nature of the evil that is present in the world. (2) One must be willing to think about the power of God, the reality of evil, and the influence of Satan in some rather untraditional ways. (3) One must have an understanding of Satan, angels, and demons that not only

most biblical authors but is central to the whole New Testament.<sup>168</sup> Boyd observes the presence of evil principalities and forces in Scripture and the absence of focus on these forces in most practical theologies. He sees the absence of a warfare worldview as damaging to one's understanding of God in light of the problem of evil:

In a nutshell, the way in which classical-philosophical Christian theists have approached the problem of evil has generally been to frame evil as a problem of God's providence and thus of God's character. Assuming (rightly) that God is perfectly loving and good, and assuming (wrongly, I hold) that divine omnipotence entails meticulous control, the problem of evil has been formulated within the classical-philosophical theistic tradition as the problem of locating a loving and good purpose behind evil events. This...represents an impossible task, and hence the problem of evil becomes simply unsolvable within this framework.<sup>169</sup>

In Boyd's warfare worldview, good and evil are literal opposing forces that are consistently at war with one another. God is not in some way controlling the forces of evil and leaving the illusion of a struggle. God is not meticulously controlling the cosmos at all; God is working with and against other forces. That being said, no force is as powerful as God is—other forces are merely able to have a legitimate degree of influence within the cosmos.<sup>170</sup> Boyd has an interesting observation of the presence of evil:

If the world is indeed caught up in the middle of a real war between good and evil forces, evil is to be expected—including evil that serves no higher end. For in any state of war, gratuitous evil is normative. Only when it is assumed that the world is meticulously controlled by an all-loving God does each particular evil event need a higher, all-loving explanation. For only then is evil not expected, hence only then is it intellectually problematic at a concrete level.<sup>171</sup>

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includes their existence, but also acknowledges that they are autonomous beings with free wills. *God at War* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 32.

<sup>168</sup> Boyd, *God at War*, 18.

<sup>169</sup> Boyd, *God at War*, 20.

<sup>170</sup> Boyd, *God at War*, 20.

<sup>171</sup> Boyd, *God at War*, 20-21.

The problem of evil, then, is not a matter of understanding why God is doing these perceived evil acts or that God is willing evils to occur, but rather understanding why God established a system where evil *could* occur at the hands of free agents.<sup>172</sup> The mystery of finding good in horrible things is not an issue in this worldview. The answer is simple: there is no good in an evil act—evil acts are acts of evil! Understanding this simple truth allows one to stop spending time talking *about* evil and start spending time fighting *against* evil.<sup>173</sup>

### **Pastoral Methods**

One may see without much examination how the ideas of Open Theism would upset John Piper as a pastor within Evangelical Calvinism. Piper believes that Open Theism is both a dishonor to Christ and pastorally damaging.<sup>174</sup> Despite this accusation against Open Theism, Greg Boyd has a functioning pastoral method, just as Piper does. Having introduced Piper and Boyd, we now turn to their differing approaches to pastoral care and counseling.

#### *Piper's Pastoral Approach*

Piper's pastoral ethic relies heavily on God's sovereignty because God's sovereignty is the thing that gives God credence and trustworthiness. God is sovereign in all things, and nothing happens that God has not specifically ordained. God never "fumbles the ball," so to speak. One may take comfort in knowing that even if things seem like they are bad, it is all part of God's plan to teach a lesson or allow an individual

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<sup>172</sup> Boyd, *God at War*, 21.

<sup>173</sup> Boyd, *God at War*, 22.

<sup>174</sup> Piper, *Beyond the Bounds*, 9.

to grow. Nothing happens unnecessarily and nothing is in rebellion against the plans of God. This is the comfort that one has in God. God is to be praised because God is glorious and wants everyone to acknowledge that God is glorious—each passing moment is another example of the glory of God, no matter the content of the moment. Christians are part of the story that God is telling. The end of that story is glorious, and it is the end that makes valuable the page on which one finds oneself.

Piper served as a general editor for a book titled *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*. In an appendix to this book (an interview between Piper and a colleague of his, Justin Taylor) Justin Taylor asked Piper how he counsels suffering people. His answer consists of several stages of counseling. The first step, beyond the standard period of offering company and an ear, is to draw the attention of the one suffering to Psalm 40, where the Psalter has the repeated question of "How long, O Lord." Piper uses this text to point out that it is not a rare thing for a Christian to feel alienated from God in times of grief. He encourages the one suffering that, despite the fact that she may feel that God has abandoned her, God is still around. He points to Genesis 37-46 and the story of Joseph going through thirteen terrible roller-coaster years in slavery following the action of his brothers, only to end up in a better place than he ever could have dreamed. For Piper, this is a testament to the intricate plans of God—even when God seemed to have abandoned Joseph, God was working out God's plan for him. Piper's ultimate aim is to restore trust in the sovereignty of God and the power of the cross of Christ.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Piper, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 226-228.

