

# **THE OPEN VIEW OF GOD**

**GOD AND GOD'S CO-(RE)CREATORS  
LIVING IN THE DYNAMIC DIALECTIC OF  
RELATIONALITY**

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**13 JANUARY 2005  
PH330: PARADIGMS AND PROGRESS IN THEOLOGY  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

*As I have wrestled with open theism in my own denomination,  
I have tried to articulate for the churches the reason this defection  
from historic Christian teaching is so serious. As a pastor I see open  
theism as theologically ruinous, dishonoring to God, belittling to Christ,  
and pastorally hurtful. That, of course, is not the intention of open theists.  
But intentions of the heart are not my concern here. I can't see them.  
Only God can. And he is merciful.*<sup>1</sup>

- John Piper -

When new theologies or doctrines are introduced, unless they match up well with a reformed, classical theistic understanding of God and the world, conservatives approach them with a wide range of stances, ranging from skeptical optimism to great apprehension to animosity. For some, nothing less than the Gospel, the faith and omnipotent God is at stake. R.C. Sproul, Jr., in a recent essay, wrote the following prayer: “We can pray with confidence that in His grace He will not allow His redeemed to fall into this damnable heresy.”<sup>2</sup> It is to this *damnable heresy* that we will now turn: the open view of God.<sup>3</sup>

There has recently been a new movement within Christianity calling upon theologians, practitioners and laity to be open to the idea that contemporary Christianity may need to rethink their conception of God. Contemporary Christianity, especially Evangelicals, have based much of their conservative theology off of the theological formulations of the Reformers and their predecessors.<sup>4</sup> As we enter a postmodern world, a world vastly different from 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe, many people are finding themselves asking different questions than were being asked 500-600 years ago. People are asking different questions primarily because the answers provided by Reformed theologians are not satisfying.<sup>5</sup> Now is the time we must be true to our Reformed and Presbyterian heritage and truly live by our motto: “*Reformata et semper reformanda!*”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, “Grounds for Dismay: The Error and Injury of Open Theism,” in *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, eds. Piper, John, Justin Taylor and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2003), 371.

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, Jr., “Atlas Shrugged: Worshipping in the Beauty of Holiness,” in *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 63.

<sup>3</sup> There are many names for this belief-system. Many of the works consulted use different terminology for this belief, but the most common names include *the open view of God*, *open theism* and *free-will theism*. Unlike Sproul, Jr., I will not be referring to open theism as a “damnable” heresy in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin are some of the theologians I am referring to.

<sup>5</sup> Truth can be found in all eras in history, and so it is important that one *not* assume that I am stating that Reformed theology no longer carries any truth. That is not the case.

<sup>6</sup> *Reformata et semper reformanda* means “Reformed and always reforming.”

The open view of God has many implications for new ways to think about God and the way God interacts with God's creatures. The ideas of open theism affect our view of God's providence, foreknowledge, omniscience, sovereignty, omnipotence and relationship with humanity, among others. Even within the openness camp, there are a variety of nuances as to how all of the details get worked out. There are a host of people open to or supportive of the openness of God<sup>7</sup> and because of the work of pastor, professor and author Gregory A. Boyd, open theism is being made available to the greater evangelical movement. One of the first books that made the open view of God available to the public was Pinnock's collaborative work with Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger: *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. Published by InterVarsity Press in 1994, this book began a conversation that has only gained in momentum since its beginning. Since *The Openness of God* was published, scores of tracts, pamphlets, scholarly articles and books have been published to refute the claims of open theism: many of which have incredibly negative subtitles such as "Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity,"<sup>8</sup> "The Failure of Open Theism,"<sup>9</sup> and "The Diminished God of Open Theism."<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to do an introductory investigation into open theism, using *The Openness of God* as the primary text. Incorporating the chapter divisions used in the book, the review will cover biblical support for the open view, brief historical considerations, both theological and philosophical perspectives and lastly, practical implications for the open view of God. Following an in-depth review of the book, I will concentrate on the concept of relationality and how that looks different in open theism compared with classical "Calvinist" theism. Dr. Wentzel van Huyssteen, in his work *Theology and the Justification of Faith*, said that "if a certain theory in systematic theology...is somehow modified or finally even replaced by another, such a change is progressive only if the modified or new

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<sup>7</sup> Here is a list of theologians, philosophers and pastors involved with, or sympathetic toward, the movement: Clark H. Pinnock, John Sanders, Richard Rice, William Hasker, David Basinger, Terence E. Fretheim, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Foster, Philip Yancey, Gilbert Bilezikian, Gregory A. Boyd, John Boykin, Harry Boer, Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Catherine LaCugna, Richard Swinburne, J.R. Lucas, Peter Geach, Richard Purtill and Keith Ward. Many of these names were found in Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Piper, John.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, Douglas.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2000).

theory is a better or more effective problem-solver than its predecessor.”<sup>11</sup> That is the goal and hope of this paper: to determine if open theism’s conception of a dynamic two-way relationality is more effective at solving problems than the view provided by classical theism.

