Children of a Lesser God
Open (or Free-will) Theism: the logical end of Arminian thought

By Peter C Glover

The God who moves in ‘mysterious ways’ too often translates in the minds of modern Christians as: ‘the God who acts beyond both (our) logic and understanding’. But if this is true, why then does our God demand of us to be ‘transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (Rom.12:2) as well as insisting ‘in understanding be mature’ (1 Cor. 14:20)? Clearly, as Christians, we are expected to understand with our minds the nature of our salvation and the nature of the Creator God. Otherwise, on what basis could he require of us to ‘be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks…a reason for the hope that is in you’ (1 Peter 3:15)? From whence would that ‘reason’ flow, if not from a ‘reasonable’ faith built upon the foundation and consistent logic of the revealed Word? Logic, reason and understanding, it seems, are important to God.

If the Reformed faith – that which is often termed ‘Calvinism’ – forged in the intense fires of medieval theological debate but as ancient as Christianity itself, is anything, it is a teaching system, which demonstrably ‘hangs together’. This is a fact born out even by some of its detractors – all of those who adopt, consciously or unconsciously, the Arminian theological position. But if any single difference marks out the line of demarcation between the Calvinist and the Arminian believer it is this: the place and exercise of human ‘freewill’ – especially its part in salvation. The Arminian claims that man’s ‘freewill’ is exactly that: ‘free’ or ‘neutral’ in the spiritual battle, and thereby that man’s exercise of it gives him, and not God, the ‘casting vote’ when it comes to salvation. The Reformed faith or Calvinism, on the other hand, maintains that the Bible is clear in its teaching that God alone elects to faith (Eph. 1:5;1:11) or chooses (John 15:16; Rom. 8:30; Eph 1:4), calls or draws us (John 6:44) and ultimately redeems (Eph. 2:1; 2:8) his own. The bottom line is this: Calvinists teach that none of this is achieved by the exercise of man’s decision or choice, either in whole or in part, but that all is achieved solely by the will of God alone (John 1:13; Rom. 9:16) and that the glory is all his and not to be shared with men.

Logic comes to the house of Arminius
The purpose of this essay however, is not to review the great divide between the Calvinist and Arminian positions. The Revd. Mark Herzer has done that ably enough in the previous article ‘Arminianism Exposed’. The purpose of this essay is to review the ‘new kid on the block’ in Arminianist circles, the open theism or free-will theism movement – what we might perhaps term ‘more consistent Arminianism’.

An increasing number of modern Arminian theologians and thinkers are latterly admitting what Calvinists have known for centuries: that their historic faith just doesn’t ‘add up’. Chief among the recognized problems is this: if the Arminian view that man is able to exercise his spiritually ‘neutral’ freewill in any meaningful sense, the results of the exercise of that will must be uncertain and unknowable in advance – by man or God. The natural logic of the open theist position is therefore that God cannot be 100 per cent sure that a man will decide to ‘choose life’ in Christ until after the event. The open theist therefore effectively denies, to one degree or another, the attribute of divine
foreknowledge. Neither, therefore, can a God who does not know an unknowable future have complete control of what that future will hold.

The historic Arminian believer has often been a better practising Christian (being very familiar with a wealth of Scriptures that provide evidence for an omniscient God) than a practising theologian. Refusing the all too obvious logic inherent in their position, the historic Arminian has resisted being driven to the natural conclusion of his position – that God cannot know the ‘unknowable future’ if freewill be truly ‘free’. The growth of open theism however, is changing all that.

The gift of ‘logic’, it appears, has finally come to the house of James Arminius as the ‘open’ view of God is flourishing among some Christians. Though there are differing views on the extent of the restrictions on God’s divine foreknowledge, the movement as a whole agrees that restricted it must be.

As we briefly review the thinking behind open theism, we will do so with reference to two recent publications. The first is a devastating critique of the open theist position by Professor Bruce Ware in his excellent *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*. Ware’s book, though a general response to the movement, is also specifically a direct response to Gregory Boyd’s (a Christian teacher known to Ware) earlier defence of the movement in *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.

