

Open Theism and
the Undermining of
Biblical Christianity

BEYOND THE BOUNDS

EDITED BY

JOHN PIPER
JUSTIN TAYLOR
PAUL KJOSS HELSETH

CROSSWAY BOOKS
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GENETIC DEFECTS OR
ACCIDENTAL SIMILARITIES?
ORTHODOXY AND OPEN THEISM AND
THEIR CONNECTIONS TO WESTERN
PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS

Chad Owen Brand

Open theism has become front-page news in evangelical theological circles. Professors cannot teach any subject in the intellectual theological disciplines these days without paying some attention to what open theists are saying. And the discussion does not go very far before someone starts wondering where all of this came from. Did Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, John Sanders, and others get their ideas from the Bible? Or were they driven to their model by some set of philosophical pre-suppositions? Casual observers have noted similarities between open theism and process theology. Is this new view simply process thought dressed up in a more evangelical garb? And while we are at it, we might also field questions from those on the other side of the fence who wonder whether and to what degree traditionalism has been influenced by philosophical concerns. Were the Nicene Fathers simply recapitulating Platonism? Are their contemporary children propagating biblical theology or Hellenistic philosophy?

Questions about how theological systems are related to philosophical systems have been around for some time. They have surfaced again, though, in the controversy over open theism. It seems imperative, there-

fore, for us to take a long look at open theism and its philosophical connections, and to open again the same questions with regard to orthodoxy. And it will be necessary not only to ask whether there are similarities between these theological systems and various philosophical projects, but whether those similarities entail borrowing, dependence, and synthesis. The fact that there are occasional similarities between two schools of thought is neither here nor there. But if, for instance, a system of thought employs the same set of arguments to prove the same basic ideas for the same purposes as does another system, and if one can establish a historical connection between the two, then that might entail more than an accidental similarity. This essay will probe whether traditionalism or open theism are doing just that.

I. THE ACCUSATION AGAINST TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

Open theists have consistently made the claim that historic, traditional Christian orthodoxy, which they equate with classical theism, holds to views that arise more from philosophical commitments than from Scripture.¹ Specifically, they accuse the traditional position of leaning on classical Greek philosophy and of filtering Scripture through a Hellenistic grid.² Against this purported heritage, authors such as Pinnock, Sanders, and Boyd defend their own approach, which they see as constituting an alternative position both to traditionalism and to process theology, and as being thoroughly evangelical. They further claim

¹ This essay defines *classical theism* as that system of thought which, under the influence of or parallel to Aristotelian or Stoic thought, crystallizes such divine attributes as immutability and impassibility, and defines God in terms that do not allow for the possibility of his having a genuine relationship with the world (Bruce Demarest, "Process Trinitarianism," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979], 29). On the other hand, in this essay I will argue that "traditional Christian orthodoxy" (or *traditionalism*), which I am distinguishing from classical theism, has preferred to allow the Bible to speak to these issues and so to produce a theology which sees God as relational though still in some sense immutable (Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983], 30). There is no terminological consensus in the contemporary discussion; therefore, some scholars have used the term "classical theism" to designate what I am calling "traditionalism," and vice-versa.

² While open theists sometimes recognize that traditionalists have not all adopted the full classical theistic system, they still maintain that the modifications are not nearly thorough enough (Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001], 75).

that their position is driven not by prior philosophical commitments but by biblical exegesis.

Not a New Allegation

The claim against traditionalism is, of course, nothing new. In the nineteenth century various theologians in the liberal/revisionist tradition complained that orthodoxy constituted the victory of Athens over Jerusalem. Adolf von Harnack alleged that everything from Nicaea to Thomas Aquinas (and beyond in scholasticism) resulted from the Hellenization of theology.³ He saw what he perceived to be the “gradual disappearance” of the “Enthusiastic and Apocalyptic,” which were prominent in the New Testament, and their replacement by a synthesis of the “Greek spirit” with a newly revised “Jewish religion” that came to its final apex in Catholicism.⁴ Harnack claimed that the first real “fusing” of Platonism and Christianity was found in Origen, though there were “elements” of such in people such as Justin and Clement.⁵ Harnack was not alone in making such allegations,⁶ and representatives from schools of thought such as neo-orthodoxy and the biblical theology movement in the twentieth century have beaten the same drum.⁷

The Open Theist Critique

Open theists have added their “amen” to the analysis of Harnack and allege that most orthodox theologians Hellenized the great tradition for several reasons. One, traditionalists were driven to articulate orthodox theology in the face of various challenges from heretics in the early church, a challenge which caused them to seek ammunition outside the Hebrew heritage of the faith. Two, they faced the difficulty of defend-

³ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976), 1:43-59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51, 54. Though it took till the fourth century for this new tradition to become dominant, Harnack argues that it began as early as A.D. 95 with the work of Clement of Rome. He identifies the moralizing tendency of the apostolic fathers and the synergism of thinkers from Tertullian to Pelagius with this Jewish element. See on the apostolic fathers T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1959), 133-141.

⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma*, trans. Edwin Knox Mitchell (New York: Star King, 1957), 152-154.

⁶ See, for instance, Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 285-287.

⁷ Michael S. Horton, “Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method” (chapter 6 in this volume and *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 [2002]: 318).

ing respective traditions over against each other in the various scholastic movements in history, a difficulty which sent many theologians scurrying to Aristotelian, Ramist, and other alien forms of discourse. Three, they felt compelled to respond to the threat of unbelief, deism, and atheism in the face of the Enlightenment, and the resulting *apologia* became tinged with modern thought-forms.

Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow offer this general assessment of the problem with the traditional model of understanding God: “The difficulty with classical theism, so influenced by Hellenism, is that it makes God impassive and unable to relate.”⁸ Sanders contends that the bridge from Greek philosophy to Christian theology was Philo, since he attempted to harmonize the Old Testament with Greek thought.⁹ Both the patristic tradition and the scholastic tradition of Anselm and Thomas simply followed suit.¹⁰ Augustine’s interpretation of God so controlling the world that there are “no surprises” arises from his Hellenistic tendency to render God as an absolute principle rather than a person—contrary to the biblical portrait.¹¹ In the Bible the emphasis is on God’s “vulnerability and openness” not on his immutability and omnipotence.¹² The Greek tradition, then, has done the Christian heritage a great disservice.¹³

It is not only the Greek tradition that manipulated Christian thought, though. In a similar manner, theology in the medieval and Reformation West was bent by the impact of Latin legal traditions, “causing the image of God as judge to predominate in an unbiblical manner.”¹⁴ Though God is at the same time “parent” and judge, the first of those terms is the more appropriate when dealing with redemption, say the openness advocates, but Calvin and Anselm “have led us astray when they have interpreted

⁸ Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 50. They continue, “It removes God from the process of real involvement with the world and makes it hard to envisage real conversation with the three persons of the Trinity” (*ibid.*).

⁹ John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 69-71.

¹⁰ For an even more determined statement of this position, see Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 69-70.

¹¹ Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 81.

¹² Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 9-10.

¹³ It needs to be noted at the outset that neither open theists nor revisionists are usually very specific when they talk about the Greek influence. This point will be taken up later in this essay.

¹⁴ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 9; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 72.

salvation in heavily forensic and legal terms.”¹⁵ Likewise, Thomas, since he derived his conception of the divine attributes from reason rather than revelation, is guilty of the “Christianization of Greek” and the “Hellenization of Christian” thought.¹⁶

Open theists tend to see traditionalism as operating within an essentially monochromatic dimension in its theological formulation. For instance, in critiquing the traditional view of sin and forensic justification, Pinnock and Brow argue that for the traditionalists, “sin is defined primarily as disobedience to the rules.”¹⁷ In another place they contend that “Calvinism has tended to regard [God’s] wrath as a function of divine holiness and to sever its relation to love.”¹⁸ Again, they maintain that traditionalists believe that God has to be “coaxed” by Jesus into loving sinners, since he is merely angry with them.¹⁹ Pinnock offers a similar critique of Donald Bloesch’s views on salvation, alleging that for Bloesch, whom open theists consider an ally on some issues, “conversion is not a personal event.”²⁰ Anyone who has read Bloesch’s works on the theology of conversion or historic Christian piety will raise an eyebrow or two at such an assessment. It seems critical to open theists, though, that they characterize their opponents as simplistic, as committed to alien philosophical systems of thought, and as being willing to adopt any schema that presents itself in order to win their apologetic and polemical battles.

II. TRADITIONAL ORTHODOXY: JERUSALEM, OR ATHENS?

Is it the case that the critics of traditional theism are correct? We will first take a look at what traditionalists have said in response to the challenge

¹⁵ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 9, 26-30, 38-39. These thinkers have joined a veritable plethora of contemporary left-wing evangelicals who wish to jettison the concepts of satisfaction and substitutionary atonement in favor of less “violent” and less punitive conceptions of the work of Christ on the cross. See, for instance, J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); and Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Pinnock also objects to Anselm’s “perfect being” theology (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 70).

¹⁶ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 71.

¹⁷ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67. Their option is to argue that God’s wrath arises from “injured love,” and is an indicator of “God’s response to humanity’s treatment of him” (*ibid.*, 68).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Donald G. Bloesch,” in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, ed. Elmer C. Colyer (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 132.

from liberals and open theists. Second, we will examine the writings of two thinkers in the orthodox tradition who have aroused the ire of the critics. Third, we will seek to determine whether and to what degree open theism is itself a system which is grounded on philosophical assumptions.

Connected To, Influenced By, and Borrowing From

At the outset, it is important to be specific about what we mean when we say that a position is “influenced by” a philosophical or cultural tradition. When we argue that a belief is grounded in or influenced by some other tradition, we have to make clear the degree to which such alleged “borrowing” has actually taken place. We also need to demonstrate that the alleged connection between the two systems actually is the case. It is not enough simply to demonstrate that some parallels exist. In making historical comparisons, it is often considered a damning indictment if one can assert that some group is “like the Nazis,” or “just like the Ku Klux Klan,” for instance. But most such comparisons are facile and, therefore, inconsequential.

In a similar manner, we need to be precise about the degree to which a theological argument is related to a philosophical movement or tradition. There is no doubt that theologians do their work in cultural and historical contexts and that they are influenced by their intellectual environments. But how are they influenced? Is their relationship with the prevailing ideologies tangential, or intimate? To what degree are there parallels between the two systems of thought? Are they mostly influenced to ask certain questions due to the thought of their times, or are their answers tinged, consciously or otherwise, with the dogma of the hour? In terms of the question raised by this essay, to what degree is there a “synthesis”²¹ between these systems, i.e., between the philosophy of the Greeks and the theological formulations of Christian traditionalists? If there is no clear evidence of synthesis, then the burden of proof is on the critic to establish a relationship of borrowing, infection, or syncretism. Even if some taint can be found, it will be important to discern the degree to which that has determined the direction of the theological project in

²¹ This is the term used by C. Andresen, “The Integration of Platonism into Early Christian Theology,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 85, pt. 1, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie, 1984), 399-413.

question. That is, the most likely scenario is one in which biblical ideas will have been mixed with certain influences from the local culture. But which is dominant and determinative of the overall direction of the theological program in question? It seems that the questions are not as simplistic as some would maintain.

What "Traditional Orthodox" Theologians Say

If one were to read only the works of revisionists and open theists, one would get the impression that all conservatives and other representatives of the more traditional position were followers of the Platonists and had never given thought to that fact. Nothing could be further from the truth. Traditionalists have criticized classical theism for centuries, and the recent surge of conservative evangelical scholars, including those who have taken up arms against open theism, is no exception.

What revisionists and open theists have often left unsaid in their condemnation of the traditionalist's "Hellenization" of theology is that in most of the debates which culminated in confessional statements or which produced supposedly rationalistic theologies, the opponents of the traditionalists were themselves attempting to philosophize the faith. Arianism, for instance, denied the deity of Christ based on the premise of the absolute transcendence of God as "the unoriginate source . . . of all reality," and the presupposition that the world was unable to bear his direct impact.²² Sanders, in his discussion of Arianism, ignores this fact, and notes only that Arius rejected the static view of God which was developing in his time and argued rather for a model which would posit change and suffering within God.²³ But this is surely not an adequate analysis. Arius was an Aristotelian and so was convinced that if one used a different name to describe an entity, such a designation suggested a difference in *ousia*. This was the basis of the Arians' rejection of the orthodox affirmation that Christ was *homoousios* with the Father.²⁴ So, while it is true that the Arian party at Nicaea wanted to use only biblical language in the wording of the Creed, that was primarily because such a move would felicitously support the specific philosophical ontology which stood behind

²² J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 227.

²³ Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 77.

²⁴ Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 127.

Arian Christology. It was necessary, though, to take a step beyond a mere repetition of biblical verses to clarify all of the issues involved:

A doctrinal hermeneutic was required, in which scripture and tradition were encountered creatively and profoundly, in order to recast their ideas and interpret their narratives in new images and terms. A theology of repetition—whether of biblical texts or liturgical formulae—left too many theological loose ends. The ideas behind the familiar formulae of the New Testament and the liturgy of the church had to be reimagined and recreated through conceptual innovation, unless they were to become dead metaphors, petrified verbal moments from the past. The Nicene crisis instantiates a general phenomenon to which we shall return later in the present study: the perceived need to transfer theological reflection from commitment to the limits and defining conditions and vocabulary of the New Testament itself, in order to preserve its commitment to the New Testament proclamation.²⁵

While one might quibble over one or two of the phrases in McGrath's statement, the fundamental idea is certainly correct—that Christians must state their faith in terms that are completely faithful to the Bible but which also speak to their own day.²⁶ Parroting biblical words and phrases is no guarantee that one's position truly represents Scripture.

Early Christians did employ the categories found in their contemporary traditions. In the Greek world the Christian faith appropriated the language of classical thought in an attempt to counter pagan philosophy.²⁷ That was not necessarily unfitting. Revelation itself employs the language of Hellenism as well as the language of Hebraism “in order to reach the intelligentsia of every age.”²⁸ The apologists and church fathers drew upon concepts provided by the creative thinkers of their time and earlier times in order to render the message of faith intellectually respectable and credible. Much of what they affirmed is still needful, especially the work of those persons, such as Athanasius, who did not base the

²⁵ Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 7.

²⁶ John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), 11-42.

²⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation*, Christian Foundations, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 285.

²⁸ Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*, Christian Foundations, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 29.

heart of their thinking primarily on secular models.²⁹ He derived his *homoousios* doctrine, not from Hellenic roots, but from the “I am” sayings of Jesus in John.³⁰ This same spirit can be found in Tertullian, who, though he claimed to believe in the incarnation “because it was absurd,” still relied on reason to be the criterion for determining exactly what was absurd.³¹ All of this led Harry Wolfson to observe that the Fathers “did not battle as partisans of certain opposing schools of Greek philosophy; they battled only as advocates of opposing interpretations of Scripture.”³²

The truth of the gospel, though, always transcends such Hellenistic linguistic forms and cognitive development, even as it transcends the popular Jewish expectation of a militaristic Messiah.³³ It is important to note that danger always lurked beneath the surface of such undertakings. The tendency of theology to succumb to the rationalistic spirit is ancient. In the early church Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Tatian made major concessions to rationalism in an attempt to demonstrate that Christianity was the most perfect of philosophies. Justin, for instance, made use of the Stoic concept of the Logos and sought to convince his hearers that the divine Logos had become incarnate in Jesus Christ. The court is still out on the degree to which he subverted the incarnation to Stoicism. Some of the early apologists erected the superstructure of their theological systems on foundations laid by their opponents. Reflection has shown that these foundations were not always compatible with the structure which was erected upon them. Rationalism is also apparent in many medieval churchmen. John Scotus Erigena argued that reason was prior to theological authority and that true authority is simply truth found by the power of reason and handed down in writing by the Fathers

²⁹ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Ground of Certainty* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 29-30. Athanasius declared that he did not prove his case against Arius by the wisdom of the Greeks but rather by the “faith that clearly precedes . . . argumentation” (Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, ed. and trans. Robert C. Gregg [New York: Paulist, 1980], 88).

³⁰ He noted that *ousia* is simply a form of *einai* (T. F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002], 118-119).

³¹ Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics* 7, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, trans. Peter Holmes, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.).

³² Harry A. Wolfson, “Philosophical Implications of Arianism and Apollinarianism,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 13.

