

Open Theism and
the Undermining of
Biblical Christianity

BEYOND THE BOUNDS

EDITED BY

JOHN PIPER
JUSTIN TAYLOR
PAUL KJOSS HELSETH

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Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity

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CONTRIBUTORS

Chad Owen Brand. Ph.D., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Assistant Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Associate Professor of Christian Theology, and Chairman, Department of Bible and Theology, Boyce College.

A. B. Caneday. Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Professor of Biblical Studies, Northwestern College.

William C. Davis. Ph.D., University of Notre Dame. Associate Professor of Philosophy, Covenant College.

Russell Fuller. Ph.D., Hebrew Union College. Assistant Professor of Old Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Wayne Grudem. Ph.D., University of Cambridge. Research Professor of Theology and Bible, Phoenix Seminary.

Paul Kjoss Helseth. Ph.D., Marquette University. Assistant Professor of Bible and Philosophy, Northwestern College.

Michael S. Horton. Ph.D., Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Associate Professor of Apologetics and Historical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

John Piper. D.Theol., University of Munich. Preaching Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis.

Mark R. Talbot. Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania. Associate Professor of Philosophy, Wheaton College.

Justin Taylor. Director of Theological Resources and Education, Desiring God Ministries.

Bruce A. Ware. Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary. Professor of Christian Theology; Senior Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Stephen J. Wellum. Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Associate Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

FOREWORD

John Piper

The stunning thing about open theism in American Christianity is how many leaders do not act as though it is a departure from historic Christianity and therefore a dishonor to Christ and pastorally damaging. Some have seen the departure clearly and said so. For example, Thomas Oden, a Methodist minister and the Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University, writes in *Christianity Today*, “The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds.” His warning to the church is sobering: “Keeping the boundaries of faith undefined is a demonic temptation that evangelicals within the mainline have learned all too well and have been burned by all too painfully.”¹ Oden’s indictment points toward the baleful heart of open theism and the broken heart of those who love the historic biblical vision of God.

THE BALEFUL HEART OF OPEN THEISM

The heart of open theism is the conviction that humans and angels can be morally responsible only if they have ultimate self-determination—and have it to the degree that their self-determination rules out God’s ability to render or see any of their future free acts as certain.² Therefore, open theism’s most obvious departure from historic Christianity is its denial of the exhaustive, definite foreknowledge of God. This departure

¹ Thomas C. Oden, “The Real Reformers Are Traditionalists,” *Christianity Today* 42, no. 2 (9 February 1998): 45.

² Gregory Boyd, and all open theists, distance themselves from the view that says there is compatibility between human responsibility, on the one hand, and God’s ability to render future free acts certain, on the other hand. Thus Boyd says that his view of “self-determining freedom” “contrasts with ‘compatibilist’ freedom, which sees human (and angelic) freedom as compatible with determinism. This view is thus sometimes called ‘incompatibilistic freedom’” (Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 428).

is obscured by the protest of open theists that they *do* affirm the omniscience of God. They argue that self-determining free will creates choices that have no reality before they are created and therefore are not possible objects of knowledge—even to God. They would say that not to know a no-thing does not undermine omniscience. And, they add, truly free choices are no-thing before they are made. The clearest statement of this protest is from Gregory Boyd’s book, *Letters from a Skeptic*:

In the Christian view God knows all of reality—everything there is to know. But to assume He knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person’s free activity is already there to know—even before he freely does it! But it’s not. If we have been given freedom, we create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don’t exist. Thus, in my view at least, there simply isn’t anything to know until we make it there to know. *So God can’t foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions.*³

Boyd clarifies this in his more scholarly books by affirming that God can indeed know with certainty some future volitions of man and angels, if God himself overrules the self-determining will and inclines it in a certain direction.⁴ In other words, God can know ahead of time what *he* intends to do in his freedom, but not what *we* intend to do in our freedom. He can know with certainty what we will choose if he intrudes on our self-determination and renders our choice certain. But at that point, to the degree that God renders our choice certain, our accountability dis-

³ Gregory Boyd, in Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father’s Questions About Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994), 30, emphasis added. Cf. his statement in *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000): “. . . future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them” (120). Similarly, Clark Pinnock wrote in 1990, “Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential—yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom. . . . God too faces possibilities in the future, and not only certainties. God too moves into a future not wholly known . . .” (“From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1995], 25-26).

