

AN ARMINIAN RESPONSE TO JOHN SANDERS'S *THE GOD WHO RISKS: A THEOLOGY OF PROVIDENCE*

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My purpose is not to present a traditional review of this important and erudite work.¹ Instead, I will respond critically to Sanders's views, representing as they do a current stage in the continuing development of the "openness theism" of the contemporary neo-Arminian movement.²

Reformed theologians have been understandably quick to object to the revisionist theism involved. Arminians have been less outspoken, perhaps because their disagreements might seem to be internecine and divisive.³ As an Arminian⁴ I think it is even more important that we respond to this movement with appreciation for what is good about it but with firm resistance to what is not. While I welcome Sanders's rejection of Calvinism's view of providence and salvation, I fear that Sanders and his friends may be doing evangelical Arminianism more harm than good.

At the risk of over-simplification, for my purposes Sanders's work can be treated in terms of three basic propositions:

(1) God is personal and relates to human beings, likewise personal in his image, in an interactive, give-and-take way. Sanders calls this "relational theism," which he intends to stand in some contrast to classic theism, though the reasons for this involve the next two theses also.

(2) God does not possess foreknowledge in the traditional sense; he knows only the past and present, both exhaustively—a view called "presentism." Except for the relatively small number of things he has predetermined to do, God's only "knowledge" of the future is derivative, resulting either from his determination and promises to act in certain ways or from his reading of past and present personalities and events.

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¹ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). For a more traditional review, see Bruce A. Ware, *JETS* 43 (June 2000) 339–42.

² I began referring to this movement by this term before I saw or heard it elsewhere. Even so, others are using the term: see, for example, Daniel Strange, "The Price of Internal Consistency?" *TynBul* 51 (2000) 139–50. We may conveniently mark the beginning of this movement with the publication of *Grace Unlimited* (ed. Clark Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975).

³ During a parallel session of the 2000 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, John Sanders observed that he had not seen any classic Arminian critique of his position.

⁴ I am a "Reformation Arminian," holding essentially the viewpoint of Arminius himself and of the first generation (and only that generation) of Remonstrants. For a full presentation of this soteriology, see my forthcoming work (from Randall House) subtitled *Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Theology of Redemption*.

(3) Thus conceived, God can make mistakes and “risks” failure of his plans for human beings. This depends on our response to him, not on his foreordaining. Things sometimes turn out differently from what he believes will transpire. The traditional concepts of omnipotence and immutability must therefore also be revised.

While there are many other matters touched on, these are at the heart of the matter and provide a framework for my response.

I. THE PERSONAL GOD’S INTERACTIONS WITH HUMAN BEINGS

I will deal briefly with the first of Sanders’s three propositions, since it is the one with which I have the least disagreement. Sanders makes clear from the beginning that his purpose is to present “a model of God as a personal being who enters into personal relationships with us.”⁵ He writes often of “a personal God who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with us.”⁶ This personal God has created other beings with whom he has shared the constitutional nature of personhood. And out of that decision, sovereignly made, arise the main considerations that govern his relationship to those beings as persons. As Sanders puts this, “God creates significant others and gives them ‘space’ to operate.”⁷

In this regard, Sanders’s exegesis of the Biblical stories is often illuminating and challenging. I will not treat these in detail, but among the more interesting are his comments about Jacob’s encounter with God at Jabbok (Genesis 32) and the situation leading to the flood in Genesis 6.⁸

Cautiously on Sanders’s side in this respect, then, I would affirm that God, as a personal being, experiences will, thought, and *feeling*. He most certainly responds emotionally and volitionally to our decisions and actions. The Bible is replete with references to this aspect of his nature, anger or wrath being the example most familiar to us. A God who is capable of anger (Jer 30:23, 24) and can be grieved (Eph 4:30) may also be appropriately described as disappointed or pained, to use two of Sanders’s favorite words. As he says elsewhere, “God, because he cares, is repeatedly hurt, angered and saddened by sinful human actions.”⁹ The God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is by no means impassive. We must not permit our philosophy to sit in judgment on the Scriptures in this regard.