³³ Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 207. “We should resist both the Hellenizing and the Judaizing of the faith without abandoning its Hellenistic matrix and Jewish roots” (ibid., 211). “Theology and philosophy tend to reflect the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*), though an authentic biblical theology will invariably go counter to the mood of the times” (Donald G. Bloesch, “The Missing Dimension,” *Reformed Review* 26 [1973]: 167).

for later use. Even so conservative a thinker as John Feinberg recognizes that classical theism sometimes supervened on the earlier theologians, especially Thomas, and altered their perspectives.³⁴

Augustine: Christianized Neoplatonist, or Biblical Theologian?

Early theologians employed the language of their intellectual world in explicating their views. So, Justin Martyr identified Christ with the Logos of Stoicism, while Augustine spoke of God as Absolute Form and the Supreme Substance.³⁵ Such considerations did not blind them to the contours of the biblical revelation and its emphasis on God as the Father of Jesus and as the redeemer of mankind, but did allow them to engage the intellectuals of their day on their own ground.³⁶ The question is: Did they explicitly or implicitly import Hellenism into Christian theology, and if so, to what degree?

Open theist writers contend that Augustine did Hellenize the faith, and did so in a damaging manner.³⁷ The African Father certainly sought, especially in his early career, to synthesize the teachings of “certain Platonists”³⁸ with those of the Apostles and Prophets. Augustine’s pilgrimage, through Manicheanism, then on to the Academicians (such as Cicero), and finally to Neoplatonism just before the gospel found him, is well known.³⁹ Anyone reading his early writings will detect a strong Neoplatonic strain, so that even as late as *The Enchiridion* (ca. 422, eight years before Augustine died) one finds him using the definition of evil as privation.⁴⁰ No doubt some

³⁴ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), 62-67. See also Nash, *The Concept of God*, 40-52, for a critique of the Thomistic synthesis of theology and philosophy.

³⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 96-98, 271-279; Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 208-209. Certainly the philosophical overtones of this language were balanced over against biblical, evangelical emphases. Justin broke with Platonism by affirming that God is Creator, and Augustine made it clear that the God of the Bible is a living God and that the distinctions within the Trinity are relational rather than substantive (ibid., 208; Geoffrey Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979], 95).

³⁶ See Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 66-93; and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, The Christian Tradition, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 295-297.

³⁷ Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 80-85; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 69.

³⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.9.

³⁹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 23-107; Augustine, *Confessions*, 1-10.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, trans. S. D. Salmund (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1877), 11-14. Of course, on this subject, there is no final canonical answer as to the definition of evil which satisfies

Platonic elements stayed with Augustine right down to the end,⁴¹ though one might question the degree to which his anthropological and ontological dualisms arise from his reading of Plotinus or of Paul.⁴²

Was Augustine's mature theology then an amalgam of Paul and Plotinus? Pinnock says yes, and argues that Plotinus actually wins out, as Pinnock labels Augustine's theology as "pagan."⁴³ Sanders likewise claims that even in his mature years, Augustine used Neoplatonism "to interpret the Bible."⁴⁴ He further criticizes Augustine's doctrine of predestination as being linked to a Hellenistic notion of impassibility. The earlier Fathers had argued that God foresees who would have faith, and then "elects those who will,"⁴⁵ while Augustine contended for a rejection of libertarian free will and a strong doctrine of predestination as unilateral. Sanders has either misread or misrepresented this tradition in his critique of Augustine's contribution to predestinarian theology,⁴⁶ but that is merely

all evangelical theologians, so it may be inappropriate to criticize Augustine too harshly for his borrowing from the Neoplatonists here. Chang notes that his definition of evil as privation shows that "he refused to accept that violence and death are intrinsic to human life and desires" (Chang, *Engaging Unbelief*, 87). See also the discussion in G. R. Evans, "Evil," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 340-344.

⁴¹ This is best seen in his discussion of the Platonists in *City of God*. Here he commends such Platonic insights as that God is the Supreme Good, that humans need the light of God to see clearly, and that philosophers ought to love God. He also poses the possibility that Plato had read the Hebrew prophets, though he does not argue strongly for this (Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 8.4-8.14).

⁴² Even evangelical scholars are not in agreement on these issues, but it would seem that, among evangelicals, more would hold to an anthropological (holistic) dualism than to monism. Compare, for instance, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 472-489; with E. Earle Ellis, *Christ and the Future in New Testament History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 147-178; and Nancey Murphy, *Reconciling Theology and Science: A Radical Reformation Perspective* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 1997), 47-62.

⁴³ The title of the chapter in which he details orthodoxy's flight from the Bible is, "Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance" (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 65-112). He states that Augustine preferred being to becoming and that the African theologian put God in a box (*ibid.*, 69).

⁴⁴ Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 81; cf. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 69.

⁴⁵ Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 81.

⁴⁶ I contend that Sanders has misread the evidence here. With the exception of Origen and Athanasius, there is little discussion of predestination in the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Further, as far as I have been able to tell, there is no discussion of election based on foreseen faith in these thinkers. On Athanasius, see F. Stuart Clarke, "Lost and Found: Athanasius's Doctrine of Predestination," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976): 442. For Origen's view, in which he argues for election based on foreseen merit, not, as Sanders argues, foreseen faith, see Origen, *De Principiis* 2.9.7 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.); and Origen, *In Epistolam ad Romanos Commentariorum*, in *Origenis Opera Omnia*, ed. Carol Henric Eduard Lommatszsch (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1837), 7.17. For a fuller treatment of Augustine and his influence on Calvin and Luther, see Paul Jacobs, *Prädestination und Verantwortlichkeit bei Calvin* (Neukirchen: Erziehungsvereins, 1937). Pelikan also makes the case that Augustine had a remarkable awareness of the doctrine of predestination, "more thoroughgoing than that of any major thinker since Paul" (Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 297).

an aside to the question of whether Augustine's position was in fact an outgrowth of his doctrine of impassibility. Sanders also rejects Augustine's doctrine of immutability and Augustine's belief that ultimately God does not "change his mind."⁴⁷ Further, Sanders argues that since Augustine was "sensitive to the suffering involved in friendship and love," he developed a dislike for any interpersonal models of the Godhead.⁴⁸

Is all of this so? Let me first state that I do not think it imperative to defend everything that Augustine believed. His ecclesiology was clearly more Catholic than Protestant, and even in his soteriology there were elements that the Reformed tradition does not accept.⁴⁹ Further, his treatment of the Donatists laid the groundwork for the later Inquisition, in that he supported the imperial proscription of that sect, though he himself would not have condoned the use of force in dealing with sectarians or heretics. So, in my response to the interpretation of the Bishop of Hippo offered by the open theists, I want to make it clear that I am not an apologist for his whole theological project.

I would argue that some of the concerns expressed by Sanders and Pinnock are legitimate, while others stem from the fact that their model of theology simply is at odds with that of the African Father. Augustine was not simply a Neoplatonist in bishops' garb. In 386, Augustine accepted Christianity "without reservation and in opposition to the Neo-Platonist, Porphyry, who had most helped him, perhaps, at this stage."⁵⁰ Though Neoplatonism had an impact on Augustine, as culture always has some impact on the thinkers of each era, it is clear that where the Bible contradicted Plotinus, Augustine went with the Bible.⁵¹ In terms of defining his doctrine of God, "Neoplatonic elements were unmistakably present in this definition, but in setting it forth Augustine believed himself to be—and he was—expressing the catholic creed."⁵²

Augustine is a classic example of a thinker who combined philosophical considerations with biblical narrative. At times, the philosoph-

⁴⁷ Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁹ Augustine did not hold to a consistent *sola fide*, he held that infant baptism was regenerative, and he did not believe that all of those who once were regenerate would persevere to the end.

⁵⁰ John J. O'Meara, ed., "Introduction," St. Augustine, *Against the Academics*, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 12 (Baltimore: Westminster, 1950), 197.

⁵¹ John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Clarke, 1938), 163.

⁵² Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 297.

ical concerns outweighed the biblical. His commitment to divine simplicity and his affirmation of impassibility show that the Neoplatonic elements never completely left his consideration.⁵³ But these were always counterbalanced with his belief in redemption, in God's involvement in the world, and in the supremacy of Scripture over all of the intellectual machinations of man. As for his doctrine of predestination, Augustine took his cue primarily from an exegesis of Paul and John.⁵⁴ This is in contrast to the earlier Fathers, who, with the exception of Athanasius, generally developed their views on libertarian free will as a response to the deterministic position of the Gnostics.⁵⁵ In other words, Sanders has it backwards when he contends that Tertullian and Origen were bibli-cists in their understanding of human freedom while Augustine was following the Hellenistic footpath.⁵⁶ Quite the opposite is actually the case.

There are, then, Hellenizing tendencies in Augustine. But there are also anti-Hellenizing tendencies. It may be that he is guilty of too strong a doctrine of impassibility. But this did not prevent him from affirming the genuine possibility of knowing God personally. In fact, Augustine has gone down in history as an evangelical mystic, in a vein similar to Jonathan Edwards. What is clear is that his theology was not merely baptized paganism, as Pinnock maintains.

*Carl F. H. Henry: Modern Rationalistic Thinker, or
Biblically Motivated Apologist?*

In the contemporary evangelical context few thinkers have been painted with the brush of "rationalism" more thoroughly than Carl Henry. He has been at the forefront of evangelicalism's attempts to carve out a scholarly theological alternative to the reductionist traditions which were current in Continental theology. This alone has made him a marked man. But more than this, Henry's tendency to write in a polemical fashion on the topics of revelation, anthropology, and the doctrine

⁵³ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 432.

⁵⁴ Predestination is God's "foreknowledge and preparation of those acts of kindness by which those who are saved are saved" (Augustine, *The Gift of Perseverance*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, trans. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.], 14.35).

⁵⁵ J. B. Mozley, *A Treatise on the Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination* (London: John Murray, 1883), 126-147; John M. Rist, *Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 268-283.

⁵⁶ Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 81-82.

of God has resulted in more attention being paid to him than to those who have been less committed to apologetics in these sensitive areas.

One of the first thinkers to accuse Henry of being a modernist was Hans Frei.⁵⁷ He noted that theological typology and theological method cut across the ordinary lines of distinction between liberal and conservative paradigms. “For example, a contemporary liberal theologian like David Tracy of the University of Chicago will look more like a conservative and evangelical theologian such as Carl Henry than he will like many a fellow liberal in regard to the basic affirmation that theology must have a foundation that is articulated in terms of basic philosophical principles.”⁵⁸ Since Henry’s theological method incorporates many features of rational discourse, the Yale theologian categorizes him with others who deploy similar methodology, regardless of the actual content of their theological system. Frei observes that Henry criticized Karl Barth for his failure to submit his theological reflections to “the law of contradiction, the so-called congruity postulate, and the criterion that all propositions must be arrangeable in the form of axioms and theorems.”⁵⁹ This sort of intellectual move constitutes sufficient grounds for Frei to lump the evangelical theologian together with the revisionist Tracy.

Several evangelical scholars have also posited that Henry has made concessions to the modernist worldview. Stephen Spencer wrote, “Carl F. H. Henry’s writings display this recourse to modernist epistemology as the sole alternative to subjectivism and relativism (whether modernist or postmodernist), despite Henry’s frequent criticisms of modernism and his call for us to reject both modernism and postmodernism.”⁶⁰ Spencer then claims that evangelicals who hold such views believe that

⁵⁷ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 24-25. This volume was assembled from lectures given by Frei in 1983 and 1987. See also Hans W. Frei, “Response to ‘Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,’” *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987): 23-30. This is Frei’s reply to Henry’s criticisms of narrative theology.

⁵⁸ Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 24. Frei’s estimate that classical liberal theology is non-foundationalist is subject to serious question. Murphy demonstrates convincingly that the liberal theological tradition associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher, Shailer Mathews, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Gordon Kaufman is explicitly foundationalist (Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1996], 22-28).

⁵⁹ Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 24.

⁶⁰ Stephen R. Spencer, “Evangelical Modernists? Evangelical Responses to Postmodernism and Postliberalism” (paper presented at the southwestern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Dallas, 21 March 1997), 7.

“Christian [*sic*] have no right to proclaim Christianity universally true without first establishing its truthfulness—which seems to mean proving it them [*sic*].”⁶¹ In other words, such Enlightenment-influenced evangelicals equate the apologetic task of the church with its dogmatic task. In contrast to what he believes he sees in the methodology of Henry, Spencer proposes that “truth is not objective, if that means that it is self-existing or impersonal, abstract. Rather, truth is rooted in the triune God. Truth is what this tri-personal God knows and says. . . . Truth is personal because God is truth.”⁶² Spencer seems to be saying that evangelicals who adopt this kind of “modernist epistemology,” such as Henry, have forgotten this fact.⁶³

Donald Bloesch insists that there is a rationalistic trajectory in much of evangelical theology. Modern theologians, under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism, have incorporated methodologies which are explicitly founded upon either “the logic of deduced conclusions . . . or the logic of evidential confirmations.”⁶⁴ In this they often allow philosophical concerns to determine the form of their theological methodology.⁶⁵ Bloesch argues that Carl Henry has provided real assistance to evangelicals in identifying the ontological immanentalism of modern theology and in warning the church about capitulating to the dangers of modernity. He insists, however, that Henry has not been circumspect enough to avoid *epistemological immanentalism* and that he has in effect called the church to “a return to the rationalistic idealism

⁶¹ Ibid. He makes this claim after critiquing R. Albert Mohler’s criticism of Stanley Grenz on the grounds that Grenz refused “to begin theology by establishing the role of Scripture in Christian theology” (ibid., 6). It ought to be noted, for the sake of accuracy, that Mohler does not use the word “begin” in his critique. He says, rather, quoting from Grenz, that “Grenz . . . suggest[s] that efforts to establish the role of Scripture in Christian theology are ‘ultimately unnecessary’” (R. Albert Mohler, “The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Assessment*, ed. David S. Dockery [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1995], 80). It is one thing to believe in the need to “begin” (one assumes, both chronologically and apologetically) the theological project by establishing the foundational role of Scripture; it is quite another to contend that such a project is ultimately a necessary component of the theologian’s task.

⁶² Spencer, “Evangelical Modernists,” 9.

⁶³ Charles Scalise offers a similar criticism when he contends that Henry begins with an architectonic prolegomena and an elaborate doctrine of revelation, an approach which results in an “Enlightenment-fueled transformation of the doctrine of revelation from a secondary doctrine waiting in the wings to the primary doctrine on center stage” (Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 37).

⁶⁴ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts*, Christian Foundations, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 35.

⁶⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1985), 70.

of the early Enlightenment.”⁶⁶ Further, Henry’s strong focus on propositional revelation drives him to find the unity in Scripture in a logical system of shared beliefs.⁶⁷ Other evangelicals could be added to this group of rationalists,⁶⁸ as could the work of certain thinkers out of a more liberal tradition, such as Pannenberg,⁶⁹ whose theology allows the world “to become another criterion for faith beside the God of the Bible.”⁷⁰

The most wide-ranging indictment of Henry as a modern thinker has been offered by James William McClendon, Jr. This theologian argues that Henry’s theological method fits neatly into the modern paradigm, as his “philosophical work” is characterized by the “four recurrent marks” of that epistemological paradigm: it is “human-centered, universalizable, reductionist, and foundationalist.”⁷¹ Modern thought is *anthropocentric* in that it makes human nature the measure of all things.⁷² It tends to *universalization* by assuming that “what matters for anybody must matter for every-

⁶⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, Christian Foundations, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 253; cf. idem, *Holy Scripture*, 81.

⁶⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1979; reprint, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999), passim.

⁶⁸ Other contemporary (or recent) evangelicals whom Bloesch would designate as rationalistic are R. C. Sproul, E. J. Carnell, the early Clark Pinnock, John Gerstner, J. Oliver Buswell, Millard Erickson, and John Warwick Montgomery. His criticisms of Carl Henry seem to relate primarily to Henry’s later works (specifically his six-volume magnum opus). Bloesch’s earlier writings tend to praise Henry’s contribution. See, for instance, Bloesch, *Ground of Certainty*, 22 n. 21; idem, *Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), 26-28, in which he actually perceives Henry to be among those who resist “elevat[ing] the Bible unduly” in the move toward a strong doctrine of inerrancy. The list of rationalistic theologians from the past includes Clement of Alexandria, Abelard, John Locke, Francis Turretin, Charles Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield (Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 40, 65, 81; idem, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 252-253; idem, *Evangelical Renaissance*, 42).