*Boyd's Pastoral Approach*

Boyd's ministerial concerns are just as strong as Piper's. One pastoral concern of Boyd involves the way Christians think about God:

When asked what we think about God, we may recite all the orthodox attributes—love, omniscience, omnipotence—while entertaining a mental picture of God that is unloving and severely limited. Yet our actual picture of God, not our theoretical knowledge about God, most influences how we feel about him. It's impossible to enjoy a genuinely passionate and loving relationship with God when our mental picture of him doesn't inspire passionate love.<sup>176</sup>

Boyd recognizes that many people carry a quite impersonal view of a quite personal God. Boyd's concern results in part from a desire that people might recognize God as having the kind of character that God has, but it results primarily from a concern for the way that individuals cope with evil theologically. Boyd often cites stories of people in his congregation who have lost children or been harmed emotionally because of a situation they thought was ordained by God.

In counseling an individual, Boyd does not deny that God is a deity who teaches lessons to humans. However, God is a good, wise, and loving teacher. One can trust that God's pedagogy will reflect God's character. When evil happens in one's life, God should not receive the blame. One should not assume that any difficult experience is part of a mysterious plan to accomplish something greater. The fact of the matter is that a much more complex state of affairs is playing out in the cosmos than humans are able to understand. This complex state of affairs is a product of conflict between good and evil principalities in an unseen war in which humanity is thoroughly involved. So one might ask: Where is God while the cosmos is in the midst of this war? Boyd would answer with the assertion that God is actively involved in the war *with* God's creation, fighting to redeem it.

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<sup>176</sup> Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 21.

*What About Job?*

Piper and Boyd interpret the narrative of Job in very different ways, and their interpretations of Job have great significance in their approaches to providing pastoral care to those who are hurting. Piper interprets Job as an account of one relying fully on the sovereign God through whatever calamity one experiences—after all, every event is part of God's perfect plan to bring God glory. Boyd, on the other hand views Job as a narrative depicting two very different, yet very similarly deficient, ways of coping with evil. The most crucial detail to note when examining their differing interpretations is whether or not the reader should trust the claims made by Job throughout the book.

Piper insists that the reader *must* take what Job says as the truth. Piper's support for this idea is taken from Job 2:10, "...In all this Job did not sin with his lips." The text says simply that Job did not sin with his lips. For Piper, this means that Job spoke nothing but the truth for the duration of his calamity. As a result of this assumption, Piper's interpretation takes every claim made by Job to be correct and theologically authoritative. God gives and God takes away, but the afflicted should praise God all the more. God does what God pleases, and who can question otherwise? These ideas fit nicely with Piper's understanding of God's nature, and it is not surprising that Piper interprets Job in this way. Job provides a model for the way one should cope with suffering in faithful submission—trusting that God has a greater plan that is merely invisible at the present moment.

In contrast, Boyd speaks of the book of Job like this: "The central point of the book of Job is to teach us that the mystery of evil is a mystery of a war-torn and

unfathomably complex creation, not the mystery of God's all-controlling will."<sup>177</sup> There are essentially two arguments that emerge in the narrative as ways to explain the nature of what has happened to Job. Job is of the mind that God does whatever God pleases, and what happens to mere humans makes no difference—Job will still worship God even if God is directly tearing him down. Job's friends insist to him that he has done something wrong and is being punished; their theology may be identified as Deuteronomist theology.<sup>178</sup> They encourage him to find what he did to anger God and repent of it.

Boyd points out the flaws in both sides of this argument.<sup>179</sup> Job makes multiple blatantly false claims about God, such as God laughing at the cries of the oppressed and covering the eyes of judges to further injustice (9:23-24). He contends that God continually is mauling him and giving him no comfort (10:16, 20). Job's friends seem to create as much distance, rhetorically speaking, between themselves and Job. It becomes an issue of Job unknowingly offending God. If Job would discover what he had done wrong, God would certainly forgive him. The motivation to give this advice seems clear: Job's friends are comforting themselves—they are telling themselves that the horrible sufferings of Job could never come upon them.

Boyd's concern really comes from God's reaction near the end of the book. God does not seem pleased with the initial interpretation of the situation from either party. However, God's response is not an endeavor to systematically debunk each side. God begins to speak of the nature of the cosmos and cites a multitude of things that Job and

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<sup>177</sup> Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 85.

