

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#34—Theology Proper—Part XIII¹
Review and Summary of Open Theism

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If you have the book, you should finish reading Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. Also of great value is Reymond, pp. 343-381 and Piper, *et al Beyond the Bounds*.

In the last two decades a radically new theology has appeared, one that devotes most of its writing to the nature of God and his relationship to human beings. It also affects other areas of theology in significant ways. It is called Open Theism or Openness of God Theology². Many Christians have accepted this view and have been helped in this by the publications of major Christian publishing houses and by the lack of strong action by those in a position to refute the error and marginalize its proponents.

We have spent time on this error in our study of theology proper because it is a significant movement whose theology you should understand and be able to refute. This study—the last in theology proper—will review Open Theism and summarize the errors associated with it.

Key features of Open Theism

Here are the core doctrines of Open Theism.³ They are not necessarily held by everyone involved in the movement in the exact form stated here.

1. Human beings have free will to determine their future. A God who completely determines the future limits human freedom and therefore human meaningfulness. Our sin natures do not keep us from being able to choose the things of God. God does not “coerce” anyone into being saved or doing his will.
2. God does not know the future completely (he does not possess ‘exhaustive foreknowledge’). This is because 1) God has chosen to restrict himself so that he can allow human beings to make free choices or 2) since future events don’t exist yet, no one, not even God, can know them⁴. Our relationship with God is more meaningful and real when God does not know what we are going to do ahead of time.
3. God takes risks. Since God does not know the future, he depends on human beings to support his purposes and make decisions that help his plan. The open theist says that God could not have known that Adam and Eve would sin or that Jesus would need to be crucified. John Sanders says that “God takes risks in bringing about this particular type of world.”⁵
4. God learns about the future as it occurs.
5. Any difficulties in your life are the result of the free actions of human beings, not God’s. All evil is the result of the wrong use of free will. God is not responsible for your trials and does not control them.

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² The following are some of the publications that present this position: Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2000); Pinnock, Clark, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001); Pinnock, Clark H., Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Sanders, John, *The God who Risks* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

³ Some of these are drawn from “Basic Tenets of Open Theism,” by Matthew J. Slick, available at <http://www.carm.org/open/tenets.htm>. See also Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is Too Small*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 13-22.

⁴ It is important to note that these are not new formulations. See, for example, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (London: James Clark & Co., Ltd., 1960), 545, where he shows that the first idea has been held for some time by Arminians and the second dates at least to Faustus Socinus, 16th-century Italian theologian.

⁵ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 10.

6. God makes mistakes and regrets some of his decisions. Since God does not know the future, his acts and decisions may turn out to be counterproductive to his plan. He may then decide to adjust his tactics.
7. God may change his mind based on what he finds out that human beings do. He can be surprised, disappointed or angered by what people do.
8. God's supreme attribute is love. God is not controlling or manipulative. He is not a God of judgment. He desires to allow human beings to determine their futures and come to him for salvation.
9. Prayer is meaningless if the outcome is determined ahead of time.
10. Traditional theism is based more on philosophy than the Bible. The idea that God exercises meticulous control over human actions does not come from the Bible but from Hellenistic Greek philosophy, which saw God as detached and unmoved by human needs.

Quick summary of the key theological errors of Open Theism

In terms of its methodology Open Theism

1. Is based on a thoroughly Pelagian view of sin. Man has complete free will to choose good or evil, to choose for or against God. It is an extreme extension of contemporary Arminian theology.
2. Emphasizes biblical narrative over biblical teaching.
3. Uses Scripture selectively.
4. Does not address many key features that contradict its system.
5. Allows significant theological contradictions to stand together and leaves many areas of theology up in the air or erases them (e.g. election).

Compared with the views of historic Christianity, Open Theism, among other errors,

6. Presents a radically different view of God.
7. Reduces the power and greatness of God.
8. Denies the sovereignty of God in human affairs.
9. Completely eliminates the doctrine of election, either in the Calvinistic or Arminian sense, since God doesn't know who will exist.
10. Changes the meaning of faith and trust and calls into question our hope of heaven.
11. Changes the nature of sanctification and our role in it.
12. Presents a radically different picture of the plan of God, including the Cross (e.g. the Cross is an accident, there can be no imputation of sin, since God doesn't know who will exist ahead of time), the resurrection and Jesus' return.
13. Downgrades the inerrancy of Scripture.