⁶⁹ Avery Dulles, “Pannenberg on Revelation and Faith,” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 187.

⁷⁰ Bloesch, *Holy Spirit*, 44.

⁷¹ James William McClendon, Jr., “Christian Knowledge in the Sunset of Modernity” (paper presented at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, February, 1998), 8. It ought to be noted that this is an unpublished paper. It must be read, therefore, in the context of McClendon’s published opinions on these matters.

⁷² McClendon contends that “post-medieval (i.e., modern) theology,” both orthodox and liberal, moved in a conscientiously anthropocentric direction: “Instead, modern theologians located morality and reality alike in *human beings*—in a word, modernity was deliberately anthropocentric” (James William McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Doctrine* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1994], 49, italics in the original). There is some ambiguity in McClendon’s use of terms. In personal correspondence with this author he indicated his preference for the term “modern” over the term “modernist” in referring to Henry. Yet, in his systematic theology book he also lumps conservatives with other advocates of “modernity” whom he refers to as “modernists” (ibid., 49-50). In his writings, then, he has not made clear the distinction he wishes to draw between these terms.

body.”⁷³ This tendency assumes that one set of experiences will provide the norm for the rest of culture and is, thus, “imperialistic” in its approach to knowledge.⁷⁴ Further, modern thought is *reductionist* in its trend toward reducing everything to its components in a manner analogous to the scientific tendency to reduce analysis to molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles, an approach to be found in positivism,⁷⁵ rather than to widen the angle to a more expansive investigation.⁷⁶

McClendon also accuses Henry of being a narrow foundationalist.⁷⁷ *Foundationalism* refers to the tendency of Cartesian and, to some extent, Lockean epistemologies to construct all of knowledge upon self-evident and indubitable foundations.⁷⁸ It is the attempt to find an Archimedean Point from which one’s entire system can be recursively built. Descartes wistfully proffered, “I shall have the right to entertain high hopes, if I am fortunate enough to find only one thing which is certain and indubitable.”⁷⁹ Descartes sought to ground his system in a set of rational first principles, principles which were, then, metaphysical in orientation. The

⁷³ Idem, “Sunset of Modernity,” 2. “It is not assumed (though it may be true) that the standards of adequacy appropriate in one community are appropriate in others. . . .” (James William McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, 2nd ed. [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1994], 43).

⁷⁴ McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁶ For a thorough treatment of this idea, see Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion and Ethics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), 12-34; idem, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 58-78.

⁷⁷ By “narrow foundationalist,” McClendon seems to be accusing Henry of holding what others call “hard” or “rigid” foundationalism, that is, the kind of logically constructed, self-contained system that is characteristic of Cartesianism and logical positivism. Such a system begins with absolute certitude and then constructs its “house of knowledge” from this indubitable starting point. I would argue that Henry does not employ such a model, since, though he believes the Bible to be without error, his appeal to “rationality” is more modest. The only Archimedean Point in his argument is God—not an epistemological system. What Henry does employ is what some have called a sort of “soft” or “modest” foundationalism with regard to rationality. Modest foundationalism recognizes both that the rational basis for an argument is always subject to critique and that a sound argument might be constructed inductively, and not merely deductively from the first principles of the system. I contend that this is precisely what Henry does, as he develops his case for truth not from reason, but from the exegesis of Scripture. See Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 117-165. For an evangelical treatment, see Millard J. Erickson, “Foundationalism: Dead or Alive?” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 20-32.

⁷⁸ McClendon, “Sunset of Modernity,” 2.

⁷⁹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. F. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 95. Hegel hailed Descartes for erecting a “metaphysics of understanding.” Hegel believed he was destined to bring this project to completion (G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, vol. 3 [New York: Humanities, 1968], 220-230).

empirical form of foundationalism came to its most consistent expression in the logical positivism of such figures as Carnap, Ayer, and the early Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein began the *Tractatus* with the observation, “The world is all that is the case.”⁸⁰ After spending seventy tortuous pages delineating what can and cannot be included in his theory of the declarative sentence, he concluded it with, “What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.”⁸¹ Common to both the Cartesian and the positivist systems is the belief that philosophy is “largely an exercise in epistemology.”⁸²

Henry uses the word *reason* to refer simply to “man’s intellect, mind or cognitive powers.”⁸³ Henry views reason in theology as an instrument for recognizing truth, though not as a *source* of truth or as a tool for *constructing* models of cognition based on the autonomous reflection on empirical data or on universal principles not derived from Scripture. The very notion of revelation “gives no quarter to the idealistic illusion that human reason is intrinsically capable of fashioning eternal truth.”⁸⁴ Reason is “man’s logical capacity.”⁸⁵ Again, “Christian doctrines are not derived from experimental observation or from rationalism, but from God in his revelation.”⁸⁶ As a means of recognizing truth, reason can serve a verification role, a way of testing the truth claims of Christianity,⁸⁷ since it has the ability to “recognize and elucidate” truth. But even the divine image in humans does not enable them either to intuit or to generate truth claims.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Peers and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 1.0.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.0.

⁸² John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 6.

⁸³ Walter E. Johnson, “A Critical Analysis of the Nature and Function of Reason in the Theology of Carl F. H. Henry” (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), 41.

⁸⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 1 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976; reprint, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999), 225-226.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:377; *idem*, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1946), 220.

⁸⁶ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:223. “We cannot commit others to the truth of revelation simply by theoretical argument” (*idem*, *Remaking the Modern Mind*, 215).

⁸⁷ Christianity is distinguished by its “objective truth, and must adduce the method of knowing and the manner of verification by which every man can become personally persuaded” (*ibid.*, 213; *idem*, *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990], 37). For a brief discussion of how the Bible employs such an approach to verifying truth claims, see David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, *Contours of Christian Philosophy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 78-82.

⁸⁸ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:226. Henry’s views on the role of reason place him within the Anglo-American tradition, which sees reason as instrumental, rather than the Continental tradition, which views reason as teleological and normative. Reason in the Anglo-American tradition refers to the ability of persons to understand given data and might include the

Henry has repeatedly observed that the language of the Bible is clear and understandable and is in the form of “objectively intelligible statements.”⁸⁹ He is not sympathetic with Barth’s concern that human language is an inadequate vehicle for the communication of divine truth. “If language is the product of sin, conditioned by man’s perverted nature and unsuitable even when revelation grasps it, there arises the question whether God would or could use it.”⁹⁰ That does not mean that the “words we use are identical with the objects they designate,” but rather that we can have some confidence that God would not deceive us by using language that has no real correspondence to reality.⁹¹ Furthermore, Henry observes that the Bible does not present us an “extended treatise” on religious epistemology, and does not endorse a “single correct system of epistemology,” and so it would be “unjustifiable to identify any one scheme as biblical.”⁹²

Is then his doctrine of God dependent on Scripture, or on Hellenistic or modernist philosophical conventions? Henry is convinced that theology can be constructed without appeal to a dialectical method and without conceding that doctrines contradict one another. He affirms that it may be difficult at times for theologians to understand the relationship between such doctrines as divine election and human responsibility, but he will not concede that they flatly contradict one another. He appeals to the law of noncontradiction, not to determine the truth of revelation but only as a negative test for truth.⁹³ “Logical consistency is not a positive test of truth, but a negative test; if it were a positive test, logical consistency would accredit all views, however conflicting, that consistently follow from differing starting points.”⁹⁴

ability to adjudicate between claims to truth by use of canons of rationality, such as consistency, but does not itself determine what that truth is. It is thus an inherently skeptical approach to rationality. Henry differs from the Anglo-American tradition, as seen, for instance, in Hume, in that he *does* believe in the possibility of knowing truth, a possibility dependent ultimately on seeing the world through the lens of Scripture.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:223.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 3 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1979; reprint, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999), 287. Neither does sin affect human logic in any direct fashion. Its effect is on the will, not on the ability of humans to draw correct deductions (Johnson, “Reason in the Theology of Carl Henry,” 47).

⁹¹ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:289.

⁹² *Idem*, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:224. See also James Emery White, *What Is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 94, for further treatment of this question.

⁹³ Johnson, “Reason in the Theology of Carl Henry,” 51.

⁹⁴ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:235.

Is Henry, then, a rationalist? That would depend on what one means by the term. Henry did not reject the designation for himself, as long as he had the right to give his own definition of the term.⁹⁵ Henry's use of the apparatus of logical, even Aristotelian, discourse, with its appeal to theorems, proofs, and so on, gives his expositions a "rational" feel. Likewise, he was convinced that the biblical revelation was credible and reasonable:

The main issue for the intellectual world is whether the biblical revelation is credible; that is, are there good reasons for believing it? I am against the paradox mongers and those who emphasize only personal volition and decision. They tell us we are to believe even in the absence of good reasons for believing. Some even argue that to seek to give good reasons for the faith within us is a sign of lack of trust or an exercise in self justification. This is nonsense. Against any view that faith is merely a leap in the dark, I insist on the reasonableness of Christian faith and the "rationality" of the living, self-revealed God.⁹⁶

Henry then affirms that revelation is rational, but he denies that one can construct theology on positivist or rationalist grounds. So, his discussions are highly rational, and his methodology employs rigorous appeals to logical analysis. But his God is not the God of Plato or Plotinus, nor is his method merely scholastic. Henry's rationalism is more in line with the Anglo-American tradition, in which reason functions as a means of coming to truth but does not itself provide the content of truth, an approach one finds in the Continental tradition of Descartes and Kant. Reason is functional, not normative or teleological. Further, Henry's presuppositionalism served as a counterpoint to his understanding of reason, a commitment on his part which further insulates him from falling prey to traditional forms of autonomous Rationalism.

Augustine and Henry: Hellenists or Hebrews?

Our two models, Augustine and Carl Henry, are perfectly comfortable in engaging the thought forms of their time. They are fluent in the philo-

⁹⁵ Johnson, "Reason in the Theology of Carl Henry," 53-54.

⁹⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, "The Concerns and Considerations of Carl F. H. Henry" (interview in *Christianity Today* 13 [May 1976]: 21, quoted in Johnson, "Reason in the Theology of Carl Henry," 55).

sophical currents and cultural artifacts that make up the prevailing worldviews from their own respective ages. They are willing to use the tools afforded them by their culture, and, at times, those tools even impinge somewhat on the grammar of their theology. At the same time, though, both of these men are thoroughly committed to Scripture and to drawing their theology from that book rather than the “books of the Platonists.” While we may wish to tweak Augustine here or there and to suggest to him that a few of his proposals might be slightly more tainted with Platonic influence than they ought to be, in general, all of his ideas can be traced to the Bible. Of course, one might disagree with his interpretation, but that is a different issue, now, is it not? Similarly, I might not wish to structure some of my arguments in the same fashion as does Henry—with theorems, corollaries, and the other accoutrements of formal debating style. But style is one thing—substance is another.

III. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE QUESTION: IS OPEN THEISM PHILOSOPHICALLY OR BIBLICALLY DRIVEN?

Now the time has come to put the shoe on the other foot. There are several questions that one ought to pose here: What is the driving force behind the open theist position? Are its fundamental and unique theological moves compelled by biblical exegesis? Are there clear indicators of philosophical and cultural influence which have come from alien systems of thought? This essay will ask only the third question directly, but will attempt to assess the answers to the other two questions along the way.

Parallels with “Certain Greeks”

The Greek tradition was not merely confined to Platonism and Stoicism. Other ancient philosophers proposed models which were not top-heavy on the issue of Being, but of Becoming. Heraclitus taught that all was in flux, and so established a “processive” school of thought long before Plato was born. Others in the Greek tradition promoted the notion of libertarian freedom. It is curious that open theists often point to parallels between traditionalists and the Greeks, as if that in itself is sufficient condemnation, but they rarely confess to the parallels between their own views and those of the philosophers.

Is open theism merely another version of process theology? Geisler and House answer yes, since openness advocates affirm that “God can change in His nature.”⁹⁷ This would entail a dipolarity in God, and that qualifies this system to be labeled “process.” It is not clear, though, that Pinnock, Boyd, and the other key figures in this tradition are arguing that God can change in his nature in the same sense as Geisler and House allege.⁹⁸

Process theology has been “the most influential movement stressing libertarian freedom and divine vulnerability” in this century.⁹⁹ Open theists have often praised some elements of process thought:

We make the love of God a priority; hold to libertarian human freedom; are both critical of conventional theism; seek a more dynamic model of God; contend that God has real, and not merely rational, relationships with the world; believe that God is affected by what happens in the world; say that God knows what can be known, which does not amount to exhaustive foreknowledge; appreciate the value of philosophy in helping to shape theological convictions; connect positively to Wesleyan/Arminian traditions.¹⁰⁰

They have also distanced themselves from process theology’s more objectionable elements, such as dipolarity, metaphysical dualism, and its view of God’s dependence on the world. In assessing the relative merits of traditionalism’s Platonist tendencies with open theism’s process tendencies, Pinnock writes, “Candidly, I believe that conventional theists are more influenced by Plato, who was a pagan, than I am by Whitehead, who was a Christian.”¹⁰¹

In a book-length debate between open theists and process theolo-

⁹⁷ Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2001), 263.

⁹⁸ Sanders, for instance, argues that God does change his mind regarding decisions he has made and the course he will follow, which entails that he “has been remarkably flexible, innovative and adaptable in working to achieve his goals,” but that at the same time he is faithful to his goals, committed to his covenant relationships, and consistent in his character (John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998], 143-144, 165, 186 [quote is from 186]).

⁹⁹ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 38.

¹⁰⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 142-143; see also Clark H. Pinnock and John B. Cobb, Jr., “Introduction,” in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock and John B. Cobb, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), ix-xiv.

¹⁰¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 143.

gians, it seems as though the openness advocates were more interested in their commonalities with the process thinkers than was the case from the other side.¹⁰² I think we ought to give the open theists the benefit of the doubt to make their claim that they are not really process theologians in evangelical guise. I do, however, believe that many of the things they hold in common with process thought, such as libertarian free will, lack of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, and the search for a more dynamic model of God (whatever that means), are seriously problematic. It is also interesting that Pinnock does admit that openness advocates do “appreciate the value of philosophy in helping to shape theological convictions.”¹⁰³ However, it must obviously be the right kind of philosophy lifted from the correct Greek (or Continental, or Anglo-American) philosophers. Forgive me if I take this as a slight bit of double-dealing.

Parallels with Socinianism

Several thinkers have recently compared open theism to Socinianism, a model which Sanders curiously leaves out of his survey of historical theology.¹⁰⁴ Robert Strimple notes that Faustus Socinus saw his work as a corrective both to Calvinist views on foreordination and to Arminian views on foreknowledge. If the future was foreknown, then, for Socinus, it was also foreordained, since humans had no power of contrary choice. Against this view, Socinus argued for a kind of free will theism in which future contingencies were not settled.¹⁰⁵ This is just about exactly what open theists are proposing. That is not to say that open theists hold to a Socinian view of Christ or of the Trinity (though some of their objections to substitutionary atonement have a Socinian ring), but it is curious that none of them has adduced the Socinian view of free will as a partner position to their own, though it is clear that it is.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Pinnock and Cobb, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God*. See especially the essays by David Ray Griffin and William Hasker.

¹⁰³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 143.

¹⁰⁴ Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 87-90. Here he deals with the Reformation and its aftermath, but with no discussion of Socinus, whose views on some of these issues parallel those of the open theists.

¹⁰⁵ Robert B. Strimple, “What Does God Know?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 140-142.

¹⁰⁶ Frame, *No Other God*, 35.

Parallels with Manichaeism

Historic Manichaeism held that two coeternal principles exist alongside each other in the universe, one good and the other evil.¹⁰⁷ The evil has invaded the good, and redemption takes place when humans work to restore the kingdom of light.¹⁰⁸ In the meantime, the two forces are arrayed against each other in a pitched battle, and for all intents and purposes the kingdom of darkness is currently in command of this world. Manichaean theology presents an intrinsic warfare motif with good and evil in battle array.