⁴ Boyd would say that there is a category of actions that God can foreknow with certainty, but which he does not determine, namely, acts done by people whose self-wrought characters are so solidified in good or evil that they cannot do otherwise. For those agents who have “eternalized” themselves in this way, God can even determine, if he chooses, some of their future volitions. For further explanation and interaction, see the chapters in this volume by Wellum, Ware, and Helseth.

appears.⁵ Therefore, in the view of open theism most good and evil choices that humans make are unknown by God before they happen.⁶

THE BROKEN HEART OF THOSE WHO LOVE THE HISTORIC BIBLICAL VISION OF GOD

Oden's words above also point to the broken heart of those who love the historic biblical vision of God. Oden said, "Keeping the boundaries of faith undefined is a demonic temptation that evangelicals within the mainline have learned all too well and have been burned by all too painfully." The failure of many Christian leaders to see the magnitude of error in open theism has left churches and denominations and schools with no clear boundary between what is tolerably Christian and what is not. This is painful and will become more so.

It remains one of the most stunning things in evangelicalism today that so many leaders can treat as optional what C. S. Lewis and two thousand years of Christian witness called "mere Christianity." In his usual blunt and clear way, Lewis said, "Everyone who believes in God at all believes that He knows what you and I are going to do tomorrow."⁷ The fact that leaders today so readily nullify the intended impact of that sentence, by protecting the Christian legitimacy of open theism, is not a statement about Christian orthodoxy but about leaders who have lost their hold on it. We have prepared this book to address the issue of boundaries and, we pray, bring some remedy to the present and impending pain of embracing open theism as a legitimate Christian vision of God.⁸

⁵ Boyd's version of open theism "does not entail that God can never exercise coercive power in his interactions with free creatures" (*Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 185). God can indeed act so as to render human choices certain. But such choices lose their moral goodness or evil to the degree that God renders them certain: "To the extent that humans or angels are self-determining, to that extent their moral responsibility must be irrevocable" (ibid.).

⁶ I say "most" rather than "all" because Boyd grants that the good and evil choices that persons make who are already fixed or "eternalized" in their character can be foreknown by God. See note 4.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier, 1952), 148.

⁸ Robert Strimple points out, concerning the denial of God's exhaustive foreknowledge, "Here Christians face the denial not simply of one of the distinctives of Reformation theology but of a fundamental truth held in common by every historic branch of the Christian church" ("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], 139). This includes historic Arminianism. Jacobus Arminius affirmed, for example, "The fourth decree, to save certain particular persons and to damn others . . . rests upon the foreknowledge of God, by which he has known from eternity which persons should believe according to such an administration of the means serving to repentance and faith through his preceding grace and which should persevere through subsequent grace, and also who should not believe and persevere" (quoted in Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1971], 352).

INTRODUCTION

Justin Taylor

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “Everyone who believes in God at all believes that He knows what you and I are going to do tomorrow.”¹ But this is precisely what open theists deny. That is why many would concur with Timothy George, who says, “Open theism teaches a sub-Christian view of God that is unworthy of a robust biblical faith. I have no sympathy for this view and think it would be a great mistake for evangelicals to welcome it within the bounds of tolerable theological diversity.”²

It is crucial to understand that open theism is not just another intramural squabble among evangelicals. It is not a debate about second-order doctrines, minutiae, or peripheral matters. Rather, it is a debate about God and the central features of the Christian faith. The contributors to *Beyond the Bounds* stand with a growing chorus of contemporary scholars who have made clear what is at stake in this debate. D. A. Carson argues that open theism “so redefines the God of the Bible and of theology that we wind up with a quite different God.” Wayne Grudem contends that open theism “ultimately portrays a different God than the God of the Bible.” And R. Albert Mohler, believes that “The very identity and reality of the God of the Bible is at stake.”³ Open theism is, at its roots, a question about the nature of

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier, 1952), 148.

² Timothy George, personal correspondence (4 November 2002); used with permission. George was one of the two external, non-voting participants in Bethel College and Seminary’s Committee for Theological Clarification and Assessment, which examined Boyd’s teaching. For a brief history of the intersection between the Baptist General Conference and open theism, see John Piper with Justin Taylor (appendix by Millard Erickson), *Resolution on the Foreknowledge of God: Reasons and Rationale* (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, 2000); and 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” (www.desiringgod.org/library/fresh_words/2000/070500.html).

³ Carson, Grudem, and Mohler, from their endorsements of Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), 1-2.

God.⁴ The essays in this book contend that open theism presents us with a different God—a God compatible, perhaps, with contemporary sentiments, but one who is not the God of the Bible.