Apparent problem passages cited by Open Theists

I want to look at two passages that are used by Open Theists to support their view that God changes in response to circumstances and human actions. There are many others that they misuse, but we do not have time in this series to treat them. The solutions I provide here will provide significant help in approaching other passages. The first passage is Jonah 3:

3 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Here it appears that God changed his mind in response to the repentance of the Ninevites. Is the Open Theist right concerning this passage? How can traditional theology explain it? First, we know from many other passages that sound biblical theology must include a decree that is fixed from before time. We have shown (see Study #33—Prayer and Divine Sovereignty) that there can be no conditional points in the decree of God (which, of course, cannot even exist in the theology of Open Theism). Therefore the plan of God was that the Ninevites repent (they could not have done so without God’s working in them to change their hearts!) and that no destruction come upon them at this time. Second, the threat of destruction after 40 days as uttered by Jonah in v. 4b was genuine, but God knew it would not come to pass because his decree did not include it. Was God being disingenuous? No. This is no different in principle from the offer of the Kingdom to Israel (see Study #33), which God knew would never be accepted.

Jeremiah 18:1-12 is a passage frequently appealed to by Open Theists to support their view that God changes his mind when conditions are met:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴ But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

¹¹ “Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ ¹² But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.’ “

There are two problem points in this passage. The first is v. 7, where God says he will relent and not bring disaster if humans repent. This is no different in principle from what we saw in Jonah 3: where there is repentance, it is brought by God, and there never is a possibility of judgment for those who repent.

The second problem point is v. 10, which says that when evil occurs God reconsiders giving blessings he “intended.” First, we should remember that in such cases God’s decree would include the failure of a nation to obey (with human beings being guilty for their sin). Second, since God’s decree would include his not blessing such a nation, we have to look for an answer other than God’s changing his mind. The decree doesn’t change. Third, God does not lie, so any announcement that he will bless someone that is followed by judgment instead of blessing cannot be a trick. The only possible answer here is that God’s “intending” has to be seen from the human viewpoint. God would have spoken in such a way that human beings hearing his

words would see his actions as a change. Here is Hugh Martin, speaking over 100 years ago on God's "repenting" in this passage in his commentary on Jonah⁶:

It needs no more to be vindicated than a thousand expressions in which God, putting on the person of a man, speaks to us as from the position, and as with the feelings of a man, in order to make His own mind and heart intelligible to us. We are ever to guard against assigning human imperfection to God. But we are equally to guard against assigning to Him such a character or nature as would render living, intelligible, friendly intercourse between Him and His people impossible. But impossible utterly, all such intercourse must be, if I may not speak to God in the same forms, and phrases, and feelings in which I would offer a request, or state my case to a fellowman, though of course with unreserved submission and unlimited adoration of the Almighty and Holy One of Israel. . . . And all the while, believing that His counsel is formed from everlasting—that His counsel shall stand, and He shall do all His pleasure—that He is of one mind, and none can turn Him—believing this, and adoring, I am not to concern myself about how this can consist with my weakness, which cannot rise beyond finite forms of expression, and desire, and address, and expectation. . . .

For it lies at the foundation of all intercourse between God and man that God should Himself address us, and permit us to address Him, in expressions suited to our weak capacities and conceptions, rather than dictated by what were suitable to His infinite glory and searchless being. Does it then follow that in thus condescending unto the weakness of our nature, He does injustice to His own, —or misrepresents it? That does not follow. God can speak of Himself after the manner of man, and what He thus speaks may yet be worthy of God.

Put simply, what we have here is an anthropomorphism, a feature of the biblical text that Open Theists often fail to understand. It is interesting that a Google search on this passage and problem yields no hits that approach the situation as Martin does. The assumption over and over is that God changed his mind. This says a great deal about the lack of biblical and theological understanding today.