Clearly Boyd does not hold to the cosmology or the cosmogony of historic Manichaeism, nor does he hold to its bizarre soteriology. He does construe a dualistic ontology in terms of good versus evil, though, in a manner reminiscent of the ancient cult. In addition, he argues that Satan is in command of this world and is, in effect, the sovereign of this world in this age, another feature parallel to the Manichaean view of the relationship between good and evil spirits in this eon. This idea is consistent with Boyd's belief that God does not generally exercise comprehensive sovereignty in the world at this time. He further argues that it is inappropriate to use the word "monotheism" to describe the biblical view of God, since the Bible affirms the existence of the other "gods."¹⁰⁹ Rather, we should speak of a sort of henotheism, or, as he proposes in one place, "monotheopraxis."¹¹⁰ Satan and the demonic powers are, then, gods who wreak havoc on this world and with whom the true God is in perpetual conflict during this age.¹¹¹

The conflict rages because "God chose to create a quasi-democratic cosmos in which dualism could result," and some of the angelic beings in that universe are now in a state of rebellion.¹¹² Since Yahweh, "in almost every respect,"¹¹³ mediates his authority by morally responsible angels,

¹⁰⁷ S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁸ Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire," in *Religion and Society in the Age of Augustine* (London: Faber, 1972), 94-118.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 119.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120-142.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143-167.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 178. He quotes approvingly the statement of Athenagoras that, though God exercises a general providence, the control of "the particular parts are provided for by the angels over them" (Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 40).

such a rebellion created a situation in which the evil ones now rule. Boyd interprets Jesus' words in which he refers to Satan as the prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30) to mean that, "concerning ruling powers over the cosmos, this evil ruler is the highest."¹¹⁴ Boyd goes on to argue that Satan is the cause of all sickness and infirmity, that ill people are "the casualties of war,"¹¹⁵ and that this dualistic hermeneutic is the key to understanding the New Testament, especially the ministry of Jesus.

Apart from the proponents of the Word of Faith movement in contemporary charismatic circles, it would be hard to find anyone who makes a stronger case for the sovereignty of Satan in this world and for a warfare dualism than does Boyd in his argument in this soon-to-be trilogy of books.¹¹⁶ I cannot subject the thesis to any serious analysis due to space limitations, but I will make three observations. First, Boyd's proposal depends on a complete rejection of God's comprehensive sovereignty. If God exercises providential governance over all the details of life and history, then Boyd's proposal breaks down. Though I cannot here make a case for meticulous providence, I will note that Boyd's own approach is intrinsically self-contradictory on this matter, since he believes that God can and does sometimes work in deterministic fashion (the text of Scripture indicates examples in which he does so),¹¹⁷ but that he does not generally do so. Others have critiqued Boyd on this matter, and I will defer to their observations.¹¹⁸

Secondly, Boyd's interpretation of "warfare theodicy" is overdone. He certainly raises important exegetical issues in his interpretation of Jesus' encounters with demonic forces, though he simultaneously makes *more* of the amount of material than is really there¹¹⁹ and *less* of the

¹¹⁴ Boyd, *God at War*, 181.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹¹⁶ The third volume is tentatively titled, *The Myth of the Blueprint* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).

¹¹⁷ Note how Boyd is inconsistent in construing exhaustive, definite foreknowledge in his treatment of Cyrus, Josiah, and Peter's crowing rooster (Gregory A. Boyd, "The Open Theism View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 18-23).

¹¹⁸ See, for instance, David Hunt, "A Simple Foreknowledge Response," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. Beilby and Eddy, 48-54. See also the treatment on meticulous providence in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 274-288. This is a withering critique of the openness view on this matter from Scripture.

¹¹⁹ His assertion that Jesus' teachings on the kingdom and his healing ministry are understandable only within a warfare worldview (Boyd, *God at War*, 213) is not entirely wrong. The problem is that Boyd really means that we can understand such teachings of Jesus only within the

material than is really there.¹²⁰ Graham Twelftree argues that exorcism was not the key to Jesus' ministry, though "it was at least one of the most important aspects of his ministry."¹²¹ Boyd is careful to argue that sickness and death are "the byproducts of a creation gone berserk through the evil influence of this Satanic army" and that Jesus "many times" (as opposed to "all times") "attributed this to direct demonic involvement."¹²² But the overall thrust of his warfare theodicy is that illness is generally demonic in nature and must be confronted accordingly.¹²³ It is more accurate to say that healing and exorcism are not the same, and that "Jesus did not treat them in the same way."¹²⁴

Thirdly, though openness advocates offer as a major premise their belief in libertarian freedom, the amount of authority and power granted to the "gods" by Boyd virtually eliminates human freedom altogether. What we have here is a substitution of Satanic power for divine power in the drama of history, with humans as not much more than pawns in the game.¹²⁵ Perhaps more accurately, human beings do get to make some limited moves in the game, but the "gods" control most of the board, even though we are assured that God is smart enough that he will eventually corner them and checkmate the enemy. My point is that the emphasis on the power of Satan is so pronounced in Boyd's work that libertarian freedom is virtually eviscerated.

Is this a Manichaeian or Gnostic presentation? Boyd explicitly claims

framework of his (Boyd's) "warfare worldview." I find his warfare worldview, though, to be inconsistent with the full teaching of Scripture.

¹²⁰ See *God at War*, 231-234, for his explanation of the man born blind in John 9. He does not discuss Jesus deciding to let Lazarus die because he loved Mary and Martha. Scripture states that the reason behind both situations is the glory of God (John 9:3; 11:4), and there is no mention of warfare.

¹²¹ Graham H. Twelftree, "Demon, Devil, Satan," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 168.

¹²² Boyd, *God at War*, 182-183.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

¹²⁴ John P. Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions: A Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 208.

¹²⁵ Boyd's discussion of Chemosh is salient here. In 2 Kings 3:26-27, Israel had been defeating Moab city by city. The king of Moab then sacrificed his own son presumably to Chemosh. The text then notes that Israel left off its attack and returned home. Boyd opines that, "Indeed the text also seems to assume the ability of the Moabite king to influence, and perhaps even to empower, this demonic being through sacrificing his child; the text also seems to assume the ability of Chemosh in this case to rout Israel in battle" (Boyd, *God at War*, 118). The text makes no reference to a "rout," and it is just as likely that Israel left in disgust over the incident of human sacrifice as anything else. The notion that Chemosh had power over Israel, regardless of God's role in the battle, is not a conclusion that comes readily to the reader of this text. Boyd constructs a great edifice of theory upon a very small foundation.

that his position is not.¹²⁶ Clearly he is right that his views are quite distinct from historic Manichaeism, but the overt and constant dualism that is present here has Manichaean overtones. If we are to follow the example of open theists in rhetorically labeling other positions when they bear family resemblances at some points, then it would not be unfair to say that there are Manichaean tendencies here.¹²⁷

Parallels with Contemporary Cultural Concerns

Open theists are quite specific about their willingness to allow contemporary culture to stand as a source for theology.¹²⁸ Influences from areas of thought such as feminism and postmodernity seem to be rampant in their writings. Several thinkers in this tradition want theologians to revise their language for God to be more inclusive. Pinnock and Brow, for instance, prefer to use the word “parent” rather than “father” when speaking of God.¹²⁹ Similarly, though they recognize that Jesus was a male, they contend that “‘Son of God’ itself is a metaphor, pointing to a social relationship with God; it is not a statement about gender. It would be a radical distortion to depict the incarnation as supporting patriarchalism when its outcome is deliverance from all forms of oppression.¹³⁰ Jesus is God’s Child who seeks the wholeness and full humanity of everyone.”¹³¹ They seem to be arguing that we need to modify “the language of Canaan” in the interests of supporting feminist hermeneutics.¹³² Pinnock and Brow’s support for feminism is actually quite

¹²⁶ Boyd, *God at War*, 229, 230.

¹²⁷ Pinnock calls traditional orthodoxy “pagan,” and regularly speaks of traditionalists “proof-texting,” “gate-keeping,” using “scare tactics and lying,” and other such rhetoric in his denunciation of their views. He does this all the while accusing traditionalists of using shrill rhetoric! (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 1-24). One would hope that the conversation might be a little more substantial and a little less inflammatory in the future.

¹²⁸ See, for instance, Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 153-178.

¹²⁹ In their discussion of God as “Father” in *Unbounded Love*, they really say nothing about God as “father,” oddly enough, but rather appeal to the readers to recognize the maternal metaphors in Scripture (Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 53).

¹³⁰ It may well be that part of Pinnock’s dissatisfaction with Augustine stems from the fact that the African Father employed exclusively masculine imagery in conceiving of the Trinity. See the discussion in Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 141-144.

¹³¹ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 52. From this statement it appears that Pinnock and Brow see any and all forms of “patriarchalism” (including that found in the Bible) as “oppression.”

¹³² For a withering critique of the attempt to remove “patriarchal” language from theology, see Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity*, 43-56.

extreme, leading them even to assert that the Bible “gives us permission to name God in feminine ways.”¹³³

This tendency is also apparent in open theism’s commitment to “relational theology.” Sin is sometimes described in terms that are merely relational.¹³⁴ Open theists also speak of God’s power in relational terms: “Irresistible power can bring forth a world, but only a relational power can make the most delicate of things, a creature independent of it.”¹³⁵ Also, in their focus on God’s love as his basic attribute, open theists emphasize the caring nature of God, but that is not all: “love is more than care and commitment; it involves being sensitive and responsive as well.”¹³⁶ This appeal to “relationality” is clearly an attempt on the part of Pinnock and others to claim that traditionalists focus on immutability, omnipotence, and transcendence, while the open theist position is committed to God’s relationship with humanity. The difficulty is that in attempting to focus on the biblical idea of living in relationship with God, open theists wind up truncating those parts of Scripture, such as the notion that sin is disobedience to the will of God, which are contrary to modern cultural norms. They wind up sounding more like therapists than biblical theologians, and one has to wonder whether this is not a capitulation to culture rather than an appropriation of its insights for hermeneutics.¹³⁷ Also, their tendency to sublimate all of God’s attributes under the attribute of love is not consistent with Scripture, for the same Bible which states that God is love also features God affirming, “I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2, NKJV).¹³⁸

Parallels with Marcionism

Pinnock and Brow contend that God is a father who heals his creatures, not a judge who looms over them in wrath. But they note, “Not all biblical texts make this as clear as others do. The prophet Nahum, for

¹³³ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 116.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57; Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 89.

¹³⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 96.

¹³⁶ Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, 15.

¹³⁷ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 60-83. In addition, it simply is not the case that traditionalists are not committed to the need for a genuine relationship between God and human beings. See, for instance, Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 88.

¹³⁸ See the excellent analysis and critique of this issue in Frame, *No Other God*, 49-56.

example, does not seem to see it that way from his brief oracle. Perhaps it was not yet revealed to him. Old Testament writers often display a less than Christian point of view when they teach some truth.”¹³⁹ Two moves are apparent in this statement. First, Nahum had not yet received the fullness of revelation which would later come in Christ—that Yahweh is also Abba. Second, the authors insist that Nahum’s comment is sub-Christian, and, therefore, is to be rejected in the light of New Testament revelation.

The first claim is a legitimate hermeneutical move, whether or not one agrees that Pinnock and Brow are correct in their assessment of the text in question. Progressive revelation is a concept that nearly all evangelicals accept, even though the term was first coined by liberals in their polemic against conservative views on Scripture.¹⁴⁰ Defined as “the fact that God progressively revealed himself in event and in Scripture, climaxing the events with the death-resurrection-exaltation of Christ and climaxing the Scriptures with the closing of the canon,” progressive revelation is a concept thoroughly consistent with an inductive analysis of Scripture’s claims to authority.¹⁴¹ So, it might be, as Pinnock and Brow claim, that some truth “had not yet been revealed to him.” Of course, whether it is appropriate to argue that such a father-judge dichotomy is in fact legitimate exegetically or theologically is quite another question.

The more serious matter here is Pinnock and Brow’s claim that “Old Testament writers often display a less than Christian point of view when they teach some truth.”¹⁴² This statement is either a sloppy way of repeating the point about progressive revelation, or else it constitutes a more serious charge—that the Old Testament is not merely dispensationally limited, but that it is actually dead wrong.¹⁴³ In his more recent work, Pinnock observes that prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John

¹³⁹ Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 71.

¹⁴⁰ J. I. Packer, “An Evangelical View of Progressive Revelation,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 143-158.

¹⁴¹ D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), 83.

¹⁴² Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 71.

¹⁴³ The next sentence in the paragraph cited above seems to confirm this estimate that some Old Testament texts are simply miscues: “It is possible to cite texts of judgment, such as the account of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, where there does not seem to be any concern to correct and restore sinners but only to destroy them” (Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*, 71).

the Baptist uttered prophecies which are contained in Scripture but which never came true.¹⁴⁴

Pinnock and Brow seem to be committing the same error often attributed to Luther—elevating one truth to such a status that it becomes the touchstone truth, so that even canonical texts are evaluated by the clarity with which they uphold the one criterion. Luther had doubts about the authenticity of the letter of James because it seemed not to affirm justification by faith alone; his doubts were unjustified. Insofar as Pinnock and Brow entertain similar doubts about individual passages of Scripture (mostly Old Testament) which they evaluate as being inferior to the texts which affirm God's nature as Abba, they are guilty of ascribing to a canon within the canon, and they come dangerously close to Marcionism. Their doubts about the truthfulness of some prophecies¹⁴⁵ calls into question the authenticity of their evangelical profession. Perhaps they will be able to make it clear at some point how a theologian can call the truthfulness of Scripture into question and at the same time affirm biblical inerrancy.¹⁴⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

You may recall that, earlier in this essay, I urged that just showing similarities between two schools of thought does not indicate that one has borrowed from the other or is dependent on the other. Sometimes similarities are just that—similarities. In addition, on some occasions borrowing is not a bad thing—as long as alien ideologies are not imported into the system of thought. The problem comes in when two systems are synthesized in a manner in which a hybrid is produced. Of the four systems which this essay has discussed—classical theism, process theism, open theism, and traditional orthodoxy—the first two are clearly hybrids. What of the last two?

It seems to me that traditional orthodoxy, which, by the way, is not a monolithic tradition (incorporating both classical Arminians and classical Calvinists), contains within itself all the resources it needs to prevent it from becoming a theological hybrid. It appeals to Scripture,

¹⁴⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 50, 51, especially n. 66.

¹⁴⁵ See note 144 above.

¹⁴⁶ For an extended reflection on the incompatibility of open theism and inerrancy, see Stephen J. Wellum's chapter in this book.

seeks to allow Scripture to speak for itself without forcing it into a hermeneutical box, is willing to critique its own deficiencies, and is not overly sensitized to contemporary cultural manipulation.

What of open theism? In my opinion, it shares some of the hopefulness of traditionalism in that it examines Scripture, seeking to allow it to speak for itself, being willing to hear new interpretations of texts, and is generally willing to critique its own deficiencies. However, open theism has some characteristics which, in my opinion, make it more susceptible to synthesis and infection from alien thought forms. One problem lies in its tendency to seek the more bizarre interpretations of Scripture and to prefer them above other options. This is repeatedly seen in Boyd's warfare volumes, and is the reason why his theology has a modified Manichaean flavor. Here is another difficulty—the rear-guard action which Boyd (especially) employs to make his hermeneutics work. As I noted earlier, he has to switch gears repeatedly between the times when God does know tomorrow and the times when he does not. These manifold hermeneutical adjustments eventually make his proposal less and less believable, and make it seem more and more as if he is constantly repairing the roof over his theological work shed. But perhaps the most insidious problem with open theism, the one which makes it most susceptible to dogmatic infection by alien theological viruses, is its commitment to contemporary culture as a source for theological knowledge. It is this which infuses feminism, relationalism, processism, and even Marcionism into the mix.

I appreciate open theism in at least one way. Pinnock, Boyd, Sanders, and the others who are pursuing this project will stand there as reminders to the rest of us how important it is not to subjugate our theology to alien thought forms, whether Hellenistic, Teutonic, or Anglo-American. They will shake their fingers at us and tell us, "Don't go that route." At the same time, though, they serve as exemplars of just what happens when we allow our theology to be taken captive by alien thought forms. I'd like to say to them, "You should not go that route, either."

WHY OPEN THEISM IS FLOURISHING NOW

William C. Davis

History is littered with unsuccessful attempts to turn Christians away from the God of the Bible. Many of these failures were too short-lived to merit even a footnote. Too complicated, isolated, or poorly developed, these temporary threats often collapse on their own. But other proposals for changing our understanding of God grow strong enough to deserve a vigorous response by the entire church. The strongest of these challenges in the past drove the church to speak with a single voice, both for the protection of the church and for the sake of God's honor.