**Open Theism’s (Free-will Theism’s) case**

Open theism has been on the rise for over two decades, but it perhaps ‘came of age’ with the publication of the increasingly influential writings of Clark Pinnock, co-author of *The Openness of God; A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* with Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger in 1994. At the very outset Pinnock offers us a summary of the major themes, key doctrinal assertions and the values of the open theism thus:

"Our understanding of the Scriptures leads us to depict God, the sovereign Creator, as voluntarily bringing into existence a world with significantly free personal agents in it, agents who can respond positively to God or reject his plans for them. In line with the decision to make this kind of world, God rules in such a way as to uphold the created structures and, because he gives liberty to his creatures, is happy to accept the future as open, not closed, and a relationship with the world that is dynamic, not static. We believe that the Bible presents an open view of God as living and active, involved in history, relating to us and changing in relation to us. We see the universe as a context in which there are real choices, alternatives and surprises. God’s openness means that God is open to the changing realities of history, that God cares about us and lets what we do impact him".

Pinnock and co. have been keen proponents of traditional Arminian doctrines, particularly those concerning ‘freewill’, i.e. that man has a decision to make, to choose life or not. Where Pinnock, Boyd and co. depart from their forebears, however, including from James Arminius himself, is that they logically (and rightly we might add) conclude that for human choices and actions to be genuinely ‘freely made’, they *cannot* be known by God in advance. James Arminius, and countless millions of his followers, never went this far – though logically they should have. For as open theist John Sanders explains, ‘Though God’s knowledge is coextensive with reality in that God knows all that can be known, the future actions of free creatures are not yet reality, and so there is nothing to be known’.

Whether God does not know or cannot know an unknowable future because it is ‘not yet reality’ perhaps matters little. What matters far more is the movement’s assertion that we must deny the divine foreknowledge of God in all things. In his *God of the Possible*, open theist Boyd explains it thus: ‘If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is incomplete. It’s because there is, in this view, nothing definite there for God to know!’ Boyd’s assertion however, should not escape the interest of the Plain English campaign, which might struggle a little with the gobbledegook that attempts to suggest that a God who does not ‘foreknow’ future actions is not necessarily a God whose future knowledge is ‘incomplete’. (Run that past me again??) Though positions may differ as to the degree of God’s limited foreknowledge, all are in agreement that his knowledge *is* and *must* be limited and that the future is *not* therefore settled but ‘open’. Open theist Boyd puts it this way:

I arrive at the conclusion that the future is to some degree *settled* and known by God as such, and to some degree *open* and known by God as such*.

Commenting on the views of another open theist, Bruce Ware, critiquing the movement in *God’s Lesser Glory*, states the case plainly:
The challenge from open theism to other Arminians is simple: Comprehensive divine foreknowledge and libertarian freedom are mutually exclusive notions. You cannot have both together. So, if you value libertarian freedom (as classical Arminianism clearly does), then you must be willing to give up your commitment to comprehensive divine foreknowledge.

Being fully aware that even the simplest Christian is capable of finding an army of Scripture verses to refute their case, the open theist labours hard to wrest the traditional or classic understanding of various passages of Scripture from their contexts to make its case. So it is to their use of the Scriptures that we must now turn.

**The Bible according to Open Theism**

What has continued to amaze us over the years at CRN, as we have reviewed the ‘evangelical’ movement’s latest speculative cause, is the exegesis some theologians and pastors employ to lend credence to their assertions. How such men can be held in ‘esteem’ within the evangelical church remains a mystery when their fundamental biblical argument is so blatantly poor.

Sadly we have space here only to review two representative examples, which open theists use to show why the classic OT and NT teaching of the omniscience of God is, according to them, defective. The first example attempts to show that God changes his mind in the face of an unexpected turn of events; the second that God has to plan and act according to the constraints placed on him by the often frustrating and surprising actions of men.

1. **Hezekiah’s extended life** – 2 Kings 20.

This is a passage much used by open theists to prove their case. According to the preface of Gregory Boyd’s book *God of the Possible*, it is the very text that first alerted him to challenge the historic Christian view of the divine foreknowledge of God.