<sup>178</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 45.

<sup>179</sup> Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 87-94.

his friends do not understand. This is often interpreted as a show of power on God's part—something of an "I can do anything I want, and you do not matter," statement. Boyd rightly interprets this as a much more basic representation of humanity's lack of understanding in regard to the nature of all that is—that is to say, "There are plenty of things that you do not understand about the cosmos; this is just one of them." Boyd speaks of the danger of interpreting God's speech in the former way:

When we compromise what we *do* know (God revealed in Jesus Christ) because we forget what we *don't* know (the complex creation)—when we make the mystery of evil a mystery about God rather than creation—we tarnish God's character and indict victims of the war.<sup>180</sup>

Certainly God does not seem pleased with Job's response until *after* Job admits, "I have uttered what I have not understood," (42:3). This is the stance of humility that God deems laudable. This is a stark contrast to God's initial assessment of Job as "one who speaks without knowledge" (38:2). It clearly upsets God when God's creatures speak incorrectly about God—it is better to admit ignorance. Furthermore, while God does highlight to Job and his friends a list of things that they cannot do or do not understand, God never actually takes credit for approving Job's hardships; God does not appeal to God's mysterious will as the cause of Job's calamities.

Job is a book that has often been used as an example of how to behave in the face of horrific adversity. It is certainly a book that deals with theodicy directly. Job takes a noble stance as he is broken more and more, but it is difficult to ignore God's disappointment with Job's analysis of the situation. Boyd is correct in assuming that by placing greater weight on what God says in the context of what Job has already said, one

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<sup>180</sup> Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 105.



may come to understand that God is asserting that humankind is ignorant of the most basic principles of the cosmos and cannot fathom why things are the way they are.<sup>181</sup>

### Summary

Piper and Boyd each have fundamentally different approaches to their understanding of the nature and character of God. This leaves them with radically different approaches to pastoral ministry. Piper counsels by assuring the individual that God is in control of what is happening, and the tragedy is ultimately going to glorify Godself. Everything that happens is purposed for the glorification of God, and one should rejoice in this. Boyd counsels by assuring the individual that God does indeed love her and is hurting with her. He emphasizes the fact that God is not directly mandating every event to occur and that evil is the product of abuses of free will on the part of humans, demons, and Satan. In spite of the present darkness, God has a plan to fix this broken creation.

Their pastoral methods are significantly different. In theory, the individuals that seek pastoral care and counseling from each of them would likely affirm that Boyd and Piper are both excellent pastors. The truth is that for many people who are hurting and looking for answers, an answer really is all they are seeking. They are not systematically assessing the theological assumptions and implications of the counsel they receive. Piper may view Boyd's theology as heretical and Boyd may view Piper's theology as misrepresenting the character of God. But neither can deny that *both* systems serve the purpose of comforting the broken. However, there is more to pastoral care and

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<sup>181</sup> For further reading on Job: Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 33-36; Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 206-226;

counseling than cleansing wounds; God *is* certain ways and *is not* other ways. The question now at hand is which ways are more nearly correct.

## V. THAT LOVE MAY ABOUND

Thus far, this paper has attempted to describe Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism, explore their primary areas of dissent, and investigate their differing pastoral ethics. Now this paper will enter the dialogue more deliberately. In the following pages, this paper will explore a more thorough critique of Evangelical Calvinism and Open Theism, as well as their respective pastoral ethics in light of their debated positions.<sup>182</sup>

### *Love and Free Will*

There is a serious problem with Evangelical Calvinism. If one is to somehow love the God who is love, the one must have freedom of choice. This idea is not new, and is not without debate. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to understand that genuine love can never be forced: it must be chosen. That is not to say that humanity could never have a relationship with God that was involuntary—such a relationship is fully possible. Yet it does not qualify as a love relationship in the God-designed reality that humankind is currently experiencing.<sup>183</sup> Ultimately, this is a much deeper well than there is presently time to explore. This paper assumes that love requires some manner of mutual choice to be authentic.

The Open Theists are correct in their endeavor to emphasize God's essence of love. Love is a strong theme throughout the whole of Scripture. A brief survey of the Gospels and the story of Israel throughout the Old Testament provides evidence that love is ever present at the core of the biblical narrative. If Jesus *is* God and is *also* man, one

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<sup>182</sup> It is virtually impossible to meticulously cover every aspect of the pertinent material within the confines of this paper. That being said, what follows may serve as an introductory framework to be elaborated on at a later date. The task of refining an entire theology is more appropriate for a book and is far beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>183</sup> "Love Relationship" here refers to an interpersonal, give and take relationship. It requires choice to have any meaning at all.

may assume that Jesus is the avenue through which God may most directly communicate to humanity an understanding of God's character, on human terms. In other words, God and God's character are most sufficiently revealed to humans through the person of Christ. Jesus self-paraphrases his teachings into the two-point notion of *loving* God and *loving* people (Matt 22:37-40). Love seems to be an important idea in the teachings and character of Jesus.