THE PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS VOLUME

Some may legitimately ask why another response to open theism is needed, given that a number of fine critiques have already emerged,⁵ and more are on the way,⁶ documenting its serious flaws in terms of exegesis, hermeneutics, philosophy, and piety. One reason that this present volume is needed is the evolving nature of open theism. Open theists have continued to introduce nuances, qualifications, and new proposals. When this happens, counter-arguments must become more refined so as to take into account the strongest version of openness theology. For example, in his most recent book on open theism, Gregory Boyd argues that his version of “neo-Molinism” accounts for roughly the same degree of divine providential control as that of traditional Molinism.⁷

⁴ I am aware of Boyd’s argument that open theism “is not really about God’s nature at all” but rather “about the nature of the future” (*God of the Possible* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000], 15). Or to put it another way, “The debate over the nature of God’s knowledge is not primarily a debate about the scope or perfection of God’s knowledge. All Christians agree that God is omniscient and therefore knows all of reality perfectly. The debate over God’s knowledge is rather a debate over the *content of reality* that God perfectly knows. It has more to do with the doctrine of creation than it does with the doctrine of God” (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], 13). This distinction depends upon Boyd’s insistence that open theists “affirm God’s omniscience as emphatically as anybody does” (*God of the Possible*, 16). But Boyd and company have redefined omniscience. The traditional doctrine of omniscience does not merely affirm that “*at any time God knows all propositions such that God’s knowing them at that time is logically possible*” (William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 136). Rather, the doctrine of omniscience “requires that any agent is omniscient if and only if he knows all truths and believes no falsehoods” (William Lane Craig, “The Middle-Knowledge View,” in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 137). Craig’s conclusion is correct: “The debate over the nature of God’s foreknowledge is primarily a debate about the scope and perfection of God’s knowledge” (Craig, “A Middle-Knowledge Response,” in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 55). Secondly, Boyd himself seems unwittingly to agree that this debate concerns the attributes of God. On the very same page as his *denial* that this issue is “about God’s nature at all,” he claims that “Scripture describes the openness of God to the future as *one of his attributes of greatness*” (*God of the Possible*, 15, emphasis added). How can “the openness of God” *not* be “about God’s nature at all” when it is at the same time about an “attribute of greatness”?

⁵ See especially, Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*; and John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001). See also my working bibliography on open theism, included at the end of this book.

⁶ Projected works include those by D. A. Carson, Steven C. Roy, Mark R. Talbot, and Stephen J. Wellum.

⁷ Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 130. Molinism, named after Luis de Molina

This necessarily qualifies, to some degree, early criticisms of his project. His philosophical defense of libertarian free will⁸ means that critics are no longer able to charge open theists with assuming free will apart from argumentation. The details of these discussions need not detain us here; the point is that new responses are needed to a theology that is in many ways still evolving.

There is a more fundamental reason, however, for why we have felt it necessary to assemble this book. Despite a number of fine critiques, there remain a number of important issues that require a coherent, sustained response. These crucial issues can be summarized as five questions, which have become the five major sections of this book:

1. Have unbiblical philosophical influences decisively distorted traditional Christian theology, as openness proponents maintain? Conversely, has openness theology itself been tainted with unbiblical philosophy?
2. What are the philosophical presuppositions and cultural conditions leading to the development and relative acceptance of open theism?
3. How are we to understand anthropomorphic language and the role it plays in revelation and the interpretive process?
4. What is at stake in the debate about open theism? Does open theism logically undermine the essentials of our faith, including the inerrancy of Scripture, the trustworthiness of God, and the gospel of Christ?
5. Finally, what biblical criteria should biblically faithful churches and parachurch organizations follow in drawing new boundaries to exclude doctrinal aberrations? And why should open theism be considered “beyond the bounds” of biblical Christianity?

(1535–1600), is a philosophical position that understands exhaustive definite foreknowledge to be compatible with libertarian freedom. In Molinism, God has a degree of providential control via his “middle knowledge,” such that he knows exhaustively not only all that *will be* but also all that *would be* given different circumstances. On the basis of this knowledge, God chooses to actualize a particular world. For an explanation of Boyd’s *neo*-Molinism, see *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 127-133. For interaction with his proposal, see the chapters in this volume by Wellum, Ware, and Helseth.

⁸ See especially chapter 2 of *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.

We are not attempting an exhaustive response to open theism⁹; doing so would require many volumes. Our goal is more modest: to focus on these issues, attempting a clear, fair, and accurate analysis that will assist the church in these days of controversy.

CHARITY IN CONTROVERSY

We know that some will view the very existence of this volume—with its title, its argument, and its conclusions—as incompatible with Christian charity and humility. Some will even brand it as an example of theological bigotry. Those who believe open theism is beyond the bounds of biblical Christianity can expect to be viewed as members of an “evangelical Taliban” that would “highjack the evangelical movement.”¹⁰ A full-scale response to this criticism lies outside the scope of this introduction. However, at least five principles justify and necessitate our engagement in this polemical theology.