In the passage Hezekiah becomes mortally ill. The prophet Isaiah is immediately despatched to the king to warn him thus: ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live’ (v.1). At that Hezekiah breaks down and prays and weeps bitterly before the Lord. Having delivered his revelation message, Isaiah is about to leave the courtyard when God instructs him to return to Hezekiah and tell him this: ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you… I will add to your days fifteen years’ (vvs. 5-6).

This incident, Boyd and company maintain, is a clear example of God repenting of an action he was about to take. But is that really all there is to this incident? One is left to wonder why God should bother to have his famous prophet Isaiah hotfoot it to the palace to inform the king that he was about to die… unless he had an ulterior purpose in mind. Is it not much more likely that God desired to give Hezekiah the opportunity to reveal heartfelt repentance, before God, before his witness Isaiah, and subsequently ensure it was written down for our edification? How often have we made a statement of intent, its real purpose being to elicit a hoped for – even an expected – response? Boyd does not even consider the possibility. For him, it is merely that a surprised God repents and changes his mind. A clear indication, according to Boyd, of God not knowing what Hezekiah’s reaction would be.

But even if we should remain unconvinced by this, it should also be pointed out that this is an amazingly inappropriate Scripture passage upon which to base any assertion that God’s divine foreknowledge is limited. We are told that God informs Hezekiah he will ‘heal him’ with the precise prophetic revelation that ‘I will add to your days fifteen years’ (v.6). Consider this just for a moment. The Lord would add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life. Not five or ten. Not twenty or twenty-five years but fifteen years exactly. How could God know or be sure that his life would end in precisely fifteen years other than by his divine foreknowledge of all things? How could God know that Hezekiah, exercising his freewill, would not decide to commit suicide just two years later? Or that he would not declare war on the surrounding nations and be killed? Or that he could be struck down with a mysterious illness? God would have looked rather silly had Hezekiah’s free choices led to such an end.

In truth, the number of decisions ‘freely’ made and the complexity of the possibilities ahead for Hezekiah were infinite. How could God be so certain? Unless, of course, God is precisely omniscient concerning the future, and the open theists have got it wrong.

And of what real spiritual value is this passage to future generations of Bible readers if it does not reveal a God interacting with his people, looking for heartfelt repentance and allowing them time to act upon that repentance?


The Bible according to Open Theism

What has continued to amaze us over the years at CRN, as we have reviewed the ‘evangelical’ movement’s latest speculative cause, is the exegesis some theologians and pastors employ to lend credence to their assertions. How such men can be held in ‘esteem’ within the evangelical church remains a mystery when their fundamental biblical argument is so blatantly poor.

Sadly we have space here only to review two representative examples, which open theists use to show why the classic OT and NT teaching of the omniscience of God is, according to them, defective. The first example attempts to show that God changes his mind in the face of an unexpected turn of events; the second that God has to plan and act according to the constraints placed on him by the often frustrating and surprising actions of men.

1. **Hezekiah’s extended life** – 2 Kings 20.

This is a passage much used by open theists to prove their case. According to the preface of Gregory Boyd’s book *God of the Possible*, it is the very text that first alerted him to challenge the historic Christian view of the divine foreknowledge of God.

In the passage Hezekiah becomes mortally ill. The prophet Isaiah is immediately despatched to the king to warn him thus: ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live’ (v.1). At that Hezekiah breaks down and prays and weeps bitterly before the Lord. Having delivered his revelation message, Isaiah is about to leave the courtyard when God instructs him to return to Hezekiah and tell him this: ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you… I will add to your days fifteen years’ (vvs. 5-6).

This incident, Boyd and company maintain, is a clear example of God repenting of an action he was about to take. But is that really all there is to this incident? One is left to wonder why God should bother to have his famous prophet Isaiah hotfoot it to the palace to inform the king that he was about to die… unless he had an ulterior purpose in mind. Is it not much more likely that God desired to give Hezekiah the opportunity to reveal heartfelt repentance, before God, before his witness Isaiah, and subsequently ensure it was written down for our edification? How often have we made a statement of intent, its real purpose being to elicit a hoped for – even an expected – response? Boyd does not even consider the possibility. For him, it is merely that a surprised God repents and changes his mind. A clear indication, according to Boyd, of God not knowing what Hezekiah’s reaction would be.

