

**Pilgrim Covenant Church – Weekly Questions and Answers**

Q. Could you briefly tell us what is "*Openness of God*" theology, which we hear you mentioning as a heresy occasionally?

A. "Openness of God," "Open theism" and "free-will theism" are terms used by the erstwhile evangelical Clark H. Pinnock and his associates to describe their opinion about God. This opinion is expressed the book entitled *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (IVP, 1994), 202 pages, edited by Pinnock, and co-authored with Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger.

The basic premise of this book is that the traditional Calvinistic (i.e. Christian) view of God as being immutable, sovereign and omniscient is seriously flawed. The authors believe that God's immutability is restricted to His character and ultimate plans. He did not "unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass" and He does not know "whatsoever may or can come to pass." He has chosen to limit himself with regards to His sovereignty and omniscience at creation, and has given man the freedom and power to choose his own destiny. Accordingly, they believe that what the Bible teaches about predestination concerns only final goals and purposes of God. What happens between is neither within God's control nor foreknowledge. God can be surprised by what happens! And He actually faces risks with respect to the future, though He knows how to handle surprises quite well.

Dr Roger Nicole of the Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Orlando, Florida has written a rightly uncompromising review of the book in issue 22 of the *Founder's Journal* (Fall 1995; see <http://www.founders.org/FJ22/reviews.html>). He has very neatly tabulated the difference between the Biblical or Reformed View of God with the Openness View as follows (as reproduced with permission):

Biblical / Reformed View	Openness View
God is sovereign and controls everything in the created world, including the actions of responsible agents.	God's sovereignty has been self-limited by virtue of the creation of free agents.
God's power embraces the whole universe, yet not so as to do "violence to the will of the creatures."	God's power stops where human will begins and God Himself has established this self-limitation.
God's knowledge embraces all things possible, and specifically all that comes to pass. It includes eternal knowledge of the future actions and decisions of free agents.	God's knowledge is self-limited, because foreknowledge of the actions of free agents would evidence that they are not free.
God has an eternal plan which will surely come to pass. For Him there is no surprise and no disappointment.	God's plan has a multitude of blanks due to the unforeseen actions or decisions of free agents, God's greatness is manifest in that He is able to cope with anything that turns up.

Predictive prophecy is based on God's exhaustive knowledge and will certainly be realized.	Prophecy is based on God's educated guesses as to what will happen, and it is often conditional upon some activities or decisions of free agents. This conditionality is not always expressed in connection with prophecy, promise or warning. Hence, the appearance of non-fulfillment. Cf. the history of Jonah and Nineveh.
God's plan is immutable even as God's nature. Therefore expressions that speak of God repenting must be seen as metaphorical.	Prayer is an effectual activity whereby angels and humans can function as God's counselors and change His mind.
God is impassable in the sense that He is not, as human beings, susceptible to the upheaval of emotions. He is not impassive, for the scripture represents Him as compassionate.	God's love is the supreme perfection of God and all other characterizations must be envisioned, and if necessary reinterpreted, in terms of our understanding of that love.
God's predestination is that gracious provision whereby, out of His goodness and mercy, he has chosen a multitude out of a sinful and rebellious race, and has appointed them to receive and accept the full benefits of His salvation, provided for them in the work of Christ and applied to them in due time by the Holy Spirit.	God's predestination does not relate to individuals: it is God's blessing upon those, whoever they might be, who repent and believe on their own initiative. It is also at times God's appointment for service.
Those non-elected are inevitably to suffer the consequences of Adam's and their own sinful rebellion and will be forever separated from God.	God is too merciful to keep any one in eternal torment. Those not saved will simply cease to exist.

It is my firm conviction that contrary to the proponent's contention, Open Theism cannot at all be squared with the Scriptures. Open theism, in other words, is not as the proponents claim, a biblical theology based on proper exegesis of Scripture. Neither would a believer reading the Scripture without pre-conceived notions of human autonomy and sovereignty arrive at such an anthropocentric conception of God.

It is in my opinion, nothing more than ancient Pelagianism wearing new clothings and rearing their ugly heads, claiming to be evangelical, when it is really liberalism in disguise. As with the earlier two heresies, it proudly exalts man and his free will, and denigrates God to one who is in some ways at the mercy of man. It seeks to make God fit into the experiences of man, and what man thinks God should be (cf. Ps 50:21). It makes Scripture subservient to experience and will only appeal to such as already have a low view of God. It is, as such, most alarming that InterVarsity Press, which claims to promote evangelicalism should undertake to publish such book. This is no doubt a reflection of the sorry that that much of evangelicalism is in today.

In the same review of Dr Nicole (*ibid.*), he also gives a 10 or 11 points critique of the heresy propounded. We list 7 of his most helpful points:

This view ruins the reality of prophecy as well as the significance of God's promises. How could God possibly know that Judas would betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, when the payment and acceptance of such a sum were dependent upon unforeseeable decisions of the chief priests and of Judas?

This view makes prayer to God for the conversion of sinners to be misdirected. God can do nothing more than He has already done and the matter rests wholly with the sinners.

How could God envision the death of Christ before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8; 17:8) when He presumably did not yet know whether Adam would fall or not?

The proper understanding of the Reformed faith does not deny but includes the reality of the responsible decisions of rational agents, angels and humans. The fact that we do not fully comprehend how sovereignty and responsible agency relate to one another does not give us the right to deny either, or to say that one who holds one of these is obliged to deny or circumvent the other.

What gives the authors the right to counsel God in their prayers? What do they know that God does not know? (Isa 40:13; Rom 11:34) Frankly I would sooner abandon the inestimable privilege of prayer than to think that God may want to consult some people from Rochester, Riverside, Huntington, Hamilton or Bemidji, or even Orlando, in order to determine His actions. While some strongly evangelical authors have at times been quoted, the statements that are supportive of this book's thesis are predominantly gathered from neo-orthodox or liberal writers whose agreement would not necessarily constitute a great asset in the mind of an evangelical reader.

It is not very difficult to foresee whither these people will move, if they carry out the logic of their own position. They will soon abandon the Christian doctrine of original sin, because it will be seen as incompatible with the free will of every human being entering this world (cf. Pelagius). The next logical step is to renounce substitutionary penal atonement, as has frequently happened in liberalism and even in Arminianism. When the atonement is gone there is no great need to maintain the deity of Christ, and when that is gone one usually unloads the doctrine of the Trinity. Then one is on an equal footing with Socinianism, which is the last step prior to the total demise of Christianity.

In the other direction, the allurements of Process Theology, which the present authors are eager to ward off, will undoubtedly exercise some power on their minds. When one reads this book one gets the impression time and again that some pages were written by John Hick (extracted by permission [Nov 11, 2002]).

In my opinion, it is a moot question whether Open Theism will get any worse by becoming more like ancient Pelagianism. It appears to me that they are already there! Those who love our sovereign God and rejoice in His gracious salvation will no doubt abhor this latest attempt to empty God of His power to make Him an idol manageable by man. But one word from our all-glorious, all-powerful, all-knowing God will be sufficient to fell this pernicious heresy; for He says:

"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isa 46:9-10).