It is difficult to conceive of love without the presence of choice. Let the reader consider a person with which he or she shares a love relationship—whether it is romantic or not, it makes no difference. There are essentially two sources of emotion involved in that relationship. There is the love of the lover, and the love of the beloved.<sup>184</sup> There is an aspect of the experience of love that emerges internally—a set of emotions that compel one to approach the beloved in a certain way, and to provide the beloved with a certain level of attention or affection. The lover knows of the love within herself, and the beloved is the recipient of this love. On the other hand, the beloved *also* experiences a set of love-related emotions and motivations. Consider for a moment, a situation where the beloved did not reciprocate the love of the lover. The love relationship would be incomplete. If the lover could somehow hijack the beloved's realm of consciousness and project the missing love, would the love relationship be any more complete? Surely not! Love is not about the formula; it is about the connection.

Love, particularly between God and humanity, exists by way of legitimate free will. God chose to allow humans to have this ability at the sacrifice of a portion of God's own meticulous control; this was done that love may abound. If mere humans can

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<sup>184</sup> Please note: The roles of lover and beloved are completely subjective.

acknowledge the difference between a chosen love and a programmed "love," how much more does God know and appreciate this difference?

### ***Glory and Humility***

The issue of the integrity of love aside, there are other issues at hand. To suppose that everything that has ever happened has been specifically ordained by God with the express purpose of glorifying Godself meets great trouble in the character of Christ.<sup>185</sup> Is one to assume that the same God that was willingly made *nothing* and put into the body of a human to live a life of rejection that ended in disgrace has a need to hoard glory? This seems to be the necessary implication of Evangelical Calvinism's God who is working to glorify Godself. It is the need to glorify the Glorified. God is the beginning and the end; God sets the bar for the rest of existence. God is already glorious! On the ontological level, God was no less glorious before Christ died on the cross! To speak of a God who enters humbly into the human reality through Christ to bring a message of love and hope, and to say that the primary intention behind this action was to usher in higher praise of Godself is difficult to accept because of its inherent self-contradiction.

The way of existence that Jesus taught was centered in a concern for others. Obviously God is not an ontological peer of humanity, but one would think if God did what God did in Christ to usher in higher praise from humans, then Jesus would have focused less on the importance of loving one another and more on the importance of recognizing the gap between God and man.<sup>186</sup> If God sent Christ to die so that God could

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<sup>185</sup> Please Note: The author does not intend to suggest that God is not glorious; that the universe does not glorify God; or that God is not deserving of glory, honor, and praise. The author is rather critiquing the idea that the *intent* of God in all things has always been to make Godself appear to be more glorious.

<sup>186</sup> Speaking of the gap between God and man, Jesus seems to have come to Earth in large part to bridge it. Perhaps that is why he spoke more of love.

glorify Godself—not to redeem God's broken creation—is the death of Christ as glorious? The sacrifice of Christ certainly brings God glory—it is a glorious thing! The issue that emerges is a matter of intent versus outcome. We know the outcome (God is glorified). The question is now: was self-glorification God's primary purpose (ultimately a question one must ask without any discernable way to check one's answer)? Is God's greatest concern really for Godself, above all else? The level of self-concern on God's part purported by Evangelical Calvinists is comparable to the level of self-concern one regularly finds in a self-absorbed teenager—not in the God of all creation!

One may say that God's glory is the greatest thing in the universe, and therefore God is simply adding to the greatest thing in the universe. There is an issue with this; namely, that the message of Christ is not about magnifying the great—it is about finding the greatest among the least. The human concept of greatness as a trait of boldness and grandeur is of little consequence here.<sup>187</sup>

All notions of greatness aside, consider glory: what is glorious about seeking out glory? Is there anything within the human mind that compels one to praise the ones who are seeking praise? Perhaps this inclination is present subconsciously, but one may easily understand there is little motivation among humankind to praise one who is overtly seeking praise. It seems as though the ones who are most worthy of praise are the most humble. This is not merely an observation of humanity, but also of the life of Christ. Jesus was the ultimate example of humility, yet he was unquestionably worthy of glory,

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<sup>187</sup> One may say, "If our definition of great is insufficient, how can our definition of love be sufficient?" Well, while the human understanding of love is certainly not up to par with the reality of divine love, Jesus speaks of love in such a way that it becomes apparent that divine love is built on the same foundational principles as human love. On the other hand, Jesus recognizes what humans consider least as great.

honor, and praise. Paul exalts Jesus as this example of humility in Philippians 2. On the one hand, Jesus serves as an example after whom Christians should pattern their lives after. On the other hand, Jesus is specifically exalted for his humility in light of his divinity. Even in understanding what it meant to be God, Jesus chose to be made into nothing.