Practical problems under Open Theism stemming from its theology⁷

1. The inerrancy of Scripture

Second Timothy 3:16 speaks of Scripture as breathed out from God (see Study #14, The Meaning of Inspiration). I take this to be a description of the source of Scripture. Similarly, 2Peter 1:21 says that prophetic writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit (see Study #15, The Process of Inspiration). This is a description of the process of the giving of Scripture. Open Theism's insistence that human beings have libertarian free will and that God never controls them is incompatible with these scriptures. While the Bible teaches about itself that it is inerrant, the best that Open Theism can do is produce writings that human beings pen with sincerity but in complete freedom. Not only is there no guarantee that prophecy predicts what God wants it to, none of scripture necessarily reflects the mind and intentions of God. Open Theists cannot have error-free Scripture or even Scripture that reliably gives God's will.⁸

⁶ Hugh Martin, *The Prophet Jonah* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 291.

⁷ Many of these observations are drawn from William C. Davis, "Why Open Theism is Flourishing Now," in John Piper, Justin Taylor and Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., *Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity: Beyond the Bounds* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books: 2003), 111-145.

⁸ See Paul Kjoss Helseth, "The Trustworthiness of God and the Foundation of Hope," in Piper *et al*, 275-307.

2. The plan of salvation⁹

Because God could not know what human beings would do during history, he could not know that there would be sin in the Garden. Assuming that he made a plan after that point to save people, he could not know who would be born, so there could be no doctrine of election. He could not know what people would do, so he could not reliably plan to provide for the remedy of the Cross. Prophecy could not be reliably fulfilled, nor, as we saw in the previous point, could it even be given reliably. God could not make covenants that he could have any expectation of being fulfilled. He could not save Old Testament saints based on looking forward to the Cross, since he could have no such knowledge. Concerning the Cross itself, since Jesus has a complete human nature with complete freedom within the God-Man, his obedience to the Father would be that of a “divinely engineered robot,” in Bruce Ware’s words. There could be no certainty that the resurrection, the basis of our hope and a prophesied event, would take place. To put it another way, even if God suspected that Jesus would be crucified, it would be another big step for God to manage the resurrection, especially in the way it was prophesied. Jesus could not be a real substitute for anyone, since God could not know who would exist. The same uncertainty would be true of all other prophetic events.

2. The hope of the believer in this life and the next

Under Open Theism there could be no guarantee of the fulfillment of Rom. 8:28-30*ff.* that God will not fail to bless those that he has chosen (which couldn’t happen anyway, because there is no such thing as election) by working all things together for good (he isn’t capable of doing that). He cannot reliably keep us until we are in his presence (Heb. 7:25). He cannot guarantee that we will reach heaven. I would ask, isn’t this the ultimate sad outcome of this sad theology and movement, that God can’t really save us, since he can’t make sure there is a Cross and he can’t make sure we get to heaven. In maintaining libertarian free will, the Open Theist can assure us nothing. For one person to reach heaven would be a mathematical impossibility, given the number of possible permutations of human actions in history. I can never know if God will be able to answer a request I bring to him in prayer. He might try to, but remember that he can be thwarted by the actions of human beings. Knowing this I might just give up praying. We can have no comfort that anything that happens to us is God’s will. Things that seem helpful and things that seem hurtful—both could be the result of the actions of human beings. We could never be certain that God could comfort us or meet our needs in trials. We are effectively on our own. Really following Open Theism could not bring peace, hope and the assurance that my life has meaning.

3. The glory of God

The strong insistence on—I would say exaltation of—libertarian free will and the accompanying diminishing of God’s power (and even the changing of his nature, as we have seen) lead to the glorification of human beings. The theology of Open Theism makes people feel good about themselves, to the loss of our holiness and the glory of God.

A straightforward reading of the Bible brings the believer confidence that because of the decree and providence of an omnipotent and omniscient God he has put his trust in a Savior who died in his place, who will not fail to bless him in this life and who will, keeping all his promises in his inerrant Word, most certainly bring him into his heavenly reward.