Open theism is unquestionably an attempt to change the way Christians think about God. And even though it is relatively new as a self-conscious theological movement, its influence is evident in a surprising number of places. *Christianity Today* treats it as an evangelical option, offering both editorials that praise its proponents and links to the official open theism website. Thomas Nelson publishes and promotes *The Sacred Romance* and *Wild at Heart*. Although John Eldredge, author of one of the books and coauthor of the other, denies being an open theist,¹ these very popular books develop the open theist claim that God's desire for genuine love with free creatures leads him to take risks regarding the future. InterVarsity Press publishes and promotes Clark Pinnock's *The Openness*

¹ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 32. He writes, "Trying to reconcile God's sovereignty and man's free will has stumped the church for ages. We must humbly acknowledge that there's a great deal of mystery involved, but for those aware of the discussion, I am not advocating open theism. Nevertheless, there is definitely something wild in the heart of God."

of God and John Sanders's *The God Who Risks*. Baker Books provides publisher's notes for booksellers that identify Gregory Boyd (*The God of the Possible*) and Clark Pinnock (*The Most Moved Mover*) as "evangelicals." Societies and gatherings of Christian scholars such as the Evangelical Theological Society² and the Wheaton Philosophy Conference³ have welcomed and even showcased advocates of open theism.

Any effort to affect evangelical thought would be pleased by half this much success. Academic theologians and philosophers are taking the openness position seriously. Christian bookstores are giving it shelf space alongside the works of traditional theists. And maybe most importantly, the sources Christians are most likely to consult are either giving the movement a "pass" or actively promoting the position. InterVarsity Press, Baker Books, Thomas Nelson, and *Christianity Today* are all "authorities" that evangelicals are likely to trust. Even if evangelical scholars oppose open theism, acceptance by publishers and editors of Christian periodicals may enable the movement to succeed with the broader evangelical audience.

For these reasons and others, more and more evangelicals are finding open theism attractive. We must conclude that the movement has found conditions favorable to its flourishing. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the features of evangelicalism today that encourage the spread of open theism, as well as those features that make it so difficult to inhibit its growth. After sketching the major tenets of open theism, I will attempt to explain why our times are so disposed to finding the openness account of God attractive and to allow it a place in the evan-

² The relationship between the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) and open theism has become quite complicated. At its 2001 meeting the ETS passed a resolution affirming the historic view of God's exhaustive foreknowledge. See David Neff's "Scholars Vote: God Knows the Future" in *Christianity Today* 46, no. 1 (7 January 2002): 21. Questions about the impact of the vote are also reported in David Neff's November 19, 2001 internet posting, "Foreknowledge Debate Clouded by 'Political Agenda,'" available at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/147/13.0.html. At the 2002 ETS meeting in Toronto, the members voted by a slim majority to recommend that the executive committee examine charges regarding the compatibility of open theism and inerrancy. See Doug Koop's November 22, 2002 internet posting, "Evangelical Theological Society Moves Against Open Theists: Membership of Pinnock and Sanders Challenged by Due Process," available at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/145/54.0.html. On the prospects for the ETS to set meaningful and effective boundaries, see chapter 10 in this volume.

³ The October 2000 Wheaton Philosophy Conference theme was "The Providence of God," and a number of open theists (John Sanders, David Basinger, and William Hasker) were invited to present papers. Theologian R. K. McGregor Wright was asked to respond to Sanders, and concluded that open theists are "worshiping a different god." Most in the audience thought Wright had overstepped his place. They assumed that Wheaton would give only solid evangelicals such a prominent place at their conference.

gical mainstream. The chapter will close with a discussion of what needs to happen for the church to reverse the trend.

I. THE QUESTION: WHY IS OPEN THEISM ON THE RISE NOW?

In order to explain why open theism is flourishing today, I need to answer two prior questions. First, what is “open theism”? And second, why think this rise is a problem? These questions receive attention in other chapters of this book, so my answers will be brief.

“Open theism” aims to rescue our understanding of God’s relationship with his creatures from traditional theism.⁴ According to advocates of open theism, traditional (“classical”) theism overemphasizes God’s immutability (unchangingness) and transcendence. Open theism instead stresses God’s desire for a love relationship with us, and holds that in pursuit of this relationship God freely set aside his dominance over his creatures.⁵ God could have remained transcendently lofty, but out of a desire for truly loving intimacy with us he set his transcendence aside and entered time with us. As a participant in time, God has made himself “open” to a future that is yet to be determined by both his and our choices. The “open” future is largely indeterminate until God and his free creatures collaborate in forming it. If God were to bring about his specific designs without genuinely collaborating with our choices, our free will would be violated and our dignity destroyed.

Proponents of open theism (or an “openness” view of God) believe their understanding of God makes it possible to solve a number of puz-

⁴ The definitive statements of open theism are found in the works of Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, John Sanders, Richard Rice, David Basinger, and William Hasker. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, by Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994) is a multi-disciplinary introduction. Gregory A. Boyd’s *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000) is more extensively exegetical; Pinnock’s *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001) is more philosophically ambitious.

⁵ John Sanders summarizes the position at www.opentheism.org: “Open Theism (also called Free Will Theism) connects with the spirituality of many Christians throughout the history of the church especially when it comes to prayer. Many Christians feel that our prayers or lack of them can make a difference as to what God does in history. The Openness of God is an attempt to think out more consistently what it means that God enters into personal relationships with humanity. We want to develop an understanding of the triune God and God’s relationship to the world that is Biblically faithful, finds consonance with the tradition, is theologically coherent and which enhances the way we live our Christian lives. On the core tenets of the Christian faith, we agree, but we believe that some aspects of the tradition need reforming, particularly when it comes to what is called ‘Classical Theism.’ We believe that some aspects of this model of God have led Christians to misread certain Scriptures and develop some serious problems in our understanding of God which affect the way we live, pray and answer the problem of evil.”

zles that have vexed traditional accounts of God. These puzzles include explaining the presence of evil, the efficacy of prayer, human freedom and divine foreknowledge, and the possibility of meaningful worship. But puzzle solving is not their main objective. Their principal aim is to allow Christians to recover the joy of intimacy with their God.⁶

The explicit goal of deepening divine-human intimacy is commendable, and it has led many well-meaning evangelicals to read books by open theists.⁷ As a result, Bible study groups, prayer partners, and private devotional lives are all coming under the influence of open theism. Often participants in these devotional activities report a renewed vitality to their spiritual life. God has never felt closer; their prayer life has never been so urgent and meaningful; their worship is alive in a new way.

If these were accounts of deepened relationships with the God of the Bible, they would be grounds for rejoicing. But because this exciting intimacy is with a convenient God ultimately at odds with God's self-revelation in Scripture, sorrow and alarm are more appropriate responses. Feelings of intimacy with a God-substitute should not be satisfying. Urgent prayers to any other God are pointless. And vibrant worship of a human invention is empty. Evangelicals are finding open theism exciting. But the excitement arises from an understanding of God that is not taught by the Bible and has never before been embraced by Christians. Because open theism is tempting evangelicals away from a relationship with the God of the Bible, it must be considered a dangerous development.

II. THE FIRST PART OF THE ANSWER: THE TIMES ARE FAVORABLE

A. *The Doctrinal Environment*

One of the more striking features of open theism is its theoretical richness. Its foundation is a plausible account of the future as indeterminate,

⁶ The pastoral focus is especially evident in the work of David Basinger (in the last chapter of *The Openness of God*) and Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

⁷ Examples include: Curtis and Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance*; and John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*. Eldredge denies being an open theist, but it is hard to accept his denial. He emphasizes God's risk-taking in the pursuit of a relationship with humans. The result is unpredictability, apparently even to God. God "*loves to come through*. He loves to show us that he has what it takes. It's not the nature of God to limit his risks and cover his bases. Far from it. Most of the time, he actually lets the odds stack up against him. . . . God's relationship with us and with our world is just that: a *relationship*. As with every relationship, there's a certain amount of unpredictability . . ." (*Wild at Heart*, 31ff.).

humans as radically free, and God as hungry for real love from his creatures. From this foundation arises a whirlwind of implications about God's plans, God's relationship to evil, and our role in bringing about the future. And even if its proponents wouldn't all like the label, open theism unquestionably constitutes a systematic theology. As a systematic theology, it arrives at an auspicious time. For at least a century, systematic work in theology has been drifting farther and farther away from the practical needs and concerns of evangelical believers.⁸ The work of main-line liberal theologians pays less and less attention to the actual words of Scripture. Reformed theologians stress God's transcendence so much that it is hard to imagine having a close relationship with him. Theologians working with Arminian assumptions push to one side the puzzles that come with saying that God knows the future with certainty without making human actions unfree.⁹ Evangelicals don't have much affection for doctrine. Given their options, this isn't hard to understand. And it has provided an opportunity for open theism to advance its own system.

The task of alerting the church to the dangers of open theism would be much easier if the movement had nothing righteous to recommend it. But even though its ultimate understanding of God is unbiblical, significant features of the theological methodology of open theists are commendable. It is important for critics of open theism to admit this. If we do not, we are liable to deceive ourselves about the grip that open theism is capable of sustaining among believers. We will be too likely to think that right-thinking evangelicals will come to see through it, believing that all its charms are illusory. Moreover, we will be tempted to think it sufficient to warn our sisters and brothers only in the most general terms, linking openness tendencies to other known demons such as "postmodernism" or "relativism." If openness were attractive only for deceptive or superficial reasons, that might be sufficient. But even though it arises from unjustifiable and unbiblical presuppositions, open theism's methodology has a number of features that give it both immediate credibility and even a measure of legitimate appeal.

The most obvious of its laudable features is its careful attention to

⁸ On this point see Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ Sanders's treatment of the standard Arminian understanding of God's knowledge of the future exposes some difficult problems. See his "Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control Than the Openness of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997): 26-40.

the details of the biblical text.¹⁰ Unlike too many theological movements in the last century, open theism offers serious exegetical studies that labor to take the words of Scripture seriously. Its use of Scripture proceeds from presuppositions willing to sacrifice God's honor on the altar of human significance, but it still involves attempts at genuine exegesis. And sincere Christians appreciate honest efforts to take God's words seriously. Christians who have been living off a meager diet of sermons only tangentially related to the text of Scripture will find in the writings of Greg Boyd or John Sanders an attitude about Scripture that is refreshing. Malnourished believers are extremely unlikely to see the role that openness presuppositions about love and freedom are playing. What they'll see and feel is an invitation to take the Bible seriously. Since careful attention to Scripture is crucial to leading people away from openness thinking, any rejection of the movement must not squelch this legitimate desire.

The desire for close attention to the Bible's claims should not be surprising. It has been encouraged by years of evangelical emphasis on daily devotions and corporate Bible study. Emphasis on Bible study also helps to explain the pull exerted by open theism's focus on God's immanence. After a century of theology too often fascinated with God's transcendence and otherness, we shouldn't fault evangelicals for sensing the need to embrace God's immanence and pursue an intimate, growing relationship with him. Realizing the need to affirm both immanence and transcendence can only deepen our understanding of God. Openness pushes the pendulum recklessly far toward the immanence end of our account of God's majesty, but in itself the effort to unsettle rigid and unimaginative theology is welcome.

It is similarly difficult to fault those who are attracted to the willingness of open theists to reconsider the role that ancient Greek thought has played in the development of Christian theology.¹¹ Traditional theists should always be happy to look again at the history of doctrinal development. Augustine is not inerrant. Thomas Aquinas wasn't inspired the way Paul was when he wrote Galatians. Reason is fallen;

¹⁰ Boyd's *God of the Possible* has this feature. Chapter 1 of Pinnock's *Most Moved Mover*, "The Scriptural Foundations," is less exegetically careful.

¹¹ See especially chapter 2 of Pinnock's *Most Moved Mover*, "Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance," as well as Sanders's historical discussion in *The Openness of God* and *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

and Greek thought is full of unbiblical oddities. Even though open theists are wrong in concluding that Greek thought distorted Christian doctrine, we can commend efforts to revisit our past. And thus we shouldn't be surprised that this feature of openness writing appeals to Christians of good will.¹²

The interest open theists take in the past isn't the problem. Rather, it is their inconsistent approach to it. They insist that the ancient church was easily carried off by Greek thought. Yet they confidently assume that they are *not* being unduly influenced by twentieth-century thinking about freedom, love, and power. This confidence leads them to cast aside two millennia of Christian consensus too easily. Like jurors who overturn the presumption of innocence on the basis of a strong hunch, they overturn the presumption of the Holy Spirit's past guidance on the basis of their strong intuitions about love and freedom. Discerning the appropriate force to give to tradition is certainly a difficult matter. And many academic defenders of open theism are self-conscious about how little weight they are giving to traditional formulas and symbols. But most people attracted to openness thinking have never considered what role tradition ought to play. If in part they are attracted by the attention that open theists pay to the influence of Greek thinking, their interest is appropriate. Critics of open theism need to be careful not to undermine a legitimate interest in our history and a willingness to hold it up to the light of Scripture.¹³

A fourth legitimate strength of the work of many proponents of openness is its emphasis upon pastoral concerns. John Sanders's short answer to the question, "What is open theism?" (at www.opentheism.org) professes that the entire system arises from a concern for our relationship with God, and in particular our prayer life. David Basinger's contribution to *The Openness of God* similarly focuses on the ways in which proponents of open theism hope to enable a deeper intimacy between God and his people. Some defenses of openness focus on abstract philosophical matters (the indeterminacy of the future, libertarian vs. compatibilist theories of human freedom, or anti-Molinist

¹² For a critique of the open theists' thesis about the role of Greek thought, see chapters 1 and 2 in this volume.

¹³ David Lyle Jeffrey addresses this issue in, "Houses of the Interpreter: Spiritual Exegesis and the Revival of Authority," *Books and Culture* 8, no. 3 (May/June 2002): 30-32.

arguments¹⁴), but the works that appeal to a broad evangelical audience stress the power of open theism to bring believers palpably nearer to God. Tackling very difficult pastoral needs head on, open theism purports to offer answers to an array of perennial problems. It has developed its answers in ways accessible to a nonacademic audience, with little jargon and in user-friendly formats such as devotional guides and websites. And its answers almost never offer “mystery” as the best we can do in answering some of Christianity’s thorniest questions. Why does God allow horrendous evil in the world? Why should I pray if God already knows what is going to happen? Does God share in my grief over a particular disappointment or loss? Does God really delight in my worship or work?

Evangelicals worry about these things, and open theism provides answers that appear both rationally plausible and psychologically satisfying. God prevents all the evil he can without violating our freedom. God needs our prayers in order to finalize his plans about what to do next. God’s grief is more profoundly empathetic than we can comprehend. Our worship adds to God’s growing pleasure in his creation in a way that nothing else can. For Christians who have been languishing under thin, vague, or needlessly abstract teaching, the answers from open theists offer more comfort and satisfaction than they’ve thought possible. And coming in the midst of a proudly individualistic and self-absorbed age, they are answers that vindicate both God and those hearing the message. God’s ways *can* make sense to us; and our actions *are* as independent of God as they feel to us.

Lamentably, these answers come only at the cost of God’s majesty. While the proponents of openness are aware that their solutions involve whittling away at God’s traditional attributes, to most people such costs are too subtle and abstract to matter. Open theists believe that the gains, however, are gripping and concrete. Critics of the openness view may believe that this is a higher price than God’s Word allows us to pay for intellectual satisfaction and psychological solace, but we must not overlook the reality of the intellectual and psychological needs that make open

¹⁴ William Hasker has been especially active. See his chapter-length treatments, “The Absence of a Timeless God,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182-206; “The Foreknowledge Conundrum,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 50 (2001): 97-114; and “Anti-Molinism Is Undefeated!” *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000): 126-131.

theism attractive. Even though the openness solutions are false and ultimately injurious, these questions are real and deserve attention that is accessible and sensitive. Even when their work injures the church, open theists should not be faulted for addressing these troubling questions.