Looking at Philippians 2:6-11, one also sees a good example of the issue of "intent versus outcome" that was previously discussed. Philippians 2:6-8 portrays Jesus humbly assuming the form of man and entering into wretched death, while verses 9-11 show the end result of Christ's glorification. One may assume that the attitude of Jesus was indeed humble, and not set on glory, for two reasons: (1) While encouraging the Church at Philippi to embrace humility with one another, Paul is encouraging believers to pattern their thinking ( $\phi\rho\nu\epsilon\omega$ ) after Christ's thinking; and (2) Paul points out that Jesus did not seek to exploit equality with God in v. 6—Jesus was fully aware of the splendor of the divine, but chose to take the dirty road.

Humility is clearly an important trait for Christians, and it was clearly a central trait of Christ. If Christ is the revelation of God to man, how could one assume that humility does not have weight in the divine realm? Christ exalted that which seemed least. Why would one assume that this message had nothing to do with the ways of God? It is not a bad thing to acknowledge that God is not primarily concerned with God's own glory. In acknowledging that God is concerned more about love than God's own glory, one opens the door to greater praise of God in a way that is more pleasing to God!

***Sovereignty and Power***

The previous chapters noted that Evangelical Calvinism considers Open Theism to be a theology that significantly deprives God of power. Bruce Ware's book, *Their God is Too Small*, makes this charge quite apparent. The accusation against Open Theism is based on the grounds of denying God a great deal of control, and thereby weakening God's wisdom and reliability. This particular issue has great weight on a personal level for most Christians. What is at stake in this issue for Evangelical Calvinists is the backbone of their pastoral ethic. Either God is in *complete* control, and thus whatever events might befall one's own life are understood somehow to be a piece of the perfectly designed plan of God, or God is not in control and life circumstances must find explanation somewhere else. What hope is there if God is not controlling every detail? For the Open Theists, this issue represents an equally weighty portion of their pastoral ethic. Either freedom is a *reality* and the divine-human relationship is real, or freedom is an *illusion* and Christians have been coerced into believing in a love that is not love—not to mention the fact that the same God who loves humanity is bringing about evil to somehow draw them closer. This tension is not easy to resolve.

First, one must consider the conflicting views of what a God-sized power looks like. Evangelical Calvinism's approach defines this divine power in absolute terms—the power at God's disposal is boundless, and God actively does whatever God wants, in accordance with God's will. The approach of Open Theism asserts that God's power is boundless, but God has established a cosmos in which God restrains an element of that power in order for the divine-human relationship to develop as God has intended.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> There is a great deal of criticism that falls upon Open Theism in this regard with the claim that Open Theists care far too much about the role of humanity; that they are either anthropocentric or seeking



There are many implications of this fact. For one, God has *sovereignly* chosen to establish this state of affairs. Open Theists do not suggest that God is *unable* to meticulously control the cosmos, but rather that God is *able* to establish a system in which free will exists for other beings. Even with genuinely free beings participating in the plan, God is still able sovereignly to accomplish goals and carry out God's will. The question is, what type of will?

One may consider the Evangelical Calvinist view of God's sovereignty to entail God having a script that God wrote prior to creation and that the cosmos, under God's direct control, is currently acting out that script. Open Theists view God as having more of a to-do list—the will of God is a very real thing and God has very real goals for history, but the means of attaining those goals incorporate human freedom and are flexible.

This raises the question: *Does* Open Theism diminish the sovereignty of God? A closer examination reveals the exact opposite to be true. Open Theists assert that God is omnipotent, that God has created other beings with wills and power of their own, yet God is still able to accomplish God's plans. Is this not more powerful than the notion of a God

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absolute autonomy from God, or both. It must be noted, however, that this is not what Openness theologians are doing. This is made apparent in the following quote from Pinnock:

The open view of God invites believers to consider a new perspective on God in relation to the world. It asks us to imagine a response-able and self-sacrificing God of changeable faithfulness and vulnerable power. It invites us to see God as the power of love that creates personal agents able to freely love him. It is not a naked power. Love is God's essence and power only an attribute. His power, however great in physical terms, is an expression of love. And because love involves suffering, it is a power which, having loved to the end, takes up a towel and washes feet. God's power is even great enough to transform a wicked heart, which no tyranny, however complete, can accomplish. The open view of God is about celebrating the loving project that God has set in motion and entered into; it is not about human beings demanding autonomy from God (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, x).