## II. A REVIEW OF *THE OPENNESS OF GOD*

*The Openness of God* was one of the first books that allowed open theism to become available for people outside the ivory towers of academia. One of the primary authors, Clark Pinnock, in his chapter on theology wrote: “Humility is essential when thinking about such lofty matters.”<sup>12</sup> One of the most important virtues I believe must accompany deep, intricate theological reflection is humility. Even the great theologian Paul knew humility must partner with theology: “For we know only in part...for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”<sup>13</sup> It is clear Pinnock and the other authors strongly believe in the open view of God; some have come to this realization for philosophical reasons, others for theological reasons, and still others, because of their life experiences. However, while they believe strongly the open view of God is in fact superior to the classical view of God, they still maintain a healthy balance of perspective: “We do not claim that the open view is the only model with biblical or philosophical support...At the same time, we do not believe this view is capable of ‘proof’ in any hard sense. We know that our arguments are open to question, and we welcome the discussion we hope they will generate.”<sup>14</sup> Pinnock offers the following summary of open theism in the *Preface* to the book:

God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God’s will for their lives, and he<sup>15</sup> enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us. The Christian life involves a genuine interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God’s gracious initiatives and God responds to our response...and on it goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his plans to fit the changing situation. God does not

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<sup>11</sup> Wentzel van Huyssteen, “Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 191.

<sup>12</sup> Pinnock, 102.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 13.9,12 (All scriptural quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>14</sup> Pinnock, 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout this paper, I will be using gender inclusive language for God, but most of the authors in Pinnock’s book insist on using the masculine pronoun for God. Rather than going through and altering their texts, I will leave their quotes as they are, while continuing to use gender inclusive language throughout the rest of the paper.

control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.<sup>16</sup>

I do not believe after reading this one book, I will have come to a perfect understanding of open theism, or all of its implications. However, it is my hope that this in-depth analysis will provide myself and others with a helpful overview of the main tenets of open theism and understand its renewed emphasis on the relationality of God with God's creation, especially humanity.

### III. BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR OPEN THEISM :: RICHARD RICE

“The Scriptures contain such vast and varied material that it is not difficult to surround an idea with biblical quotations.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this is true. Scripture, while being God's Word to God's creation, does not provide quick or easy answers. Proof-texting<sup>18</sup> is a way of ‘proving’ an idea and making a point, but it is not the correct way to attempt to let scripture have a role in informing our theology. Open theists and classical theists alike need to strive to stay away from proof-texting. Just as it is easy for classical theists to choose one verse from Isaiah or the Psalms to show that God is Almighty and Transcendent, it is equally tempting for open theists to search for and find one random verse where it appears God has changed God's mind, and attempt to base an entire theological move off of one verse. I don't believe that is what Pinnock and the other authors are doing, but it is something one needs to be mindful of while reading any theological defense.

One of the primary aspects of open theism is the belief that God's relationship to the world is a dynamic relationship, as opposed to a static one. “Not only does he [God] influence them, but they also exert an influence on him...God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too. Thus, history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.”<sup>19</sup> Richard Rice, theology professor at La Sierra University, attempts to give a summary of the traditional, or classical, view of God and then compares it with the more progressive view of open theism. However, one of the downfalls of this book lies in its structure. There is

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<sup>16</sup> Pinnock, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Pinnock, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Proof-texting is a process by which one finds an idea in the Bible they want to prove to someone, and then proceeds to pick and choose random verses throughout scripture that seem to support the theological idea they want to espouse.

<sup>19</sup> Pinnock, 15-16.

so much material in only a few pages, it is difficult, if not impossible, to give each view encountered in the book an honest, objective and lengthy analysis. One of the temptations for authors, primarily because of limited space, would be to not give a thorough-enough analysis of the opposing viewpoint. I do not believe any of the authors would do this on purpose, but there may be some caricaturing and stereotyping when trying to summarize Calvin's view on predestination in two pages.