But even if we should remain unconvinced by this, it should also be pointed out that this is an amazingly inappropriate Scripture passage upon which to base any assertion that God’s divine foreknowledge is limited. We are told that God informs Hezekiah he will ‘heal him’ with the precise prophetic revelation that ‘I will add to your days fifteen years’ (v.6). Consider this just for a moment. The Lord would add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life. Not five or ten. Not twenty or twenty-five years but fifteen years exactly. How could God know or be sure that his life would end in precisely fifteen years other than by his divine foreknowledge of all things? How could God know that Hezekiah, exercising his freewill, would not decide to commit suicide just two years later? Or that he would not declare war on the surrounding nations and be killed? Or that he could be struck down with a mysterious illness? God would have looked rather silly had Hezekiah’s free choices led to such an end.

In truth, the number of decisions ‘freely’ made and the complexity of the possibilities ahead for Hezekiah were infinite. How could God be so certain? Unless, of course, God is precisely omniscient concerning the future, and the open theists have got it wrong.

And of what real spiritual value is this passage to future generations of Bible readers if it does not reveal a God interacting with his people, looking for heartfelt repentance and allowing them time to act upon that repentance?

Another example of evidence that God did not ‘know what was coming’ is, according to open theist John Sanders in his *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, the story of Jesus in the Garden agonizing over his path to the Cross. Sanders says this:

> Although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. The path to the cross comes about only through God’s interaction with humans in history. Until this moment in history other routes were, perhaps, open…In Gethsemane Jesus wonders whether there is another way. But the Father and Son, in seeking to accomplish the project, both come to understand that there is no other way. (pp.100-1)

Open theism depicts God very much as a scientist in a laboratory – subject to all of the dangers of trial and error, never being fully sure what the results of his experiments might be. He is a ‘god’ who is very far from being in control. Is *this* the ‘god’ in whom we can exercise full faith regarding the future? A ‘god’ who is not in truth the final power in the universe? For how can he be the final power when that final power, to which he also – just like men – is apparently subject, is the god ‘Freewill’?

In his critique, Bruce Ware crystallizes what is being said about Jesus’ path to the Cross: ‘Only then, at that moment in the garden of Gethsemane, says Sanders, was the decision made for Christ to be crucified, because only then, at that moment, was it clear to both the Father and the Son that this path alone would succeed.’

If Sanders is right, then the ‘final act’ at the Cross only became an inescapable fact for the Father and the Son at Gethsemane, rather than an act planned at the fall of mankind from grace with God. Until Gethsemane, open theist Sanders maintains, all eventualities were still ‘open’. We might be inclined to ask Mr Sanders: what, then, was the purpose of animal sacrifice throughout the OT era? Was it not to foreshadow the final sacrifice of Christ at the Cross? Perhaps Mr Sanders might answer that this was rather a ‘threat’ of what *might* have to take place if men did continue in their rebellion (i.e. in their sins) against him. But if that were so, then the Cross could never be viewed as a *necessary*, indeed the only possible, atonement for our sins as Scripture maintains. And to what does Isaiah 53 allude if it does not prophesy specifically Christ’s death on the Cross?

> He is despised and rejected by men,  
> A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief…  
> But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
> He was bruised for our iniquities;  
> The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,  
> And by His stripes we are healed…  
> He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
> Yet He opened not his mouth;  
> He was led as a lamb to the slaughter…

Open theism cannot, then, be taken in isolation. Clearly it will mean the reformulation of all that we have historically understood the Bible to teach. Ultimately, it must be true that if God is at the mercy of man’s (sinful) subjective, freewill decisions, there is little in which he cannot be frustrated by man. Ware rightly points out, ‘It is clear that the god of open theism is a limited god…God has limited knowledge, limited power, limited wisdom, limited control, limited sovereignty, and hence, limited glory’. And herein lies the real rub. When all is said and done, the god of open theism is a much smaller god, a ‘lesser god’ than we had previously thought.