1. *Controversy is required when essential truths are called into question.*

Every significant doctrinal teaching in the church has been refined in the furnace of controversy. This work argues that open theism undermines the heart of biblical Christianity: the inerrancy of Scripture, the trustworthiness of God, and the gospel of Christ. What are we to do when such serious disagreements arise? John Stott provides the answer: “The proper activity of professing Christians who disagree with one another is neither to ignore, nor to conceal, nor even to minimize their differences, but to debate them.”¹¹ Christ himself was a controversialist,¹² and the early church followed his lead. The church today must follow in these steps. Stott writes:

We seem in our generation to have moved a long way from this vehement zeal for the truth which Christ and his apostles displayed. But if we loved the glory of God more, and if we cared more for the eternal good

⁹ For example, this work contains neither an exegetical defense of exhaustive definite foreknowledge nor a historical survey of the development and defense of this doctrine. Both have been nicely handled in Steven C. Roy, “How Much Does God Foreknow? An Evangelical Assessment of the Doctrine of the Extent of the Foreknowledge of God in Light of the Teaching of Open Theism” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University, 2000). For Roy’s historical survey, see chapter 2 of his thesis. For his exegetical work, see chapters 4, 5, and the appendix in his dissertation.

¹⁰ John Sanders, “Is Open Theism Evangelical?” (plenary address at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, 15 November 2001), 22, 23.

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18, *passim*.

of the souls of men, we would not refuse to engage in necessary controversy, when the truth of the gospel is at stake. The apostolic command is clear. We are “to maintain the truth in love,” being neither truthless in our love, nor loveless in our truth, but holding the two in balance.¹³

2. Truth and love are necessary companions in doctrinal disputes.

There is no biblical or logical contradiction between controversy and compassion, contention and contrition, criticism and Christlikeness. Paul insisted that edification of the body of Christ required “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15, ESV) so that the church would not be like “children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (v. 14).¹⁴ The solution to doctrinal drift is spoken truth with a heart of love to the glory of God and for the good of his church.

3. We must distinguish between a tolerant spirit toward persons that manifests itself in love, and a tolerant mind toward ideas that is never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. “Tolerance” today is a disposition rarely defined but routinely insisted upon without distinctions. The fruit of this fuzzy thinking manifests itself in the church as a refusal to condemn *ideas* for fear that one might offend *individuals*. Stott, however, insists that we return to a biblical distinction:

We need to distinguish between the tolerant mind and the tolerant spirit. Tolerant in spirit a Christian should always be, loving, understanding, forgiving and forbearing others, making allowances for them, and giving them the benefit of the doubt, for true love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” [1 Cor. 13:7]. But how can we be tolerant in mind of what God has plainly revealed to be either evil or erroneous?¹⁵

Chesterton would have agreed. He wrote, “The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.”¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ An application of how this was worked out in Paul’s ministry can be seen in his rebuke of Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). D. A. Carson’s analysis reinforces the principles commended in this introduction: “Thus unless we are prepared to charge him with international-class hypocrisy, the apostle Paul is fully persuaded that his rebuke of the apostle Peter is entirely within the constraints of Christian love. Indeed, at one level, it is motivated by love” (D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002], 150).

¹⁵ Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, 8.

¹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography*, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 212.

4. *We must love and pray for the good of those whom we critique.*

John Newton exhorts us to remember our spiritual duties in the context of theological contention:

As to your opponent, I wish, that, before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write. . . . [If he is a believer,] in a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts. . . . [If he is an unconverted person,] he is a more proper object of your compassion than your anger. Alas! "He knows not what he does." But you know who has made you to differ [1 Cor. 4:7].¹⁷

5. *Finally, we must commune with God in the doctrines for which we contend.* John Owen argued that true communion with God is not only the *goal* of doctrinal contention but also the *means* by which it is to be conducted:

When the heart is cast indeed into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth,—when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us,—when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the thing abides in our hearts—when we have *communion with God in the doctrine we contend for*—then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men.¹⁸

As we seek to exemplify the spirit of this counsel, may the Lord be merciful to us all. We present these essays with the humble hope that God would use this book for the magnification of his name, the edification of his church, and the advancement of his kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria.

¹⁷ John Newton, "On Controversy" [Letter XIX], vol. 1 of *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 269.

¹⁸ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1852; reprint, Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1959), lxiii-lxiv, emphasis added.