Rice explains the classical view of God: a supreme God who is majestic and glorified by God's creation, the righteous, the rebellious and the destruction of the wicked.<sup>20</sup> "According to this influential view, God dwells in perfect bliss outside the sphere of time and space. From his lofty vantage point, he apprehends the whole of created reality in one timeless perception..."<sup>21</sup> The picture of God one receives from this interpretation of Calvin and other classical theologians is one of the almighty and powerful King in Heaven, sitting on the King's throne, detached from the world and from God's creatures, and only half-listening to the cries of God's children. God has had God's plan in mind from the beginning of creation, and there is nothing that can be done to thwart God's plan. God is transcendent, omnipotent, immutable, impassible and omniscient. God is sovereign and has complete control over all of creation.

When the open theist sits down to contemplate the character of God, the attribute that has priority over all others is *love*. "Consequently, when we enumerate God's qualities, we must not only include love; to be faithful to the Bible we must put love at the head of the list."<sup>22</sup> One comes to experience the other attributes of God *through* love. When one says in agreement with scripture, "God is love,"<sup>23</sup> this is the final word; this is as close to a true definition of the divine being that one finds in scripture. Classical theologians will fight to the death for God's sovereignty, immutability or timelessness, but who is willing to fight for love? It is clear that throughout scripture, God is love. Even in the Hebrew Scriptures, one finds a God that is "abounding in steadfast love,"<sup>24</sup> loves with an "everlasting love"<sup>25</sup> and shows "great

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<sup>20</sup> Pinnock, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Pinnock, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Pinnock 21.

<sup>23</sup> "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4.8).

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 103.8.

<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 54.8.

compassion”<sup>26</sup> for God’s people. Thus, the open theist places a hierarchical importance to the fact that *God is love* before focusing on any other attributes of God.

There are many biblical passages used to help contribute to the openness of God perspective. “As they interpret the Old Testament perspective, God’s life exhibits two important qualities: it is social, and it is dynamic. God enters into relationships and genuinely interacts with human beings. He affects them, and they, in turn, have an effect on him. As a result, God’s life exhibits transition, development and variation. God experiences the temporal world in a temporal way.” Rice focuses first on scripture where God’s emotions and feelings are made known. While God is depicted as a judge and king often in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is also depicted, specifically in the prophetic books, as one involved in familial relations, especially as a lover; God experiences emotions and true feelings.<sup>27</sup>

Second, Rice examines God’s intentions, and finds that God repents. One example of this is the story of the Flood in Genesis 6.<sup>28</sup> Before God created the giant flood to cover the earth, it says that God looked upon God’s creation; “The LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” If God ultimately knew humankind would become so evil, then God should not have been surprised, and it should not have caused “grief” in God’s character. If that was the case, then scripture would be telling us a fact about God – God experienced grief – that was, in reality, not true. It does not make sense to say God genuinely experienced grief over something God knew would happen when God initially created everything. Bruce Ware, an opponent of open theism, believes that to say God repented is simply a misreading of the text: “Granted, the simplest and most straightforward reading of this passage, and others like it, would lead one to this interpretation. But as we have seen...the simplest and most straightforward reading may not be the correct reading.”<sup>29</sup> This is one critique mentioned by others as well. Open theism argues for a “straight” reading of many difficult passages, and desires to have

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<sup>26</sup> Nehemiah 9.19.

<sup>27</sup> Hosea, Jeremiah 3.1-3, 13.26-27, Ezekiel 23, Song of Solomon, Hosea 11.1,3,4,8.

<sup>28</sup> Another example is the story of Jonah and the city of Ninevah in the book of Jonah. God said that God would destroy the city of Ninevah, but the people repented, and God changed God’s mind. “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3.10). If God knew in advance they would turn from their evil ways, it makes God sound like a sadistic overlord, playing with their lives and telling the people that God would wipe out the city.