One final feature of openness offerings deserves to be mentioned: they claim to be pursuing the absolute truth about God and his relationship to us. As buffeted as Christians have been by cultural forces urging tolerant and comfortable pluralism, conscientious children of God know that there is a truth of the matter about God. In part, this can be attributed to an excessive confidence about the power of human reason that has been with us since the Enlightenment; but it is more than that. The Holy Spirit works in each of us to open the eyes of our heart to the truths of the gospel (Eph. 1:18). We are made to see that Christ's work is the only way to be right with God. Other ways are false ways, not equally valid alternatives. Our spiritual ears are opened to hear our master's voice (John 10:27-30). The other competing voices are false masters, not our true master with a muffled voice.

Open theism is consistent with this exclusivist understanding of the gospel. Some of its defenders are unclear on Christ being the only way, but the core doctrine is not a pluralist project. They claim to be pursuing *the* truth about God, not one of many truths about God. The non-Christian world is increasingly hostile to Christian claims to know the truth, especially when the truth conflicts with the beliefs of other groups or religions. An important part of the appeal of openness thinking stems from a righteous desire by evangelicals to assert what the Holy Spirit has enabled them to see and hear. God has revealed himself in Scripture. We can know him. Even more importantly, he wants us to know him as a person, not just as an *idea*. Traditional theists too often have urged the faithful to cling to their idea of God because it is part of a beautiful system or because it is traditional. That is like urging the faithful to partake of the Lord's Supper because the wine is good or because we've been doing it for a long time. Conscientious believers know better, and shouldn't be faulted for seeking out intimacy with God himself. Open theism is a flawed systematic theology, but it is successful in part because it connects theology to the believer's desire to know God more intimately.

B. *The Cultural Environment*

Although open theists are typically pursuing the objective truth about God and a deeper relationship with him, their conclusions find a receptive audience today because they fit comfortably within recent currents in American thought. Here I will consider four influential trends. The first might be called the “Nietzschean expectation,” a generalized suspicion that all authority rests only on power and serves only to maintain power structures. Exacerbating this Nietzschean expectation is an even older fascination with human autonomy. Jealous guarding of human independence is as old as the garden of Eden, but at least since Mill’s *On Liberty* what had been a guilty jealousy has swelled and gained extraordinary legitimacy. The third trend is a peculiarly American brand of pragmatism, an antipathy to theory and an impatience with mystery. The recent expansion of American pragmatism is the fourth trend. It might be called “capitulation to Rorty’s challenge.” This capitulation is resignation to the belief that zeal for the truth is always damaging to community. According to this understanding of community, we must always choose between doctrinal precision and a flourishing life together. In order to see how these cultural currents contribute to the rise of open theism it is necessary to explain each in more detail.

SUSPICION OF AUTHORITY

Resistance to authority is a hardy perennial of human existence, but disdain for the possibility of benevolent authority is relatively new. Reformation, Renaissance, and Enlightenment thinkers had serious misgivings about the way churches and monarchs exercised their power,¹⁵ but in all three of those cases the culture at large believed that rulers could be found who would rise above their own interests. Many looked to their own churches for examples of authorities who exercised power for the good of the governed. Church rulers were expected to be servant-leaders. Most people believed that benevolent authority was possible because they saw it in their priests, elders, and deacons. Similar judg-

¹⁵ For influential examples from each era, see Martin Luther, “Address to the German Nobility,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1972); Montaigne, “On Presumption,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989); and Voltaire, “A Treatise on Toleration,” in *Reading About the World*, ed. Paul Briens et al., vol. 2 (Orlando: Harcourt, 1999).

ments were formed about successful civic leaders such as George Washington or John Witherspoon.

In the last century, however, confidence about the possibility of self-sacrificial power has been largely undermined. In part this has been the result of a series of wicked rulers, but cynical expectations have been reinforced by efforts to show that all power is oppressive. I will refer to these efforts collectively as the “Nietzschean expectation.”¹⁶ According to this line of thinking, humans are like all other animals: they are driven to dominate as much of their environment as they can. Whether we admit it or not, everything we do or say aims to extend our power. No action is ever truly self-sacrificing. No words are ever intended only to heal. And every exercise of power is aimed at keeping the powerless on the outside, marginalized and ineffective. This view paints a dismal picture of humans and human authority. But because we are fallen, it is a plausible picture. We know our own hearts well enough to know that it accurately describes us far too often. And we have seen others use power this way most, if not all, of the time. Apart from the restraining work of the Holy Spirit, it could well be a complete picture of humanity.¹⁷

The Nietzschean expectation is common in Western culture, but its influence is also evident among evangelical Christians. Along with the rest of our times, we are cynical of authority. We have long given up on disinterested benevolence from our political leaders. Skillful management of the economy, relief from foreign entanglements, and some measure of “homeland security” is all we dare to hope for. Expectations about our neighbors and friends are similarly less trusting than they were even fifty years ago. Most tragically, however, this cynicism about authority has infected our thinking about spiritual authority. We have seen too many corrupt church leaders and are quick to be suspicious of the motives and abilities of human spiritual leaders. Sadly, we are also tempted to believe that God’s power is susceptible to the tendency to oppress his subjects.

¹⁶ After Friedrich Nietzsche, the late nineteenth-century German philosopher and literary critic. The connection between oppressive power and authority is central to Nietzsche’s work. See especially *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1998). His works are still very popular and many influential thinkers of the twentieth century have extended this expectation in their work. Albert Camus, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida all build explicitly on Nietzsche’s work.

¹⁷ Richard Mouw’s *He Shines in All That’s Fair* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001) argues for this conclusion.

Open theists offer a God who has renounced absolute power, defusing the threat posed by the Nietzschean expectation. Instead of the God of the Bible whose sovereign rule is all-powerful without being oppressive, the God of the open theists willingly sets aside sovereign command out of a jealous regard for the autonomy of his human creatures. Even though open theists would agree that God's rule is not oppressive, their portrayal of God avoids the question. The God of the open theists chooses not to run the risk of being labeled a tyrant.¹⁸

INFATUATION WITH LIBERTY

One of the defining myths of Enlightenment modernism is the conviction that individual liberty is always a good thing. Freedom to pursue my own understanding of the good life, freedom to do as I please so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, and freedom to be true to myself are all seen as unmixed goods. Near the heart of this myth is the belief that significance depends on autonomy, the right to be a law unto myself. Submission that compels beyond what I would choose on my own is slavery, no matter how it is dressed up. Even vows that I voluntarily took in the past are ultimately inimical to real liberty.

Personal autonomy, the power of genuine alternate choice, is an obvious possession for most evangelicals. Philosophers refer to this as a "libertarian" understanding of human freedom.¹⁹ On this view, people are free only if they could (really) have done otherwise than they did when they made their choice. It is not enough for them to *think* that they could have done otherwise. They really had to have been able to do other than they did. Consider an example. If my arms are tied securely behind my back, I am *able* to choose to keep my arms still. But because

¹⁸ Consider Eldredge in *The Sacred Romance*, 76: "Satan mounted his rebellion through the power of one idea: God doesn't have a good heart. Though it seems almost incomprehensible, he deceived a multitude of the heavenly host by sowing the seed of doubt in their minds that God was somehow holding out on them. After the insurrection is squelched, that question lingers in the universe like smoke from a forest fire. Sure, God won, but it took force to do it. Power isn't the same thing as goodness. As the lead actor in the story, God *seems* generous and self-giving, but perhaps he's just big. Maybe his motive is simply to be in charge. At the end of Act II, our hero's heart has been called into question." Eldredge argues that God vindicates the goodness of his heart by giving humans freedom "in order for a true romance to occur" (77). Whether Eldredge would affirm God's exhaustive knowledge of the future is unclear. His emphasis on the need for risk taking and freedom in order for there to be a "true romance," however, is clearly in line with the emphases of open theism, and especially of the work of John Sanders.

¹⁹ A clear statement of the libertarian view of freedom that finds it obviously true can be found in Scott Davison's chapter, "Divine Providence and Human Freedom," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 217-237.

I can't really do anything else, calling that a *free* choice is inappropriate. If my arms are untied (and no new restraints are imposed), then if I choose to leave my arms behind my back the choice is free. I could have done otherwise. The libertarian theory of freedom holds that a choice is free only if it is really possible to do otherwise.²⁰

The philosophical implications of this view of freedom are far-reaching. Here, however, it is sufficient to note only two things. First, this understanding of what it means to be free is thought to be an undeniable fact about human existence. We are aware of what it feels like to be free (and what it feels like not to be free); and on this subject no authority can be superior to the way things clearly seem. Second, with this understanding of freedom, a person's life is insignificant and morally pointless unless the person is free in the libertarian sense.²¹ When it is later discovered that this kind of freedom is very hard to reconcile with God's exhaustive foreknowledge, God's omniscience becomes a threat both to the highest recognized authority (how things seem) and to human moral significance (which depends on libertarian freedom). Open theists offer to preserve us from having to choose between God's claims to know the future in detail and our freedom, and they promise to make God's Lordship over history no threat to our significance.

Along with this confidence about libertarian freedom of choice has come an individualistic understanding of social realities. Most evangelicals willingly accept that humans are each God-like unmoved movers in their morally significant choices. And because this is a fundamental fact, no grouping of individuals can ever really be more than a temporary and voluntary collection of people. We may say that in marriage husband and wife become "one flesh," but this is thought to be either poetry or a veiled allusion to sexual intimacy. We may sing, "We are one in the Spirit / We are one in the Lord," but we can't mean it literally. The "body of Christ" must be a metaphor, not a reality. Otherwise, our liberty would be constrained by our connection to each other.

Even worse, because it is popular to define human freedom first and

²⁰ For a fuller explanation and critique of libertarian freedom, see Mark R. Talbot's chapter in this volume.

²¹ An influential source for this position is the work of Kierkegaard. See his *Journals and Papers*, VII:I A 181 (Hong and Hong 1251) in *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1970). This is a prominent theme in most existentialist thought.

everything else in light of it, the most natural description of our relationship with God is one of mutual dependence. The common view is that, like God, we are radically independent in our free choices. It may be gauche to say, “God needs me,” or, “God is powerless until I choose to heed his call,” but it follows from this exalted view of human freedom. And quite a number of evangelicals are comfortable believing what it is gauche to say: our freedom gives us the power to make God either modify his plans around our choices or wait for circumstances more favorable to his purposes. Open theists insist that God is omni-resourceful, able to get his way in most circumstances without resorting to freedom-violating force.²² And while omni-resourcefulness falls well short of the sovereign omnipotence of traditional theism, thinking of God in this way makes God’s power no threat to our freedom.

Such an exalted understanding of human freedom is typically qualified, however. Even open theists concede that God doesn’t depend on us in order to realize his general plans. But if he wants us to be significant, responsible contributors to the realization of his plans, then God must lay aside his ability to get his will by force. In line with our culture’s infatuation with liberty, evangelical thinking about freedom loosens the connections between husbands and wives, and between members of churches. And it makes us receptive to the idea that God is dependent upon us in order to fulfill his designs. I am not here suggesting that open theists hope to loosen their ties to their spouses, or even to make God dependent upon them. The point is only that we live in an age when jealous regard for our autonomy makes us increasingly willing to accept these implications. This is fertile soil for the growth of open theism.

IMPATIENCE WITH MYSTERY

A third feature of American culture disposing evangelicals toward open theism is our pragmatic spirit. Noted by visitors since de Tocqueville in the first part of the nineteenth century,²³ Americans share a preference for doing over theorizing. We are a nation that gets things done, willing to

²² According to at least Boyd, Rice, Pinnock, and Hasker, God can usually get his way. Typically God does this by managing the circumstances in ways highly likely to result in our freely choosing what he desires. In some cases, though, God must force events. But open theists expect that these cases are rare, and may never involve overriding human freedom. For interaction with Boyd’s proposal in particular, see chapter 8 in this volume.

²³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Bantam, 2000), orig. 1835.

explain why things work only after seeing that the theory has a use. We are offended by loose ends, delayed closure, and complexity not rewarded by increased efficiency. In theological matters this expresses itself as distaste for doctrinal wrangling and impatience with mystery. Both of these sentiments advance the fortunes of open theism. Following the Bible's caution against presuming to comprehend God, traditional theism is willing to admit that some questions can be answered only with submission to the mystery of God's majesty. More satisfying to American sensibilities, though, is open theism's offer of mystery-free explanations. And when traditional theists attempt to expose open theism's dangers, they are accused of committing the social crime of pointless disputation. Deliverance from mystery makes open theism attractive to American evangelicals. Moreover, the prospect of unpleasant theological debates does more than offend. It threatens beliefs currently in vogue about the nature of a healthy community.

PRAGMATISM ABOUT COMMUNITY

In "Solidarity or Objectivity?" Richard Rorty expresses an increasingly common American expectation, arguing that we must choose between two conceptions of our life together.²⁴ On the one hand, we can choose to pursue genuine, flourishing community (solidarity), but that will be possible only if we abandon the myth that there are community-transcending truths. On the other hand, we can pursue a life based on community-transcending truths (such as universal human rights), but to do so means abandoning any expectations about achieving real community. This second alternative he calls "objectivity." This choice between objective truth and real community, he insists, is both momentous and unavoidable. Rorty's aim is to draw all Americans into the common project of liberal democracy. Evangelical Christians have largely rejected his suggestion that the church is a threat to a thriving American community. But they have internalized two of his conclusions about the nature of true community.

The first of these conclusions about community concerns the relationship between consensus and authority. According to Rorty, the only

²⁴ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3-19.

legitimate foundation for authority is the consent of the governed. For Americans this should sound familiar (it is presumed in the Declaration of Independence). In the case of civil government, the consent of the governed is very important. But spiritual authority in the church does not rest ultimately upon consent. God calls his people out of the world into a body; and God sets apart people to shepherd them. When Christians think about church authority the way they think about civil authority, they come to expect that their consent is always necessary to command their obedience. They are also tempted to resent even legitimate exercises of church discipline. And they are even tempted to think it tyrannical of God to rule merely according to the counsel of his own will. Open theists exploit this temptation, offering a God who constrains his rule by the choices of his creatures. While the God of the open theists does at times find it necessary to override human choices, it is only as a last resort. Cooperative creation of the future is what the openness God desires, since any other kind of rule destroys community.

A second conclusion about community advanced by Rorty and influencing evangelicals concerns the pursuit of truth.²⁵ Rorty argues that fascination with the truth destroys community. It is not possible, according to Rorty, to pursue both real community and community-transcendent truth. Community is maintained by a commitment to each other that bears with differences over theoretical detail. Anyone who insists that some should be excluded for the sake of the truth is a threat to the peace of the community. With this understanding of a flourishing community, tolerance is the preeminent virtue. Church discipline is viewed as a destructive power play, an expression of political ambition rather than love. Because open theism is a direct rejection of central doctrines about God's knowledge and relationship to his creatures, it can only benefit from an environment in which doctrinal disputes are widely viewed as threats to Christian community. Churches will be tempted to find a way to tolerate open theism as only a minor divergence from their doctrinal standards. To view it as more than a minor divergence would demand a doctrinal dispute that would undermine the peace of the body.

²⁵ For a clear instance of Rorty's influence on evangelical thought, see Philip Kenneson, "There Is No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 155-170.

As long as truth is thought to be a threat to community solidarity, open theism will be safe.

C. The Spiritual Environment

Current doctrinal and cultural environments are conducive to the rise of open theism. But they aren't sufficient in themselves to account for it. Why, then, is the openness understanding of God so attractive right now? The short answer is that the spiritual climate of American evangelicalism is peculiarly disposed to find it attractive and succumb to its charms. Two features of our current situation combine to nurture the spread of open theism. In the first place, unmet spiritual needs and ecclesiastical individualism make evangelicals receptive to the claims of open theists. This receptivity alone is not a sufficient explanation, however, since the church should possess the means to protect its members from such unbiblical teachings. But impediments to open theism that ought to be protecting the church are absent or malfunctioning. I will discuss the receptive environment first.

With the rest of our culture, American evangelicals possess a number of felt needs that are not being met. Many of these needs are legitimate. Reconciliation with our neighbors, a place in a vital community, intimacy with God, and intellectual stimulation are just a few of the good things that we righteously desire. And despite the universality of these desires, American culture is inimical to realizing them. Divorce rates, frantic work demands, and an entertainment industry geared to passive and individual pleasures all contribute to a brooding sense of alienation and abandonment. Real friendships are old-fashioned; neighbors you trust are distant memories; families that nurture are endangered. The legitimate need for loving relationships and a safe home is often unmet. Very few think of the church as a likely place of remedy. Even evangelicals are hungry for reliable promises of mutual commitment.