While we should be grateful to the open theists for pointing out the defective nature of the historic Arminian system, we have seen, as in the instance of the biblical narrative which speaks of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as a prelude to the Cross, that logic is not the strong suit of the open theist either. Ware recognizes this very well when we focus on the issue of the doctrine of the last days. Ware points out, ‘Since it is true that God’s present purposes may be frustrated by the unforeseen and unanticipated free action of his creatures, what basis is there for believing that God’s ultimate purpose and promises will be fulfilled in the eschaton?’ On what basis indeed! For surely the consequence of the endless freewill decisions of men must foreshadow an anarchic future of infinite possibilities.

We have here touched on only a few of the issues raised by the rise of the open theism movement. The reader is encouraged to read Ware’s book as it is unequivocally a first-rate exposition and refutation of a movement which is likely to inflict itself on the wider church in future years. And, of course, if one is convinced by the argument *against* open theism, one must also (if one is a thinking
Christian) broach the next ‘logical’ question which the appearance of the movement raises: where does this leave the Arminian belief system?

**A footnote of concern**

CRN cannot speak more highly of the service Professor Bruce Ware has performed for us all in his book *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*. It is clear and fair in representing the open theist position, and ultimately devastating in its biblical critique. But there is one disturbing note which we fear cannot be overlooked and it comes in Bruce Ware’s preface. In it Ware asserts the following:

In the introduction to his book *God of the Possible*, Greg Boyd includes a section titled, ‘Our attitude in Discussing Controversial Issues’. I wish to affirm with him his call to conduct our private and public disagreements in love for one another. Personally, I know and have deep respect for several of the central players in the open theism movement. I have cherished memories of theological banter and pleasant laughter with Greg Boyd… I have deeply appreciated over several years’ warm and mutually respectful conversations with John Sanders and Clark Pinnock and I pray and wish for God’s richest blessing upon their lives. Of course, there are others who I do not know, but for whom I wish only the best.

We find ourselves wholly mystified as to how Professor Ware could pen such a sentimental statement, which effectively communicates to the reader that, no matter what men may say about our God, we are to refrain from ‘falling out’ with them on a personal level. And we note, with some sadness, the increasing prevalence of this sort of thing among even the better modern evangelical theologians. CRN laments the fact that even the gravest of heresies is today insufficient ground among the more academically minded theologians and pastors to allow it to interfere with personal relationships.

Yet Professor Ware apparently believes that the denial of the God-revealed attribute of divine foreknowledge and control is simply a matter for irenic, academic discussion. This, of course, is precisely how men such as Pinnock and co. are able to continue to garner the wide acclaim of fellow theologians, even those who disagree with them.

Let us be sure to bring this matter into proper perspective. The argument with open theism is no mere argument over semantics. They assert that our God is *not* in control, that he does *not* know the future fully and that we therefore can have small confidence in him for the future, for it is ‘open’ and not settled. We might add that the open theists have yet to push their logic still further and realize that the God of the Bible *cannot* be the highest authority. That there is a higher authority (god) than God, another god altogether, and his name, apparently, is ‘Freewill’.

I cannot help but think that Professor Ware has here caught a touch of ‘ivory-tower fever’ and has lost touch with what all this means in practice for the church. If this is so, then we implore him to see just how these heresies (for surely this must be heresy?) quickly feed down to the local church, ruining the faith of many, diverting believers away from the true God, *towards another god entirely*. Amazingly, Ware himself recognizes this and makes the same point.