<sup>29</sup> Ware, 86.

some passages, though poetic in literary structure, read literally.<sup>30</sup> Lastly Rice examines God's actions in the Hebrew Bible, and concludes that "[A]t times, God acts to bring things about unilaterally... [A]t other times, however, God interacts with creaturely agents in pursuing his goals."<sup>31</sup>

Rice sees the culmination of God's dynamic relationship with the created order in the incarnation of Godself in the person of Jesus Christ. Classical theism's confession of God as impassible is immediately dismissed because of the crucifixion and suffering that took place on the cross as God suffered and died on the cross. Rice quotes Kenneth Leech on the crucifixion and impassibility of God: "The cross is a rejection of the apathetic God, the God who is incapable of suffering, and an assertion of the passionate God, the God in whose heart there is pain, the crucified God."<sup>32</sup> Christ's presence on earth gives credence to the understanding of God as one who suffers with God's people, who condescends from heaven and who is transcendent but regarded immanence as a necessity to experience another level of communion with God's creation.

#### IV. HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS :: JOHN SANDERS

John Sanders is an open theist, and it may be costing him his job.<sup>33</sup> Sanders is currently a theology professor at Huntington College, a small evangelical Christian college in Indiana. In this chapter, Sanders looks at the historical background for conceptions of God, starting with Plato and goes through the reformation, up to contemporary theologian Paul Tillich. Sanders' underlying thesis in the chapter is that Christianity, from the beginning, began to accommodate to much of Greek philosophy in order to be seen as an equal and valid philosophy and theology of the time. In doing so, Christianity, at various points in church history, began to look more like Greek philosophy in some areas than actually Christianity. While the reformers were the first to take theology "back to the Bible," there were still aspects of their theology of God and God's attributes that relied too heavily on the Hellenistic influences

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<sup>30</sup> Gregory Boyd writes the following: "The open view is rooted in the conviction that the passages that constitute the motif of future openness should be taken just as literally as the passages that constitute the motif of future determinism." Quote found in Gregory Boyd, God of the Possible, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 54.

<sup>31</sup> Pinnock, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Leech qtd. in Pinnock, 46.

<sup>33</sup> According to a December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004 article in Christianity Today, Sanders may be losing his job because of his strong advocacy of the open theist position. Sanders is quoted in the article saying, "You can be an open theist. You just can't be a well-known one." Article found online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/151/32.0.html> (Access date: 12 January 2005).

of early Christianity. Sanders believes contemporary Christianity needs to rely less on ancient philosophies, and seriously examine currently held religious assumptions to see if they match up with a true, and exhaustive reading of scripture.

It is not necessary to go through every church figure Sanders covers, as he covers close to forty different church fathers, reformers, philosophers, theologians and contemporary writers. It is important to remember that open theists believe too much of biblical Christianity was influenced by Hellenistic and Neo-platonic thought throughout the ages. However, while disagreeing with this approach, they are sympathetic: “they desired to show that the God of the Bible was the universal God, that this God was compatible with the best thinking of their day, and that the Christian God was the fulfillment of the God sought by the philosophers.”<sup>34</sup> Following the early church figures, Sanders turns to the Reformation, which brought about some very colorful and articulate theological characters. Calvin is most often associated with his ideas of predestination and a strong emphasis on the glory of God.<sup>35</sup> Calvin, never one to question the appropriateness of his theological musings, addressed the issue of God’s providence in the following passage from his *Institutes*:

Besides, this notion would shamefully diminish the singular goodness of God towards every individual. David exclaims, that infants yet hanging on the breasts of their mothers are sufficiently eloquent to celebrate the glory of God; because, as soon as they are born, they find aliment prepared for them by his heavenly care. This, indeed, is generally true; yet it cannot escape the observation of our eyes and senses, being evidently proved by experience, that some mothers have breasts full and copious, but others almost dry; as it pleases God to provide more liberally for one, but more sparingly for another. But they who ascribe just praise to the Divine omnipotence, receive from this a double advantage.<sup>36</sup>

God, being ultimately in control of everything in all of creation, even determined how much breast milk every infant would receive, and if one received too little, it was simply understood to be part of God’s divine inerrant plan for the world. Unfortunately, although Calvin was a brilliant lawyer and theologian,

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<sup>34</sup> Pinnock, 72.

<sup>35</sup> For some, Calvin’s emphasis on God’s glory is misappropriated. Tillich, while generally not in agreement with much of open theism, agrees with their emphasis on divine love being at the center: Tillich writes in his *Systematic Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 1.272: “For Calvin and his followers the glory of God is the purpose of creation and fall, of damnation and salvation. The majesty of God excludes creaturely freedom and overshadows the divine love. This was and is a corrective against the sentimental picture of a God who serves as the fulfillment of human desires. But it was, and is at the same time, an object for justifiable criticism. An affirmation of the glory of God at the expense of the elimination of the divine love is not glorious. And a majesty which characterizes him as a suppressive tyrant is not majestic. The majesty and glory of God should not be separated from the other qualities of the divine life.”