So far, Sanders is right. But he is wrong, I believe, to think that the wineskin of classic theism cannot contain this understanding. Traditional Christian theism already has room enough for the truth he is emphasizing. One of traditional theism’s basic building blocks is that God is personal and made human beings personal in his likeness. The implications of this will cover everything that is sound about Sanders’s first thesis.

⁵ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 12.

⁶ *Ibid.* 16.

⁷ *Ibid.* 45.

⁸ *Ibid.* 54, 49.

⁹ *Ibid.* 172.

Granted, some theists have not done justice to these truths in their development of the doctrines of God and soteriology. Persons interrelate, as one colleague of mine is fond of saying, not on a cause-effect basis but on the basis of influence and response. That the personal God made persons in some ways like him provides the very basis we need for understanding how the two relate to each other. Yes, God enters into give-and-take relationships with us.

To be sure, God has no origin in, and is not contained by, the time and space continuum. But he created human beings and placed them in such a framework. We live, act, and move about in that framework—as persons, not machines, to the glory of our Creator. Each of us in turn is born, grows, has varied experiences, dies, and goes on from there. We learn and change. We make decisions and experience the consequences.

This movement, this changing of time and place, is not illusory; we are really going from point A to point B and from one year and day to the next.¹⁰ And in that framework of space and time, in our history, God interacts with us. He is aware of what we do *when we do it*, and responds accordingly. He is as familiar with space as we are. He knows very well what time it is. (Indeed, *only* he knows this truly.)

For God, as for us, the space-time continuum is really “there.”¹¹ Being immanent, as well as transcendent, he is “involved” with us in today’s decisions and their consequences tomorrow. He acts in our world. He hears the prayer I make today and acts accordingly. He pleads with the unbeliever to trust him savingly “while it is today,” and he does or does not deliver that person accordingly. He acts and we respond. We act and he responds. Each influences the other.

There are at least two important Biblical doctrines that provide a firm basis for the preceding affirmations—both clearly recognized by Sanders, though not developed entirely as I might like. One is creation. That God made humanity in space and time means clearly that he “works” in space and time. He knows very well the difference between one day and another and on any given day interacts with what transpires on that day. The creation account makes this very clear. That he created various things on each of the six creative days¹² is not mere parable. The God of space and time—though not fully defined by space and time—most certainly works within the framework he made and is aware of, and responds to, what happens *when* it happens. The entire story of the Bible testifies to this.

The other doctrine fundamental to this understanding of God is the incarnation. If the person of Jesus means anything at all to us, it is that he is the visible revelation of the invisible God, a person both truly God and truly human in space and time. If God cannot operate in space and time, he

¹⁰ This is true in spite of Parmenides’s denial of movement and change as illusory.

¹¹ Berkeley might have preferred us to say “here” instead of “there,” but this is not the place for philosophical niceties. And I doubt that Berkeley did full justice to the Biblical doctrine of creation.

¹² This holds regardless of how long each “day” was.

cannot become incarnate. Our view of God, as Sanders recognizes, must be heavily informed by the implications of Jesus' very real and personal interaction with others in our space-time world. When Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb, for example, he most certainly revealed God.

To be sure, there is much about all this that needs careful development, and doing that will require much more attention than this paper can give it. Meanwhile, the openness theists offer us an important and positive emphasis in this one respect: that God and human beings respond to each other in personal ways, with all the desires and disappointments which this entails.

Nor is any of this derogatory to the sovereignty of God. Sanders appropriately makes such observations as "The portrait of God developed here is one according to which God sovereignly wills to have human persons become collaborators with him in achieving the divine project of mutual relations of love."¹³ "This has to be understood, however, as God's free and sovereign choice to create this state of affairs."¹⁴

I would simply add that God's sovereignty means that he acts with absolute freedom to do as he pleases. No other being has prior claim on him to act in any certain way. If he pleases, then, to create personal beings somewhat like himself and give them a limited freedom to act in co-relationship with him, then his sovereignty has in no way been limited when those beings act for or against him. Calvinists apparently believe that God's sovereignty would be compromised if he should establish any conditions by which he will respond one way or another to the choices of human beings. Indeed, such a concept would impose on God not freedom but limitation.