Open Theism is indeed a *theology*. This is not about inflating the role of humanity, but rather emphasizing the project that God has begun and recognizing the place that God has given humanity in that framework.

who is sovereign over the minutia of the cosmos to such an extent that everything God previously has planned is coming to be and there is no alternative? This "control God" does not seem nearly as powerful. Given the ontological difference between God and humankind, that comparison is no different from someone building a train track and watching a train go around it for hours. Surely, God is greater than this.

Furthermore, there are clear instances in Scripture where God acknowledges that people are not following God's will (see, for example: Is. 30:1; Luke 7:30; 1 Tim 2:4<sup>189</sup>). A compelling biblical case for the presence of free will on the part of humankind alongside the will of God is presented in the prophets—specifically Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 18, the well-known "Potter and clay" passage, many people find the focus of the analogy in v. 6—"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." This verse is commonly a proof-text for supporting a meticulous view of God's sovereignty.

Taken out of context, this verse seems to support an understanding of the divine-human relationship that Job erroneously supported in the early portion of his narrative, but if one continues reading the Jeremiah passage, the LORD continues:

<sup>7</sup>At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. <sup>9</sup>And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, <sup>10</sup>but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. <sup>11</sup>Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. (Jeremiah 18:7-11)

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<sup>189</sup> This is a statement indicating that God wants all people to enter into salvation. This does not seem to be happening; therefore, it may serve as an example of free will conflicting with the will of God.

This is a remarkable passage. It is difficult to read Jeremiah's sermon without accepting the reality of free will in the divine-human relationship. The LORD is proclaiming a conditional judgment; it is a theoretical consequence. Free choice is an option—for better or worse. This is a measurable circumstance in which God not only is responding to decisions made out of free will, but also is clearly acknowledging that it is possible for humans to ignore God's voice in such a way that God will change God's mind about them.<sup>190</sup> Such conditions as Jeremiah describes are typical, not exceptional, among the prophets as they speak to the divine-human relationship.

### **Pastoral Reflections**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism have very different pastoral approaches. Boyd approaches pastoral ministry with an emphasis on the love of God, while Piper emphasizes God's sovereignty and glory. What do hurting individuals look for most when they seek pastoral counseling? Surely they are in search of answers of some kind, but they are often in search of meaning in the midst of their pain. The question of whether or not a given situation had any real meaning beyond being a random act of evil permeates the conversation. Within the models of Evangelical Calvinism and Open Theism, respectively, God is either directly causing what transpires or is working to redeem the fallen framework from which the event arose. Ministers must answer this dilemma of hurting persons.

For the sake of examination, consider a fictional example: Stephen has recently lost the only person in the world he truly cared about to a drunk driver. The driver struck his wife while she was walking down the sidewalk, and he is on the verge of losing his

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<sup>190</sup> There is an entirely different conversation that needs to take place in regard to v. 11. Unfortunately, that is not a topic that can be fleshed out within the purview of this paper.

faith and his will to live. He has approached his pastor in search of answers. What might his pastor tell him is true about the God of the Bible?

Piper's theology would lead his pastor to encourage Stephen to accept that God intentionally orchestrated the event, no matter how terrible it seems to have been, for God's mysterious purposes. This model would also offer that, though the death of Stephen's wife is tragic, the event somehow glorifies God. Piper's notion of Christian Hedonism would justify this pastoral approach. If one is a Christian Hedonist, she has no difficulty justifying *anything* that happens, for God has *chosen* to have that thing happen.<sup>191</sup> That is the meaning of pain. Evil and pain are parts of a larger end that God is pursuing. In this model, one may find hope in knowing that everything that happens has an intentional purpose, and every event plays a role in God's plan to glory Godself. There is comfort in knowing that God *is* in control. It may seem as though one's world is crumbling completely, but *God* is still in control. God's ways are not the ways of humankind, and the hand of God may be difficult to see; but one may be assured that there are *no* accidents—whatever happens is supposed to happen.