<sup>36</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* (1.16.3; 1.17.1).

he still brought certain presuppositions to his theological work. In Calvin's commentary on Genesis 6.6, "Calvin writes that the text cannot mean what it says since such activities are impossible for God."<sup>37</sup> Calvin didn't believe God could experience real grief over God's creation because, in Calvin's mind, it was not in God's nature to change; God is immutable to Calvin. "Though he [Calvin] explicitly repudiates Scholastic theology, he shows that he has not escaped neo-Platonic influence when he defines God as self-existent, simply, impassible and immutable."<sup>38</sup> One wonders if Calvin would have come to a different conclusion if he had not been influenced by the Hellenists.

Paul Tillich is Sanders' example of a more progressive theologian who does not agree with much of open theism. For Tillich, God is being-itself and the ground of every relation. To say God is in relation is to use a symbol (just as if one were to say that God were a "living God"). Therefore, God cannot actually experience true relationship with creatures because of God's holiness; Tillich calls this the "unapproachable character of God."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, one should not be surprised when Tillich says "God cannot become an object of knowledge or a partner in action...It is an insult to the divine holiness to treat God as a partner with whom one collaborates or as a superior power to whom one influences by rites and prayers."<sup>40</sup> Open theists agree that God is in some sense separated from creation, but this does not stop from entering into relationality with the creation that God loves: "...God, though ontologically distinct from creation...enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures and is resourceful, creative and omniscient rather than all-determining and immutable."<sup>41</sup> While not dismissing the rich theological heritage of the history of Christianity, open theist proponents look ahead to continued reforming, and a breakaway from a Hellenistically-influenced model of Christianity.

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<sup>37</sup> Pinnock, 90.

<sup>38</sup> Pinnock, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Tillich, 1.271.

<sup>40</sup> Tillich, 1.271-2.

<sup>41</sup> Pinnock, 96-7.

## V. A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY :: CLARK PINNOCK

Clark H. Pinnock, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Canada's McMaster Divinity College, examines the theological implications of open theism. Pinnock begins with his primary focus for this discussion: "My aim is to do greater justice to mutuality and relationality in both the triune God and the God-human covenant."<sup>42</sup> Pinnock's goal in this chapter is to present a coherent systematic theology based on a more relationally-driven concept of God, while maintaining a direct emphasis on the importance of scripture in that theology. Pinnock says the problem with open theism lies more with current systems of systematic theology, rather than individual experience of Christ-followers. Most Christians believe their prayers to God will *actually* make a difference. They want to believe God actually thinks their lives are important and will be in relationship with them. There is much talk in contemporary evangelicalism about Christianity as a "relationship, not a religion" – yet, it seems classical theists have taken personal freedom and the divine dialectic of mutuality with humanity out of the picture. One is presented with a one-way domineering relationship, not one of mutuality or interaction.

One of the primary protests against open theism is that those who hold to the belief have given up the sovereignty of God. Ware writes "God becomes more like us, such that his transcendent power, knowledge, wisdom and sovereignty all suffer."<sup>43</sup> But this is not true. Pinnock begins a section on "The Power of God" with this quote: "As Creator, God is unquestionably the superior power."<sup>44</sup> Although the *nature* of the power God has in open theism is different than classical theism, both hold to the concept of a sovereign deity. Open theism speaks of a God who does not consider power something to hold over creation, rather, something that, in Jesus Christ, God would give up to experience life fully as a human. The experience of the God-man helps answer some of the problems of the impassibility of God.<sup>45</sup> Much of this chapter focused on the issue of relationality, which will be dealt with in Section VIII of this paper.

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<sup>42</sup> Pinnock, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Ware, 144.

<sup>44</sup> Pinnock, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Jesus' death on the cross was, in fact, God's death on the cross. An impassible God could not have suffered, let alone died, on the cross of Christ.