II. GOD'S IGNORANCE OF THE FUTURE

The second major thesis of Sanders's work is that God does not know (in the sense of foreseeing) the future. For Sanders, when God speaks about the future, one of three things may be involved. (1) He may be declaring his own intention to do something, with or without creaturely cooperation. In this he never errs. (2) He may be predicting a conditional future, with the condition stated or left implied. If in such instances he *seems* to err, that usually results from the fact that the conditions were implied. (3) He may be making a prediction based on his exhaustive knowledge of the past and present and of the nature of the persons involved. In such cases, God is sometimes mistaken and the future different from his expectation.

Traditional Christian theism, however, has held that God knows the future. For Calvinists, this is by virtue of God's foreordination of all things.¹⁵ For others, including traditional Arminians, this is what Sanders calls "simple" foreknowledge, by virtue of his eternal omniscience. Sanders's view—

¹³ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 12. (I might not approve of everything in this expression, but that is not important for the point treated here.)

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 162. Sometimes he gets carried away: "God is sovereign over his sovereignty" (170).

¹⁵ The scope of this article does not permit further treatment of this view, except to say that I am certainly in agreement with Sanders in rejecting it.

known as “presentism” and shared with other neo-Arminians—constitutes therefore a fundamental and major revision of classic theism.

Two other points may be noted in passing. First, Sanders argues that the “family” of “relational theists” includes both those who do and those who do not believe in divine foreknowledge.¹⁶ Further, Sanders insists that foreknowledge does not finally offer any advantage for understanding God’s providence. Indeed, the God who possesses foreknowledge is at a *disadvantage* when compared to the God of presentism!

It seems clear, however, that Sanders’s denial of foreknowledge is essential to his system as a whole and requires too radical a break with classic Arminian theism to maintain a “family” relationship. Clearly, his denial of divine foreknowledge is logically necessary to the “risk model” of providence as he conceives it. Try as he might to pacify traditional Arminians, it is clear that he thinks them logically inconsistent.¹⁷

1. *Foreknowledge and the future: the logical problem.* The general problem with foreknowledge—for Sanders and the neo-Arminians—is this: if God knows everything that will happen in the future we may as well admit that the future is closed. The future cannot then be other than it will be; what is *certain* to be *must* be. I have dealt with this elsewhere in detail and will not repeat what I have said there.¹⁸ That treatment, however, did not deal with some of Sanders’s specific objections, and these I will treat here.

First, however, two introductory observations must be made. One is that Arminians and others have long believed in both divine foreknowledge and human freedom without any sense of contradiction. Sanders’s survey of the tradition makes clear that he realizes this.¹⁹

The other is that Sanders does not correctly represent the traditional Arminian view of divine foreknowledge. He characterizes the view of Arminius and Wesley as though *after* God’s decision to create he “looked ahead” into the future of the universe he had already determined to create: “Prior to creation God *learns* what we will actually do, since prior to God’s decision to create God did not know what we would actually do.”²⁰ But this is a serious misunderstanding. For Arminius and Wesley, as for most Arminians, God’s foreknowledge is not a matter of deciding to “look ahead” or “learning”; instead it is intuitive omniscience. God simply and *eternally* “sees” all that will ever be, and *this includes the contingencies that might be one way or another*. He also intuitively knows all the possibilities that would follow from the choices that are *not* made—“all possible worlds,” as the philosophers enjoy expressing it. Specifically, the Arminian tradition does *not* place

¹⁶ See, for example, Sanders, *God Who Risks* 12, where he includes freewill theism, simple foreknowledge, presentism, and some versions of middle knowledge as in the family of “relational theism.” See also 75 and 322, n. 112.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 14.