Part of our desire for mutual commitment is a desire for stability, but evangelicals have also absorbed our culture's preference for novelty, and this includes theological novelty. With the rest of American culture, evangelicals increasingly prefer the young, the new, and the immediate. Skillfully managed new ideas are likely to get a hearing just because of

their “buzz.” Distribution options without any editorial control enable a mounting flood of new ideas and “hype” to circulate. This puts pressure on publishers of even Christian books to acknowledge the latest idea, deepening the perception that the idea is “mainstream” and worthy of consideration. Open theists have benefited from this trend, receiving increased attention simply because their ideas are new.

THE EMERGENCE OF EXTRA-ECCLESIAL CHRISTIANITY

The broader culture’s suspicion regarding authority finds an evangelical expression in the growth of “para-church” substitutes. Church alternatives or supplements are numerous: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Bible Study Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Promise Keepers, Baptist Student Union, homeschooling networks, and so forth. All of these organizations meet real and important needs, and the problem is not their existence. The problem is rather the extent to which they can allow their participants to treat the organization as their spiritual home. Sometimes even against the intentions of the organizers, these groups can take the place of the local church as the center of their participants’ spiritual lives. The success of the para-church organization can become more important than the health of the local church. The participants can come to care more about pleasing others in the para-church organization than about pleasing fellow members of their local church. Some even come to believe that active participation in a para-church group is an adequate substitute for being a church member at all.

However, even the most spiritually vital and biblically faithful para-church organizations cannot offer authoritative spiritual oversight. Because they are not created as substitutes for churches, they do not have leaders set apart by ordination; they do not typically administer the sacraments; and they don’t receive members by baptism or the taking of vows. And because they are not churches, they cannot presume that their leaders are set apart by the Spirit for the care of believers. The Spirit may empower their work, but they may not claim to exercise discipline as Christ’s representative. The ordained overseers of churches may do so. Whatever title is used (e.g., elder, deacon, brother, priest), the New Testament is clear that leaders set apart by ordination are crucial to the

life of the church.²⁶ Para-church organizations often do good and important work, and they regularly provide faithful church members with edifying opportunities for fellowship, service, and mutual encouragement. But they can also unwittingly suggest that properly ordained spiritual oversight is unnecessary.²⁷ In an age that already assumes that all associations are voluntary human constructions, these organizations can easily reinforce among their participants the broader culture's confusions about personal autonomy and the expectation that every association—even the church—is a voluntary human construction.

Love of personal liberty manifests itself among evangelicals in two ways that are especially helpful to the rise of open theism. The first is a clear preference for explicitly voluntary Christian associations. Churches rightly require vows from church members. These vows bind the members beyond a passing enchantment with the group. Para-church groups offer the benefits of “membership” without any vows and without any submission to ordained leaders. A second manifestation of the love of autonomy is the conviction that every Christian is equipped to make choices without any authoritative guidance. Clear guidance about devotional materials or theological literature is hard to find anywhere in evangelical Christianity. In part this is because Christians are not asking for it. Para-church individualism may encourage the belief that every believer is competent to be his or her own shepherd.

Confident autonomy and suspicion of binding authority are not the only forces encouraging evangelicals to find their spiritual home outside of specific churches. Culturally popular expectations about the relationship between authority and real community also play a role. Evangelicals have largely accepted the suggestion that any exercise of authority undermines community. As a result, they are less likely to seek spiritual nurture inside a structure that requires submission to ordained shepherds. But they still know that intimate fellowship is vital to spiritual growth. Para-church groups provide a visible home among

²⁶ See 1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; and especially Acts 20:17ff: “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them . . . ‘Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!’” (NIV).

²⁷ For a similar line of reasoning, see Brian Habig and Les Newsom, *The Enduring Community: Embracing the Priority of the Church* (Jackson, Miss.: Reformed University Press, 2002).

informally committed believers. These are communities built on consensus, not submission. These groups often construct impressive and effective systems of accountability, but it is voluntary accountability to leaders whose authority is ratified by individual members. It is not submission to shepherds set apart by God's ordination. This falls short of the rich life of the church possible in submission to God-ordained shepherds, but it is considerably better than the emptiness of modern life. And with fewer and fewer models of community built on submission, for many evangelicals these consensus-based communities are the only alternatives to the modern emptiness that they know.

Within Christian communities defined by consensus, "doctrine" is the acknowledged enemy of unity. The pursuit of theological discipline is always unpleasant because it attacks group consensus, the real foundation of the voluntary association. Accordingly, almost all the fundamentals are negotiable for the sake of peace within the community. Peace is the precondition for the maintenance of the community, instead of being the consequence of mutual submission to God's Word and to the shepherds he is holding responsible. And because peace must precede community, differences of age, ethnic culture, economic status, or education are inevitably problematic. Even though Christian community is supposed to be a picture of the irrelevance of these divisions for those captured by the Spirit, we are instead drawn to more and more homogeneous spiritual "homes." College ministries offer young adults a community experience without the inconvenience of restless little children, older believers they ought to imitate and respect, and the marginally educated. Segment-specific Bible studies cater to similarly narrow demographic groups.

These developments make it less and less likely that Christians will be willing to support the unpleasant task of excluding or even denouncing errors that hurt the church. Having gained a degree of acceptance, open theism will be very hard to condemn clearly. And para-church Christianity will find it even more difficult than churches with ordained leaders. The movement of evangelicals out from under ordained oversight provides open theists with a safe environment. This is especially evident among Christian theologians and philosophers. A significant amount of theological discussion today takes place out from under the oversight of ordained shepherds. Participants act as Christian intellec-

tuals at-large, submitting to no oversight other than the good will of the conference organizers. Open theism benefits from this arrangement. Once the conference begins, no one has the right to offer an authoritative judgment about the assertions of open theists. And if anyone does call the orthodoxy of open theism into question, then the openness position gains the advantage of being seen as a victim of intolerance.

In parallel with the move of evangelicals to para-church identities, more and more Christian theologians and philosophers are treating professional associations as their own para-church homes. Groups like the American Academy of Religion, the Society of Biblical Languages, and the Society of Christian Philosophers can become for professional Christian scholars a kind of spiritual home. They easily become places where Christian academics have their talents nurtured. They find Christians with similar challenges and burdens who are able to appreciate the peculiar struggles they face as believers with academic gifts and responsibilities. Unlike the local church or a particular denomination, these groups offer spiritual encouragement without the inconvenience of ordained spiritual oversight. Academic freedom is respected to an almost unlimited degree. The oversight that exists is carried out by other academics and is typically limited to procedural rather than substantive matters. The threat of having mere engineers, contractors, or salespeople question their work doesn't arise. For these academics, the core of their Christian life—where their faith intersects with their most cherished activities—can come to be located outside of the local church and its ordained oversight. As with other para-church homes, it is extra-ecclesial Christianity.

The absence of functioning ordained oversight in these academic organizations forces the opponents of open theism into an impossible situation. The move of academics away from ordained oversight has been consistent with the twentieth-century suspicion that any exercise of authority rests either on consensus or on the oppressive use of power. According to the Nietzschean expectation, even apparently principled stands are just disguised impositions by those with the power to get their way. Unless handled very carefully, efforts to exclude open theism from such organizations threaten to confirm these expectations about power, consensus, and spiritual authority.

SHEEP WITHOUT SHEPHERDS

Cultural trends and evolving thinking about church identity have provided fertile soil for the growth of open theism. But the speed of its move into the mainstream has also depended on the failure of efforts to impede it. Critics of openness have been sounding an alarm, but in general the God-ordained means for protecting God's flock are malfunctioning. While many strategies could effectively arrest the spread of openness influence, the only authority that can legitimately command obedience is the collective judgment of overseers set apart by ordination. Conservative scholars may be able most clearly to explain the dangers posed by open theism's understanding of God and his dealings with his people, but only ordained overseers have the biblical authority to condemn the error. Open theists have enjoyed the absence of effective resistance because the link that should exist between academics and ordained overseers is broken.

Complicating matters, the link has been broken for a long time. Both liberal and conservative Christian academics have drifted away from doing their work as church members. For a variety of reasons, evangelical Christian scholars find it natural to see their work as independent of ordained spiritual oversight. One reason is the insistence that academic freedom is inconsistent with ecclesiastical oversight. Another reason for the drift is the tendency for nonacademic overseers to greet scholarly work with either suspicion or a yawn. This response from ordained overseers has encouraged evangelical academics to seek their main spiritual encouragement for their work in extra-ecclesial organizations. These tendencies to resist oversight and to suspect theological expertise are mutually reinforcing. The result is a downward spiral away from a healthy community in which academic talents are encouraged to flourish under the careful oversight of God's appointed shepherds.

Movement away from a productive partnership between academics and ordained overseers has reached a point favorable to the spread of open theism. In the absence of mutual trust between theologians and ordained leaders, peace is maintained by a kind of *détente*. Theologians remain nominally under ordained oversight in exchange for the "freedom" to explore within very wide boundaries. Overseers exclude only the blatantly rebellious in exchange for the prestige of retaining influ-

ential authors and professors. This arrangement might work reasonably well if the church were composed only of academics and ordained leaders. But they aren't the whole church, and neither group has the luxury of pretending that they are. Both the academics and the overseers have their gifts primarily for the building up of the body. And the current peace-preserving relationship is hurting the church, denying it guidance that it needs.²⁸

Speculation by open theists about God's relationship to his creatures might seem like the benign work of ivory-tower academics. Far too often philosophers and theologians busy themselves with issues and disputes that are as impractical as they are heated. But the work of open theists is different. They are publishing articles, books, and web discussions that are widely read, especially by other academics and authors. These readers, in turn, exert their own influence as seminary professors, college teachers, and writers of devotional literature. Pastors, youth workers, Bible-study leaders, and Sunday school teachers have their thinking shaped by professors, teachers, and popular authors. This chain of influence from academic open theists to Bible studies can already be seen. In this case at least, ivory-tower speculation is having very practical consequences.

Ordained church overseers do not have the option of treating open theism as a passing fad. And even though the link is broken between academics and overseers, both must take steps to work together to give believers the guidance that they have every right to expect. Does God know the future? Church members can easily find books, Bible study groups, and even sermons that offer conflicting opinions. How they answer that question has profound implications for the progress of their spiritual life, the kinds of prayers they offer, and their approach to worship. Is God frustrated by specific acts of evil? Once again, the range of answers that they can find in print and elsewhere is staggering. And the answers believers settle on will affect their ability to give an answer for their faith, as well as affecting their appreciation for Christ's sacrificial death. The questions are many and far-reaching, and many entrusted by

²⁸ The evolution of church leadership away from spiritual oversight and toward professional management is helpfully discussed by Darryl Hart in, "Whatever Happened to Office? Ordination and the Crisis of Leadership in American Protestantism," *Touchstone* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 12-16.

God with the spiritual nurture of believers are apparently unwilling or unable to give the guidance they need and should expect.

Reluctance to offer specific guidance is understandable given the Nietzschean expectation, but in some cases careful shepherds will need to warn against specific views. Before this suggestion is drowned out by the howls of Christian scholars, I hasten to add that specific exclusion should not happen very often.²⁹ It is necessary in the case of open theism precisely because it has been developed in detail and published widely apart from effective ordained oversight. When new theological systems are developed and widely distributed apart from ordained supervision, specific exclusion is much more likely both to be necessary and to be injurious to the peace and health of the church. Until the link of trust between academics and overseers is repaired, it is likely that the church will frequently have to choose between disturbing the peace by wholesale public rejections and enduring the confusion that attends disjointed local efforts to counter errors.

However it is delivered, the shepherding guidance that Christians need most is denomination-specific. Pastors and other ordained leaders of their local congregations should be the first place Christians are looking for suggestions about what to read and warnings about errors to avoid. These local leaders, in turn, ought to be able to look to their conferences and broader assemblies for guidance. No denomination can effectively make spiritual demands of authors and teachers outside their membership, so no assembly or conference can decide for everyone what is or is not acceptable. But they can and must give guidance to their members. And members ought to be looking to them for direction and warnings. Evangelical church members have a right to hear from their local and denominational leaders whether open theism is an acceptable understanding of God. As it turns out, clear guidance of this kind is hard to achieve.

TWO EFFORTS AT GUIDANCE BY EXCLUSION

In June of 2000, the Baptist General Conference considered two resolutions relating to open theism. Their deliberations focused on the crucial openness contention that God does not know the future

²⁹ For specific criteria, see Wayne Grudem's chapter in this volume.

exhaustively (because the future won't exist until free creatures make their choices). The first of the two resolutions asked the Conference to say clearly that God does know the future exhaustively. It read:

Be it resolved that we, the delegates of the Baptist General Conference (who are also the delegates of Bethel College and Seminary) affirm that God's knowledge of all past, present and future events is exhaustive; and, we also believe that the "openness" view of God's foreknowledge is contrary to our fellowship's historic understanding of God's omniscience.³⁰

This resolution passed. Had it been the Conference's only word on open theism, the entire denomination would have had the benefit of clear guidance. Pastoral efforts to discourage their congregations from being seduced by openness thinking would have been strengthened. Staffing decisions by the denominational college and seminary would have been simplified. Members of Conference churches would have been spared the distress and confusion of wondering whether questions about God's foreknowledge have answers.

But it was not the only word from the Conference on the matter. On the day of the vote, a second resolution was added to the agenda. It read:

Be it resolved that the statement on the doctrine of God in the 1951 Affirmation of Faith is sufficiently stated; and, in regard to the subject of Open Theism, as delegates of the Baptist General Conference (who are also the delegates of Bethel College and Seminary) we affirm that [Open Theist] Dr. [Greg] Boyd's views did not warrant his termination as a member of the Bethel College faculty and by inference that his views fall within the accepted bounds of the evangelical spectrum.³¹

This resolution also passed. While it is possible to reconcile these two assertions (by stipulating that open theism is an insignificant deviation from the Bible's teaching³²), the passage of this second resolution leaves

³⁰ Quoted from John Piper, "We Took a Good Stand and Made a Bad Mistake: Reflections on the Baptist General Conference Annual Meeting, St. Paul, June 25-28, 2000." Available at www.desiringGod.org/library/fresh_words/2000/070500.html.

³¹ Quoted from Piper, "We Took a Good Stand." This formulation combines the resolution and the relevant portion of the "Position paper" by the Bethel board of trustees referred to in the resolution.

³² *Ibid.*

the membership of the Baptist General Conference with very mixed signals about the Bible's teaching on God's foreknowledge. Open theists would have us believe that before the foundation of the world God didn't *know* whether any would ever respond to the gospel call. (Since those responses were still in the future, they would say that before the foundation of the world there was nothing that God could know about them.) Is this an insignificant deviation from the Bible's teaching? The Conference's decisions make it hard to tell.

Christians looking for guidance on how to think about open theism are likely to find this outcome confusing. The timing of the second resolution suggests that it was introduced to prevent the Conference from speaking clearly. But the Baptist General Conference was not the only denomination that attempted to provide their membership with clear guidance. The following year (2001) the Southern Baptist Convention overwhelmingly passed a resolution affirming God's exhaustive foreknowledge. In a statement that open theists should find hard to accept, the Convention said (in part):

Be it further RESOLVED, that we confess and proclaim that the omniscience of God extends to all creation and throughout all time, to all things actual and potential, even to the thoughts and actions of His conscious creatures, past, present, and future . . . ³³

In this case, the message was unmixed, giving the membership of the Convention direction on an important matter.

Many other denominations have confessional standards or affirmation statements that implicitly reject the central claims of open theism. But in most cases the denominations have not acted officially to make these implicit judgments explicit. Members of these denominations are left to recognize the connection between the church standards and draw the inferences for themselves. While this does provide some help to the church, it is considerably less than most Christians would find beneficial. Both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist General Conference are to be commended for tackling the matter

³³ See www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=574, as well as "Resolution on the Power, Knowledge, and Changelessness of God," SBC, June, 1999.

directly, even if the outcome in one case was more confusing than it needed to be.