## VI. A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE :: WILLIAM HASKER

William Hasker, also a professor at Huntington College,<sup>46</sup> discusses the philosophical implications of open theism in the following chapter. Hasker begins by arguing for a God who experiences temporal existence along with God's creation. This God also experiences suffering, emotions, love and change. Even if it is possible for an impassive God to be involved in relationship with God's creation, one must ask themselves if that is really a God one desires to be in relationship with? An emotional-less, feeling-less deity. Hasker does not believe that type of God is the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament: "God is not impassive and unmoved by his creation; rather, in deciding to create us and love us God has opened himself to the possibility of joy and sorrow, depending on what happens to us and especially how we respond to his love and grace."<sup>47</sup>

Hasker then moves on to perhaps the most challenging and debated aspect of open theism's new theory: God and providence. First he looks at process theology's attempt at this question. While process theology<sup>48</sup> offers a substantial critique of classical theism, and emphasizes the persuasive activity of God, it eventually limits God by declaring God cannot intervene in the world even if God wanted to. While Calvinism paints a beautiful portrait of a God who is in total control and is ultimately transcendent, one of the most difficult aspects within Calvinism is its perspective on the problem of evil: if God is in total control of everything that happens in the universe, how can one not assume God planned and didn't try to stop evil in the world? Open theism places the existence of evil in the world on the shoulders of God's creatures, endowed with free-will by their creator God. Ultimately, no one answer will be sufficient for the problem of evil. The question that needs to be asked, however, is the one van Huyssteen asked about theology as a problem-solving device. Which theological posture, with regard to theodicy, will help humanity and the world come to terms with the co-existence of both a Good God and evil in the world?

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<sup>46</sup> Dr. R. William Hasker currently serves as the Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Chair of Humanities and Bible.

<sup>47</sup> Pinnock, 133-134.

<sup>48</sup> Some do not even call process theology a "theology," but rather refer to it simply as a "theory," as it is based primarily on Alfred North Whitehead's theory of metaphysics, as opposed to scripture. It is also important to note that while traditionalists often attempt to equate open theism with a form of process theology (thought), every open theist I encountered in my research quickly denied the association. Process theology takes some ideas to their 'logical' conclusion, which steps outside the bounds of biblical theology. Process theology affirms the interdependent nature of both God and creation, and the idea that God needs the World as much as the World needs God. While there are some areas within theology where process thought and open theism tend to find more agreement (specifically theodicy), it is improper to assume that both process theology and open theism are synonymous.

## VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS :: DAVID BASINGER

David Basinger, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at Roberts Wesleyan College, writes the final essay in *The Openness of God*. Basinger looks at open theism and its practical implications for petitionary prayer, divine guidance, human suffering in the world, social responsibility and evangelistic responsibility. Petitionary prayer is the form of prayer where the one praying believes their words will be heard by God and their prayer could make a difference in the world. Calvinism, and process theology interestingly, believes this type of prayer benefits the person praying; it helps them to see their place in the world and is beneficial for their faith. Neither, however, can say the prayer itself will accomplish anything because Calvinism believes God already has everything planned in perfect accordance with God's eternal and timeless plan, and process theology believes God is not able to enter into God's creation and bring about any type of unilateral action. The difference with open theism is that petitionary prayer can cause God to bring about unilateral action in the world "*that would not have occurred if we had not utilized our God-given power of choice to request such divine assistance.*"<sup>49</sup>

Basinger addresses theodicy and claims that for classical theists, evil must be viewed as the necessary means to something greater. "For those who believe in specific sovereignty...all evil must be considered nongratuitous. That is, all evil must be viewed as a necessary means to a greater good in the sense that it is something that God causes or allows because it is a necessary component in his preordained plan."<sup>50</sup> Since God has no power to do anything in process thought, one cannot blame God for evil in the world. Open theists assert that God's creatures, who are endowed with free will, simply do not choose the good when it is available, and thus, sin and evil come into the world. Evil is not something caused or allowed by God, it is something that God grieves over, suffers through and hopes God's creations will try and alleviate in the world. This is one of the primary motivating factors for humanity to feel the burden of social responsibility to assist with social issues like poverty, hunger, AIDS, oppressions and other issues throughout the world. Unlike process thought, where God is powerless and all the power

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<sup>49</sup> Pinnock, 160.

<sup>50</sup> Pinnoc, 169.

to change is given to humanity, open theism seeks to bring about a dynamic dual-relationship in the struggle against social evils in the world today. There is also an increased emphasis for human involvement in evangelistic efforts to bring others into the life-giving relationship with the Divine. Unlike classical theism, where there is no inherent causal connection between evangelism and the “conversion” of someone, in open theism, there is a greater emphasis on our role to be co-evangelists with God in this world.