Boyd's theology would lead his pastor to encourage Stephen that God in no way either prompts or approves the drunk driver killing his wife. God is avidly opposed to evil and is in mourning along with Stephen. To say that the event is devoid of meaning would go too far; the question is, what kind of meaning is there? Stephen's situation has arisen from abuses of free will—on the part of both the drunk driver and some kind of unseen evil entity. Those free wills exist for the context of the existence of love. Evil is, in a sense, collateral damage in the existence of love. That is the meaning of pain. One

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<sup>191</sup> That is not to say that there is no room for grief in the Christian Hedonism model; rather, there is not room to question the worth of a tragic event.

may find hope in the fact that the God of Love is working to redeem God's creation that is currently in the midst of a war of the wills, and the day will come when the war has ended. But until that day, evil continues to affect us, and God continues to suffer with us in it.

Both sides face problems that they must seek to resolve. For Evangelical Calvinism, the problem is that God is ultimately the one who has ordained every act of evil, yet one is supposed to trust the fact that God loves humanity in some way. For Open Theism, the problem is that God seems either unable or unwilling to stop evil. If God is unable to stop evil, what hope is there? If God is unwilling to stop evil, does this God of love not care that Creation is being ravaged?

If one is to evaluate which model of pastoral counseling is, in essence, better, one must ask a very important question: Which model more accurately represents the character of the God revealed in Scripture? In asking whether Piper and Boyd accurately represent the character of God in their *pastoral* methods, one first must determine which *theology* better represents the God revealed in Scripture: Evangelical Calvinism, or Open Theism? Evangelical Calvinism suggests that God's primary motivation is the pursuit of God's will and glory. Open Theism suggests that God's primary motivation is the furtherance of God's very nature—love. This is not a simple choice to make. One could make a case for either of these theologies in Scripture—after all, Evangelical Calvinists and Open Theists make their cases from Scripture on a daily basis.

### *The Motivation*

When one turns to the gospel accounts of the life of Christ, the answer seems obvious. There is nothing negligible about God invading human history in the most

humble way, only to live a life that no human could live, with an ending that no human would choose. The Gospels comprise a small piece of the Bible as a whole, but they contain compelling evidence to develop an answer to our question. When one asks oneself what God's primary motivation is, Jesus Christ answers it. Christ died for love; this was a self-proclaimed act of ultimate love (John 15:13). God entered the confines of a human body—a material that God is supremely greater than—because God loved humankind enough to do something *that* unthinkable. God did not leave that fact open for debate.

The fact that *love* was the motivation is evident in the things that Jesus said and did. The oft-quoted John 3:16 is a testament to this.<sup>192</sup> Earlier, this paper addressed the idea of glory-seeking as God's primary motivation for the sacrifice of Christ, and concluded that this idea significantly lessens the greatness of this most glorious event. Once again, God *is* all the more worthy of praise for the sacrifice of Christ, but this is the result of God relentlessly living up to God's character—God does not have to *seek* glory to be glorious.

If Evangelical Calvinism is rooted so deeply in the notion that God is primarily motivated by the desire to further God's own glory, then quite possibly it is incompatible with the mission of Jesus. Consequently, the pastoral method put forth by John Piper would also suffer. Acknowledging that the glory-centered motivation of God is only one aspect of Evangelical Calvinism, our attention now will turn to examining the claims of Evangelical Calvinism and Open Theism in regard to the will and plan of God.

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<sup>192</sup> It can be tempting to dismiss John 3:16 *because* of its trite usage in the late twentieth century, but one must keep in mind that it is still Scripture and the message is still relevant.

*The Will and the Plan*

Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism both agree that God has a will and a plan, but they disagree on the level of detail of God's intentions. Evangelical Calvinism's divine script contrasts with Open Theism's divine to-do list. Approaching the comparison differently, three words that describe the Evangelical Calvinist view of God's will would be absolute (means), controlling (involvement), and unchanging (ends). Likewise, three words that describe the Openness view would be flexible (means), cooperative (involvement), and unchanging (ends). Evangelical Calvinism and Open Theism agree that the ends that God has in mind are set—God is working toward something specific in God's redemption of the cosmos. When searching for the superior representation of God, one finds the real question in examining what Evangelical Calvinism and Open Theism conclude about the means by which God achieves God's will. In other words, is there only one path that will lead history to God's desired end?<sup>193</sup>

In Jeremiah 18, the passage we reviewed previously, the prophet seems to provide a negative answer to this question. God seems fully prepared to change God's mind and adapt to the choices of humans. And there are other examples. When humanity first abused its free will, God cast them out of God's presence to protect them from greater evils (Gen 3).<sup>194</sup> When the free wills of both angels and men met abuse, God wiped the

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<sup>193</sup> Another question one might ask is: Which is worse: God being unable to adapt to changes in the plan, or the existence of those changes at all? Unfortunately, the author may not pursue that question at this time.