Clear guidance is hard to find in the church today, and ordained leaders are certainly fallible. Even so, these leaders are the ordinary means by which God cares for the flock. They make mistakes, but we are encouraged to presume that the Spirit works through their collective judgment. We look to them for wisdom because we expect that they are given an extra measure of discernment along with their peculiar level of accountability before God. 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. As a result, the doctrinal, cultural, and spiritual climate grows in importance. Christians are disposed by this climate to pay special attention to new and plausibly biblical attempts to enrich their relationship with God in ways that they can understand. These environmental forces favor treatments of God that soften his awesome majesty, affirm human importance, and satisfy our hunger for answers. Open theism offers a God that meets American expectations admirably.

III. THE REST OF THE ANSWER: A GOD FOR OUR TIMES

While defenders of open theism insist that they are only attempting to correct the defects in the traditional understanding of God, the God of open theism is conveniently consistent with the kind of deity that American evangelicals will find comfortable. Some have argued that the open God is a capitulation to process philosophy,³⁴ but despite the provocative points of contact between process philosophy and open theism, I am more struck by the way the open God fits current American expectations about power, freedom, mystery, and community. Even if proponents of openness were motivated by zeal to rescue the God of the Bible from Greek distortions, what they have produced is a God of American distortions. In the place of a static tyrant, they have erected

³⁴ The work by proponents of open theism on process thought is worthy of attention. Consider Boyd's *Trinity and Process: A Critical Examination and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); and David Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (New York: SUNY, 1988).

the ultimate American parent. The God of open theism is soothingly free from mystery and gratifyingly zealous to affirm our autonomy.

The combination of expectations about power, autonomy, and community current in contemporary thought is relatively new in American life. But confidence that it ought to be easy to make sense of God is not. Open theism appeals to the American distaste for mystery on a range of issues. How can we be truly free and God majestically sovereign? No problem: God's sovereignty is limited by our freedom. Why is there so much evil in the world? God wasn't able to prevent it without violating human autonomy. Why would God have us pray if he already knows what we'll ask? He only knows generally what we're likely to ask. The future is undetermined until we make our choices. Until we pray, there is nothing for God to know about our specific requests; so God can't decide until *then* how to respond. He can know what we'll ask before we ask it only in a general way. Open theism claims to resolve one classic mystery after another.

A comprehensible God satisfies American sensibilities, but release from mystery is not the most attractive feature of the openness model for American evangelicals. In line with popular misgivings about the possibility of truly benevolent power, the God of open theism is unwilling to exercise sovereign power. Embodying the only kind of power that today's culture finds comfortable, the open God renounces the imposition of his own will, settling instead for persuading or out-maneuvering his creatures. The open theist insists that this is the pursuit of a genuine love relationship, but even concerning genuine love the openness model is strikingly appropriate to our times. The loving relationship the open God seeks is much more like the relationship *Parents* magazine counsels its readers to pursue with their children.³⁵ Expecting sovereign authority to destroy intimacy, the open God accomplishes just what he can manage by manipulation. This is a long way from the God of Ephesians 1, who accomplishes everything according to the counsel of his own will. The apostle Paul explains God's love for us in Christ in terms of God's sovereign, independent will, not in spite of it. Unlike open theists, Paul makes no mention of risk, or mutual dependence, or open-

³⁵ *Parents* magazine emphasizes the importance of a child's autonomy. For a representative sample of its advice about managing the dangers facing children, see Dianne Hales, "Raising Kids in an R-Rated Culture" (*Parents* [March 1, 2001]), available at www.parents.com/articles/ages_and_stages/3105.jsp.

ness to an indeterminate future. Consistent with the rest of his epistles, Paul in Ephesians describes God in love claiming a people even though they hate God; Paul has no uncertainty about whether God will succeed. For Paul, divine love takes no risks.

Drawing on a different Pauline theme, open theists offer the husband-wife relationship as a clearer model of the love relationship that God is pursuing with his people.³⁶ Their goal is to emphasize God's care to guard the autonomy of his human creatures. But the husband-wife model doesn't capture the divine-human relationship that open theists ultimately have in mind. Even after God has divested himself of sovereign power for the sake of intimacy, the God of open theism is still dramatically more powerful, knowledgeable, and good than his human creatures. This is not the relationship of mutual dependence found in healthy marriages. Because of this, a better analogy for the relationship between the open God and his creatures would be the relationship between a morally excellent parent and an infant child. This analogy would preserve the power, knowledge, and goodness gap. But even this analogy doesn't secure precisely what open theists intend, since on this model it wouldn't make sense for God to guard our autonomy jealously. Loving parents know better than to submit their wise judgments to the whims of their infant children.

In order to capture the principal features of the openness account of God's relationship to his creatures, it is necessary to find an analogy that preserves both the gap between us and God in power, knowledge, and moral excellence, and God's zeal to protect human autonomy. Jealous regard for our autonomy is crucial because, like many evangelicals today, the open God believes that responsibility and significance are impossible without libertarian freedom. On the open theist account, God can have morally significant creatures only if he is willing to constrain his own freedom by our free choices. Accordingly, the open God makes only general plans, since specific plans would leave no room for truly free input from his creatures. And the open God awaits the choices of his creatures before making final decisions about what he will do. This is not the picture of God in the Scriptures.³⁷ It is rather the picture of a

³⁶ John Sanders used this analogy extensively in his presentation to the 1999 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Orlando, Florida.

³⁷ See especially Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1; and Isaiah 45. God is consistently praised as the Lord of history who knows the end from the beginning and the specific details in between.

parent today looking to coax his or her teenage child into a meaningful mutual relationship. Evangelicals today have no trouble recognizing the challenges this open God faces. They understandably find it easy to identify with such a God. Open theism provides them with precisely the kind of father they wish they had had as teenagers. It also flatters their expectations about the centrality of their autonomy. Even God must contend with it in order to realize his ends.

The best analogy for the relationship between the open God and his free creatures is not that of a questing lover; it is instead that of a very resourceful parent of wayward teenage children. The creator of the universe pursues communal intimacy with us the same way a parent pursues a mutual relationship with his or her teenage child. Promises of delight and warnings about blessings unrealized are combined with the careful organizing of circumstances. And still the open God can't guarantee that any particular person will seek him out. Once again, evangelicals will recognize this model of fatherly solicitude. As teenagers who were able to frustrate their parents, or as teenagers wishing for parental intimacy, or as parents seeking intimacy with their children, the open God is very likely to make sense to evangelicals today. This is a God we both understand and empathize with. Open theism gives us a God for our times: a God like us.

IV. A WAY FORWARD

It is tempting to lay all the blame for the rise of open theism at the feet of its proponents, but they certainly have had a lot of help. Currents of thought within the culture have contributed to a climate in which the open God is particularly attractive. And with only a few notable exceptions—Crossway Books, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, and *World* magazine, to name three—Christian academics, publishers, bookstores, and reviewers have done too little to guard the church against this dangerous new system of doctrine. But just as ordination sets apart Christian leaders for the exercise of spiritual authority without oppression, it also carries with it peculiar responsibility for shepherding God's people. Ultimately, much of the blame for the rise of open theism must fall on ordained overseers who have chosen to allow it. In order

to see how important it is for the church to take the threat of open theism seriously, consider the following story:

At the end of a wholesome date, Richard and Janine visit a Christian bookstore looking for something they can read together. In their early twenties and evangelicals serious about their faith, they want a book they can discuss that will draw them closer to God and to each other. Neither has a particular title in mind, but they agree to look first for a book about God. Holding hands, they head for the “Theology/Christian Living” shelves.

What they find is bewildering. The shelf at eye level has numerous promising titles lined up: *Knowing God*; *The Openness of God*; *A Hunger for God*; *Engaging God’s World*; and *Pray with Your Eyes Open*.³⁸ They reject the last of them because the title doesn’t mention God. Opening *Knowing God*, they discover that it was written before they were born. Since they want something current, they set it aside. Because something like “engaging” is close to both their hearts, the table of contents of *Engaging God’s World* grabs their attention. The first chapter, “Longing and Hope,” looks very promising. But the other chapter titles—“Creation” and “The Fall”—don’t, so they decide against it.

Pleased that they are agreeing about these choices so easily, Richard and Janine each pull down one of the two remaining books. Richard studies the back cover of *The Openness of God*, while Janine thumbs through *A Hunger for God*. Both are encouraged by what they find. Richard had considered attending Wheaton College, and *The Openness of God* has a recommendation from a Wheaton professor. Janine had been thinking about fasting as a spiritual exercise, and *A Hunger for God* promises to explain the practice. They exchange books. Janine is attracted by the back-jacket promise that *The Openness of God* offers a “more consistently biblical” understanding of God that is “more true to the actual devotional lives of Christians.” Uninterested in giving up any meals, Richard agrees that *A Hunger for God* isn’t as promising as *The Openness of God*. They are impressed by the ease with which they reached a decision and head to the checkout counter.

³⁸ The books are arranged alphabetically by author: J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973); Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*; John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1997); Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); and Richard Pratt, *Pray with Your Eyes Open* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987).

The clerk at the cash register asks, “Did you find everything you were looking for?” Richard says he thinks so, but goes on to ask what the clerk thinks of their choice. The clerk says he hasn’t read the book, but thinks he has a *Christianity Today* article that mentions it. Rummaging around under the counter he pulls out an old issue turned to an editorial entitled, “God vs. God.”³⁹ Richard and Janine both read the first few paragraphs. They learn that while traditional theism is boring, open theism is a dynamic new evangelical alternative. Pleased with the thought of a cutting-edge way of deepening their relationship, Richard and Janine each buy a copy of the book. Even before they leave the store they set a dinner-date to discuss the first chapter.

Richard and Janine were careful about their selection, looking for guidance from more than one source and considering more than one option. But while the purchase of two copies of *The Openness of God* has only miniscule cultural impact, it is nonetheless a significant victory for the cause of open theism. Richard and Janine are fairly typical evangelicals. They love God and want to know him better, and they were easily persuaded that studying *The Openness of God* would be rewarded with spiritual growth.

Nearly everyone involved in this story bears some responsibility for the harm that this choice of a book will inflict. And what is needed in response is a community-wide effort to repair the systems of guidance and encouragement that should have been there for Richard and Janine. Efforts to reestablish a healthy relationship between ordained shepherds and the flock within the body of Christ will be crucial. Humanly speaking, however, it is hard to see how this can happen. One serious impediment to moving forward is a pervasive distrust within the body of Christ. Idea-shaping academics, reporters, and publishers too often don’t trust ordained shepherds, finding excuses to avoid real submission to ordained oversight. Ordained leaders too often don’t trust idea-shapers, thinking it necessary to protect the faith against reckless academics, reporters, and publishers who crave novelty and flirt with edgy ideas. Neither group is humanly likely to make the first trusting move toward responsible leadership and submissive industry.

Responsible leadership by ordained shepherds will need to take

³⁹ *Christianity Today* 44, no. 2 (7 February 2000): 34-35. The editorial as a whole is slightly more balanced than its opening paragraphs.

much more seriously the needs of those they are called to guard and nurture. More needs to be done to provide church members with pointed guidance about what is worth reading and which new ideas need to be held suspect. The amount of work this will involve is considerable. Pastors and other ordained shepherds don't have the time to review all the books that members of their churches are likely to pick up. And even if they had the time, many of them as individuals would struggle to discern some of the more subtle threats. Happily, these shepherds have a resource available in a growing stable of theologically trained lay people—both men and women—who can be called upon. Just as the leaders of a church would call upon talented carpenters in the church to reinforce a defective ceiling, they should be calling upon talented academics to provide informed guidance about theological developments.

Making use of these theological talents in the service of the church would provide needed guidance. It would also draw the academics into the life of the church, making it a place where their talents are valued and nurtured. Reestablishing the needed trust between academics and shepherds won't be easy, but it can be done. Humanly speaking, the first move will need to come from academics who volunteer to submit drafts of their work to spiritual overseers for comment and counsel. The resulting dialogue and guidance may be strained at first, but the entire church would benefit from the expanded circle of discussion and accountability. I submitted a serious draft of this chapter to my pastor at Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church and asked for guidance about its assertions. He made copies for all thirty of the church's elders, and they responded with written questions and comments. If they had collectively counseled against any part of my argument, then I would have been obligated to make changes. They didn't ask for changes as a body, but their individual observations and suggestions were exceptionally helpful. What many academics would expect to be a confining experience was for me a blessing.⁴⁰

Boldness in the pulpit is another challenge facing ordained leaders. The popularity of open theism has exposed a handful of issues that traditionalist churches have avoided. While evangelical pastors have been

⁴⁰ I need to thank in particular Pastor Joseph Novenson for facilitating my search for oversight. Through his efforts I had the benefit of specific help from Assistant Pastor David Arthur and elders Robert Ashlock, Bunky Blalock, Benjamin Dady, Robert Holt, and Ted Hope.

boldly denouncing sins of addiction, impurity, and hatred, they have been needlessly shy about addressing the legitimate needs for intimacy with God, a vital prayer life, peace regarding God's providence, and the bewilderment of grief. The various strains of evangelicalism have different weaknesses on these questions. Reformed pulpits stress God's majestic sovereignty in a way that makes an intimate relationship with God difficult to discuss. Arminian pulpits stress the necessity of our response to God's invitation in a way that makes it hard to resist the openness conclusion that God depends upon our decisions. Evangelical pastors of all kinds need to be boldly moving beyond their safely rutted paths, applying God's Word about himself as the sovereign, loving Lord to the real perplexities, anxieties, and sorrows of their flocks.

By the same token, Christian authors and other idea-shapers need to be addressing these legitimate felt needs in print.⁴¹ Their efforts need to be coordinated with pastors and ordained shepherds, to identify both the most pressing needs and the most accessible means of meeting those needs. Another truckload of dry theological exercises may enhance academic careers and encourage fellow academics, but it won't do much to meet the needs of the rest of the church. Internet discussions, articles in magazines that evangelicals actually read, Sunday school curricula, and devotional guides are all more likely to extend the kind of encouragement and guidance that the church can and will hear. And in order to reduce confusion, the authors of these tools need to make explicit in print who their overseers are. This will provide their readers with a model of submission. It will also dramatically increase the confidence with which their works will be read.

Finally, church members need to seek out and honor guidance from their ordained shepherds. We have too little practice at this. Persuaded by the myth that we are all reliable judges of what is good for us spiritually, we seek out guidance only as a last resort. Sermons that can hold our attention might be challenging for a day or so; but if the speaker is dull, we feel little obligation to work to hear God's Word to us. When buying devotional literature or children's videos, we might consult our

⁴¹ Works of this kind are starting to appear. Carolyn Curtis James, *When Life and Beliefs Collide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), is a moving account of drawing near to God while affirming God's sovereignty. Douglas Kelly's *If God Already Knows, Why Pray?* (Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus, 1995) answers hard questions about the efficacy of prayer without dragging God into time.

friends' opinions or sales figures. But most of us would benefit from asking our elders or deacons for advice as well. God has provided us with shepherds for precisely these kinds of needs.

I have used “we” and “us” here because the problem of holding spiritual overseers at arm's length is my problem as much as anyone else's. The culture in which we live makes uncommitted, minimally submitting Christianity seem both inevitable and sufficiently healthy. Open theism unopposed will thrive in this freedom-intoxicated, authority-distrusting age. The spiritual health of the body is a sufficient reason to work on restoring the relationship between ordained overseers and their flocks. Undermining the climate that is encouraging the rise of open theism will be a happy by-product of the effort.

In closing, consider what might happen next in the story of Richard and Janine if the church were healthier. Between buying copies of the book and the date for discussing it, they attend a worship service at the church where they are both members. The sermon text (providentially) is 1 John 4:8, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (NIV). The pastor specifically deals with the “recent suggestion” that love involves taking risks, and shows why it is unbiblical to say that “God is love” means that God takes real risks. Richard thinks of Janine repeatedly during this close discussion of love. Janine, however, is made uncomfortable by the sermon because she has already read the first chapter of the book they bought and agreed to discuss. The next day Richard shares her anxiety when he reads the chapter. When they finally meet to discuss the book, neither is enthusiastic about using *The Openness of God* as the basis for getting to know each other. Together they ask a church leader to suggest an alternative. Two dog-eared copies of Richard Pratt's *Pray with Your Eyes Open* wind up sharing a prominent place on their family bookshelf for years.⁴²

⁴² I am indebted to my wife Lynda, my father Theron Davis, and my students Asha Garretson, Elizabeth Mehne, Katie Mesh, Cameron Moran, Josiah Roe, and Ryan Wright for research assistance and helpful comments on preliminary drafts of this chapter.