### VIII. RELATIONALITY IN OPEN THEISM

All of the above practical implications for open theism paint the picture of a people of God who are actively seeking God’s kingdom in this world. There is the sense that God does in fact need humanity; God needs humanity to help bring about God’s hopes, dreams and desires for God’s Kingdom on earth. While for much of their theology, the early church fathers relied on the Hellenistic philosophy of their time, there was a much greater emphasis on relationality in their writings than much of what followed them. Pinnock, in a personal email to me,<sup>51</sup> directed me to Sanders’ chapter on divine relationality in *The God Who Risks*, where Sanders analyzes various views of relationality throughout Christian history. Justin Martyr believed in that God engaged in a give-and-take relationship with humanity, Irenaeus, in his *Against Heresies*, states God does in fact interact directly with God’s creation, and Tertullian spoke of God’s “responsiveness to changes in the world.”<sup>52</sup> This is a much different perspective of relationality between God and humanity than one finds in classical theism.

While classical theists would say God *is* actively involved in relationships with creatures, the type of relationship would be considerably different. For classical theists, God has a perfect and divinely-set plan, and that plan is in motion and cannot be changed or acted upon by anyone other than God Godself. God has preordained paths for God’s creatures and roles for them to play within God’s plan. Some claim humans have free will, and that it is simply a paradox between God’s ultimate and specific sovereignty and humanity’s ability to freely choose. However, no matter which way one examines the arguments, if

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<sup>51</sup> Clark Pinnock, <pinnock@mcmaster.ca> “Re: Openness Review,” 13 January 2005, personal email (13 January 2005).

<sup>52</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 143.

God is sovereign and has everything planned out, humanity cannot be inherently free. Sanders summarizes Calvin's view below:

God does not decide what he will do in response to anything the creatures do. All that God knows and wills is not in relation to the creation but simply in relation to his own will. This effectively denies any sort of mutual relationship between God and his creatures. It is all a one-way street, or better, a novel in which characters do exactly what the novelist decides. Calvin's God exercises exhaustive control over absolutely everything...<sup>53</sup>

The issue of relationality is essentially an issue of the paradoxical nature of God's dual transcendence and immanence. There have been times throughout Christian history where one of these aspects of God's nature had been emphasized more, and open theists are calling for an end to the over-emphasis of transcendence by classical theists and a desire to pursue a balanced perspective.

“For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, *and also* with those who are contrite and humble in spirit.”<sup>54</sup> It is important to remember the ‘*and also*’ from this verse in Isaiah. It has been the tendency in the past to focus more on the transcendence of God, and to set aside God's immanence as a secondary aspect of God's character. The incarnation may be one of the greatest examples of God desiring relationality with God's creation, but that is often overlooked for passages that speak of God as King, sitting on God's throne and judging Israel and the nations. Ware claims that “excessive divine immanence grounds the notion of God as risk-taker but is at odds with the notion of his great and glorious sovereignty.”<sup>55</sup> It could be argued, however, that excessive divine transcendence only perpetuates the idea of God as aloof and disingenuous. This is not a black or white, or an “either/or” issue: neither excessive transcendence or excessive immanence is the answer.

The main character in novelist Walker Percy's book, *The Second Coming*, is struggling with his early retirement and with life in the deep “Christian” south, when he says the following: “The rest of my life, which will be short, shall be devoted to a search for the third alternative, a *tertium quid* – if there is

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<sup>53</sup> Sanders, 155.

<sup>54</sup> Isaiah 57.15, emphasis mine.

<sup>55</sup> Ware, 144.

one.”<sup>56</sup> What open theists are striving for is the tertium quid: a balanced, scripturally-sound, theology of God’s divine relationality with humanity that is consistent with, but not bound by, tradition. Pinnock writes: “We cannot allow undue loyalty to traditional paradigms and esteemed theologians to prevent needed revision of the doctrine of God for today.”<sup>57</sup> Contemporary theologian and pastor, Doug Pagitt,<sup>58</sup> wrote something similar in a recent book: “We can best honor the reformers of all ages by doing as they did and not just parroting what they said. We can and should be always re-forming – always seeking to create new ways of life and new ideas about theology, service and love that are fitting for our world and time.”<sup>59</sup> It is not the place of the Christian to simply dismiss hundreds of year of deep theological reflection as “old” or “out-of-date.” However, it is the call of the Christian to constantly be analyzing and rethinking theology in light of new information, new understandings of scripture, new findings in science and psychology, and waves of the Spirit.