Reasons for the acceptance of this heretical theology

Open Theism has appeared on the scene at a time when the theological interest and understanding of the majority of people who would associate themselves with the name evangelical is undergoing significant

⁹ See Bruce A. Ware, “The Gospel of Christ,” in Piper *et al.*, 310-336.

decline. People are hungry for spiritual help because teaching in local churches and significant fellowship is so often weak or non-existent. Open theism fills a void and so for many people goes unexamined.

Open Theism has an intrinsic appeal to our sense of freedom, our desire to make ourselves more significant in the world and before God. When we are told that God needs our help to create history and fulfill his goals, our (old) natures respond positively: here is our chance for significance.

William Davis points out¹⁰ that para-church organizations have to a large degree supplanted the local church as the focus of interest and point of authority for most Christians. Coupled with the lack of strong theological and instructional leadership by local church authorities, a general disinterest in theology and tolerance of the Open Theism by local church leaders, this has resulted in an environment where open theism offers a practical Christianity that promises to meet felt spiritual needs. Davis says:

In the absence of clear guidance from shepherds set apart for the care of the flock, Christians today are increasingly left to draw their own conclusions about the claims of open theism.¹¹

In Study #24, An Introduction to Open Theism, I quoted John Piper in *Beyond the Bounds*¹²:

The stunning thing about open theism in American Christianity is how many leaders do not act as though it is a departure from historic Christianity and therefore a dishonor to Christ and pastorally damaging. Some have seen the departure clearly and said so. For example, Thomas Oden, a Methodist minister and the Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University, writes in *Christianity Today*, “The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds.” His warning to the church is sobering: “Keeping the boundaries of faith undefined is a demonic temptation that evangelicals within the mainline have learned all too well and have been burned by all too painfully”¹³ Oden’s indictment points toward the baleful heart of open theism and the broken heart of those who love the historic biblical vision of God.

There is a lesson here for Christians about following Scripture. This movement has grown in an environment where the local church is not significant for most Christians. The very place where God intends for the truth to be taught and defended (1 Tim. 3:15 is still in our Bibles) is failing in its responsibilities. Further, the New Testament teaches that the strength of the local church is to be individual believers who know the Bible, know theology and know how to apply truth to life. As I said in Study #24, the local church should be the place where theology is studied, developed and refined, as Christians in particular fellowships interact with others in such fellowships, all under the oversight of recognized elders. Sadly, there is a huge and powerful institution of “Christian scholars” that functions outside the bounds of local churches, and, barring a radical change brought by God, it will be a long time before this situation is any different. I also believe that the reason so much Christian activity is done outside the local church is because local churches have allowed themselves to become weak and ineffective. So the place where sound doctrine should be upheld and expounded has permitted others be the main carriers of this responsibility, with the result that error no longer has the checks God provided for in Scripture.

While many people do not realize this, Open Theism has a theology and it is systematic. If you don’t believe that, look at the orderly list of ten beliefs above under “Key Features.” I believe that the average person in a sound local church can understand systematic theology and interact with and evaluate critically what people

¹⁰ Davis, 127ff.

¹¹ Ibid, 137.

¹² John Piper, Justin Taylor and Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., *Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity: Beyond the Bounds* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books: 2003), 9.

¹³ Thomas C. Oden, “The Real Reformers Are Traditionalists,” *Christianity Today*, 42, no. 2 (9 February 1998): 45.

write today about theology. In many places in the New Testament we are commanded to teach sound doctrine, to understand it and to promote it. If we do not, we will as a group of believers and as individuals be subject to satanically induced error in what we believe and what we do. Our walk with God and our testimony before the world will be damaged. This movement contains a huge amount of false teaching. It is heretical. If we learn nothing else from studying it, we must learn that we need to know the Bible and theology well and be eager and able to stop error when it appears.

Study questions

1. What practical problems have you noted concerning Open Theism during our studies?
2. What have you learned about your own responsibilities toward God and his written Word?
3. Why does Open Theism have such an emphasis on libertarian free will?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.