<sup>194</sup> Some may be concerned about acknowledging the Fall as a matter of choice, but it seems somewhat paradoxical to say that God pushed us when we fell. Perhaps the primary concern against this acknowledgement is for the fact that Jesus would not have been able to show the love of God in the way that he did if there were no sin. That statement is rather bold. In the reality that we currently find ourselves in, we can conceive of no greater sacrifice or sign of love, but that does not mean God would somehow be unable to express God's love in a sinless reality. We once again find ourselves going down a path that is beyond the scope of this paper, and this digression must come to an end.

slate clean and started over (Gen 6). When Moses would or could not speak, God raised up Aaron to speak in his stead (Ex 4). Departures from any particular path do not ultimately thwart God's will. That is the beauty of a God who is both powerful *and* creative.

Overall, the pastoral approach of Open Theism appears more true to the God of Scripture. The critics of Open Theism suggest that this theology supports an incompetent God. In truth, however, the Open Theist understanding of God suggests that God is *more* powerful and creative than the Evangelical Calvinist understanding. The Openness view identifies evil as a by-product of free will, free will as a by-product of love, and love as a by-product of the will of God.<sup>195</sup> God was wise enough to comprehend the potential consequences of establishing such a system, and God deemed the risks worth taking. In light of this, God devised a plan—one creative and powerful enough to redeem a cosmos of free agents that may or may not wish to follow it. God has a plan for history, including free-acting creatures, and one may be confident in the fact that God will bring that plan into reality.

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<sup>195</sup> I have provided the observant critic (and now, footnote-peruser) with a direct path to attributing the existence of evil to the will of God. The fact of the matter is that the problem of evil is just that—a *problem*. There is no answer to the debate given in Scripture. The problem of evil has confused and concerned thinking people for centuries, and it will continue to confuse and concern for centuries to follow. For the sake of this paper, one may assume that evil exists and God does not like it. As for how that plays out in the end, God only knows.



## VI. IN CONCLUSION

Open Theism and Evangelical Calvinism both have their own problems, and it is easier to be critical outside one's own ideology. Despite their differences, Open Theists and Evangelical Calvinists *do* agree on something—that God is telling a story. The conflict arises when they elaborate on what *kind* of story God is telling. Who could know for sure, but God? Regardless of what type of story it is, it is better for one to be a part of this story than for there to be no story.

One finds it difficult to speak confidently of the nature of God. The task is daunting and often unsatisfying because a truly absolute answer is seldom attainable.<sup>196</sup> There are essentially three tools to assist one in the quest for theological certainty: Scripture, logic, and the Holy Spirit. The first is trustworthy by nature, but muddled by language. The second is relatively subjective, but the only tool one may hope to control. The third is the only living tool; the Holy Spirit is the only real hope one has when seeking theological certainty.

In writing this thesis, I have had to become better acquainted with all three of these tools, only to realize that I have just begun to be acquainted with them. I have passed through this process at times with more doubt than certainty. In truth, I cannot reconcile the problem of evil, and at this time, I cannot fully articulate the view of God's knowledge that I think accurately represents the character the God revealed in Scripture.

I can say, however, that Open Theism certainly accounts for a more powerful God than that of Evangelical Calvinism. And, as I concluded in the last chapter, Open Theism seems to be more true to God's character in terms of God's perpetuation of love rather

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<sup>196</sup> There is a great irony in acknowledging the difficulty of speaking absolutely about the most absolute Being in the cosmos.

than God's seeking of glory. Open Theism also seems to have greater Scriptural support of its view of God's will and plans. It does not seem possible to argue from Scripture that God has *no* will and *no* plan. Thankfully, neither Open Theism nor Evangelical Calvinism have purported this. In regards to Evangelical Calvinism, there are certainly passages where God seems to have a singular plan, meticulously constructed before God created the cosmos. The problem is, there are other passages that seem to leave the future open to some degree. Surely by now, the reader has realized that *Open* Theism is something of a misnomer. God is still fully *capable* of invading history, and God will accomplish God's ultimate goals regardless of anything else. Because of this, Open Theism can still stand in light of passages that seem to depict a fixed purpose of God. Evangelical Calvinism *cannot* remain standing in light of a passage that allows for a change to the plan. That system has *limited* God in this way.

May we never become complacent in our theological journeys, and may we never be afraid to question where we have been. We long for certainty. We are taught to seek it out. We aim for certainty, but we are not promised certainty in this life. Let us break the habit of only searching for God in comfortable places. Let us seek wisdom and faith, in love, with the hope of drawing near to the One who *is* love.

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