Sanders writes in his playful essay on open theism, *On Heffalumps and Heresies: Responses to Accusations Against Open Theism*, “God elicits human cooperation such that it is both God and humanity who decide what the future shall be...Graciously...God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the open part of the future into being.”<sup>60</sup> This is probably the most convincing argument for why I believe open theism is an important new contribution to theology today. People today are not looking for answers or apologetic proofs for the existence of God as reasons for believing in God. Today’s postmoderns desire worthwhile causes, something they can commit to and make a difference; they desire to bring about worldwide reconciliation, peace and justice. These are lofty goals, but still different than goals from a few generations past. To be able to partner with God in attempting to bring about a future that is more like the kingdom of God is enticing to today’s postmodern generation. Open theism’s God not only wants to partner with them, but wants to engage in a dialectic and dynamic relationship, a relationship of give-and-

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<sup>56</sup> Walker Percy, *The Second Coming: A Novel*, (New York, NY: Picador, 1999), 190.

<sup>57</sup> Pinnock, 107.

<sup>58</sup> Doug Pagitt is on the Organizing Group for Emergent and is pastor of Solomon’s Porch, an emergent church in Minneapolis, MN.

<sup>59</sup> Pagitt, Doug. *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 39.

<sup>60</sup> John Sanders, “On Heffalumps and Heresies: Responses to Accusations Against Open Theism,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 2.1 (January-March 2002), 2-3. In A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet decide they are afraid of *Heffalumps*, but they don’t have any idea what Heffalumps are. Sanders is saying that many evangelicals are “frightened” by open theism, but they have not taken the time to actually figure out what open theists actually believe – they just immediately dismiss them and their convictions.

take, a call-and-response relationship. Pagitt calls this the chance for humanity to become *co-(re)creators* with God:

A different way to understand the story goes more like this: God, the creator of all things, has been re-creating all things through the redeeming work of Jesus the Messiah. In this view we are not left with a memory of a God who made this world and now simply waits for it to expire. God is constantly creating anew. And God also invites us to be re-created and to join the work of God as co-(re)creators. We are not bystanders, nor are we to be inactive.<sup>61</sup>

Classical theism puts the majority of the focus and emphasis on an almighty Creator God who has everything in control. To generalize a bit, the God of classical theism really doesn't *need* humanity. Plans are set in motion and everything is determined. The open view of God, however, invites humanity into this dialectical, engaging, dynamic relationship with God where we see ourselves working alongside God. This is not to say that humanity experiences any type of equality with the Divine, but God is not afraid to take a risk with humanity and invite them fully into the process of creating the future of the world.

## IX. CONCLUSION

Dr. van Huyssteen wrote: "To some extent, then, acceptance of a successful model or theory in theology must always be provisional."<sup>62</sup> The authors of *The Openness of God* all know their view has been called into question, but they are open to theological dialogue on issues surrounding the debate. They are open to the fact that some of their ideas may need to be rethought. *The Openness of God* is a good primer to the issue of open theism, and presents not only their view, but a fair summary of classical theism.

Is open theism a successful and more effective model to replace the traditional and classical understanding of God's relation to God's creation? This paper was only able to detail one specific aspect of open theism, the divine-human dialectic relationality, and there are many more biblical studies and investigations that would have to take place before I could make an overall endorsement of a new view. However, I believe that the model of relationality open theism presents is more compelling than its

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<sup>61</sup> Pagitt, 132.

<sup>62</sup> van Huyssteen, 195.

classical counterpart. From both an academic and personal standpoint, I am more compelled to follow, obey and put my faith in a God with whom I can experience a deep relationship.

Open theists' renewed interest in the concept of relationality is an important one. For some, the idea of God as a uniquely relational being does not fit into their preconceived notions of God's character.<sup>63</sup> However, for others in today's world, the idea of a God who would desire to be in a deep, real and personal relationship with them, and who would desire their partnership in co-(re)creating God's kingdom on earth, is one that resonates deeply. Believing in a God who suffers with God's creation, who grieves, repents, experiences both joy and sadness and responds to the choices of God's creations does not diminish the glory or sovereignty of God. It does, however, portray a God who desires to be intimately involved in the lives and futures of God's creations.

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<sup>63</sup> "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...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 appropriate of its insights for hermeneutics" (Piper 70).

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