He says, ‘I believe and I intend to demonstrate that this debate with open theism is central and not peripheral.’ He adds rightly that Pinnock, Boyd and his friends are ‘diminishing God’s deity’ and concludes his book with this powerful assertion: ‘We have here, then, a fundamentally different god, not merely a different version of God*”.*

If this is so, then presumably Professor Ware has himself had a ‘logic blip’. It is hard to conceive but that, in making this assertion and setting this tolerant tone from the beginning, Professor Ware has successfully undone much of the great good achieved by the rest of the book. Can there be anything more wicked than ‘Christian leaders’ setting up a ‘different god’ to worship? Should not his and our righteous anger permeate our response on both a public and a private level? We acknowledge that there is always a time for a gentle response to set right erring fellow believers, and neither should we complain at receiving proper theological rebuke ourselves. But this is neither the time nor the issue for a gentle response. What would it say to observers if we were to expose heresy in public, as we are called to do, while bringing our families together socially to fellowship and enjoy ‘Sunday tea’ with its perpetrators?

Professor Ware is by no means alone in this kind of thing and in one sense this extract is a highly illuminating insight into all that is currently wrong with much Christian public debate and with the ‘leadership’ emanating from our halls of learning. Modern evangelicals, it seems, prefer to be tolerant – no matter what is taught and said about their God. Modern evangelicals are prepared to idolize personal relationships – yet suffer the worst of attacks upon the character of their God from those with whom they openly fellowship.
We would do well to note that Professor Ware’s attitude is not here following the biblical pattern at all. Faced with similar attempts to pervert core teaching the apostle Paul suggested in the strongest of language that the visiting Judaizers of Galatians 5:12 (and remember, these were Christian leaders too) would do better to ‘emasculate themselves’, so righteously angry was he with them. No ‘jollies’ with the apostle Paul for them, then!

Jesus called the OT church leaders ‘white-washed tombs…full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness’ (Matt.23:27). The tolerance level of Jesus, Paul and other Bible writers is hardly on a par with that of many modern theologians and church leaders when core Christian truth is at stake, it seems.

Theodore Beza recounts an incident in his Life of John Calvin, which should serve here as a better example for us of how academic debate should be conducted when core Christian doctrines are being rejected. A man called Matthew Gribaldi, a local Geneva lawyer, came to a meeting with John Calvin and his colleagues. The reason for the meeting was that Gribaldi was being taken to task over his consistently anti-Trinitarian teachings. Gribaldi entered the room and held out his hand to Calvin. Calvin did not take the proffered hand, saying instead: ‘It does not make sense for me to shake hands with you until we can agree about doctrine. We must not begin with formalities’, at which Gribaldi turned on his heels and left.

This writer has thought long and hard about this incident and can only conclude that Calvin was right because he was very much following the biblical pattern of publicly confronting and eschewing heretics as well as the heresy. For Calvin it seems, God’s eternal reputation mattered more than the maintenance of transient good relations here on earth. Would that each of us would be as jealous for our Father’s reputation as was he.

(Box-out quote)

**Perfidious tolerance**

In a corruption of sound doctrine so extreme, in a pollution of the sacraments so nefarious, in a condition of the church so deplorable, those who maintain that we ought not to have felt so strongly, would have been satisfied with nothing less than a perfidious tolerance, by which we should have betrayed the worship of God, the glory of Christ, the salvation of men, the entire administration of the sacraments, and the government of the church.

There is something specious in the name of moderation, and tolerance is a quality which has a fair appearance, and seems worthy of praise; but the rule which we must observe at all hazards is, never to endure patiently that the sacred name of God should be assailed with impious blasphemy; that his eternal truth should be suppressed by the devil’s lies; that Christ should be insulted, his holy mysteries polluted, unhappy souls cruelly murdered, and the church left to writhe in extremity under the effect of a deadly wound. This would be not meekness, but indifference about things to which all others ought to be postponed.

**John Calvin**

*From The Necessity of Reforming the Church* p.107-8

1. see footnote 1 in Mark Herzer’s article ‘Arminianism Exposed’ in this issue of CRN Journal.

2. By Arminian we mean here those who teach conditional predestination, whereby the predetermination of the destiny of individuals is based on God’s foreknowledge of whether they will freely accept or reject Christ. Thus the exercise of man’s ‘freewill’, as a determining factor in the salvation of an individual, is central to the Arminian belief system.


7. Ware, op.cit., p.36.


9. Ware, loc.cit.