¹⁸ Robert E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” *JETS* 43 (2000) 259–71.

¹⁹ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 140–66.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 196.

God's foreknowledge of events in this world at some "time" *between* the decision to create and the creative act itself.

Thus Arminius said: "This [fourth] decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who *would*, through his preventing grace, *believe*, and through his subsequent grace *would persevere*."²¹ John Wesley, treating Predestination, affirmed forthrightly: "The almighty, all-wise God sees and knows, from everlasting to everlasting, all that is, that was, and that is to come."²² Richard Watson, one of the best of the Wesleyan divines, made clear that "the *knowledge* of God is on the contrary never represented there [in the Scriptures] to us as a capacity to *acquire* knowledge, but as actually comprehending all things that are, and all things that can be."²³

Now to the fundamental logical problem itself, which Sanders repeatedly emphasizes, especially in the section entitled "The Uselessness of Simple Foreknowledge for Providence."²⁴ The objection can be simply stated thus: Once God foreknows the future, he is from then on helpless to change it because his knowledge cannot be incorrect. The future, in other words, must "turn out" the way God already knows it will be. To cite Sanders: "The problem arises because of the fact that what God previsions is what will *actually* occur. Divine foreknowledge, by definition, is always correct. If what will actually happen is, for example, the Holocaust, then God knows it is going to happen and cannot prevent it from happening, since his foreknowledge is never mistaken."²⁵

This objection is repeated with almost every illustration.²⁶ In one case, a God who knows I am going to have an automobile accident cannot answer a prayer for protection from accidents, since any action he takes would change the future and make his foreknowledge incorrect. Consequently, God is worse off, not better, for possessing foreknowledge!

This is the crux of the matter for Sanders, and a logical conundrum for sure. How are we to deal with it? There are at least two ways of responding.

To begin with, there is a fundamental problem in Sanders's "logic," which can be paralleled in ways that help us see it. Let us assume, for example, that in the upcoming election²⁷ Albert Gore is going to be chosen president. Proceeding on that assumption, can I say that George Bush *cannot* be elected president *because* Gore is going to be elected? As soon as we state this, we recognize that something is wrong with our reasoning. If Gore

²¹ Jacobus Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius* (trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall; Baker, 1956) 1.248 (italics original).

²² John Wesley, "On Predestination," *A Compend of Wesley's Theology* (ed. Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles; New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1954) 50.

²³ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1850) 1.376 (italics original).

²⁴ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 200–206. The section is largely taken from Sanders's earlier, "more complete" article, "Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control Than the Openness of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 14/1 (1997) 26–40.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 201.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 204–5.

²⁷ "Upcoming," that is, at the time of this writing.

is going to be elected, or Bush defeated, the reason is not that Gore is going to be elected—or that God knows he is going to be elected. An event is not its own cause, nor is knowledge of that event.

As I indicated in the earlier article referred to above, the future is certain *even if God does not know it*.²⁸ Whether Gore or Bush is elected, it is certain that he will be. Consequently, with the same logic as that of Sanders we might easily say that the other candidate *cannot be*. Sanders's position is open to the same conundrum about the future as belief in foreknowledge.

Once we speak of any future event (or of the future in general) as “fore-known,” and then say that even God cannot change it because this would make his foreknowledge wrong, *we have created the logical problem with our way of expressing it*. We have turned foreknowledge on its head. When we assume, in formulating an illustration, that the future will be a certain way, then we have logically put ourselves “on the other side” of that future. In such a case, then, of course what will be “cannot” be otherwise. Even God cannot make a fact of history a non-fact.

But no fact of *future* history is fixed by the knowledge of it: everything that God knows about the future, he knows only because it will happen, not vice-versa. It would be utterly foolish to say, for example, “Since the Holocaust happened, it cannot *not* have happened!” It is precisely the same “logic” to say, assuming by foreknowledge a perspective on the other side of a future event, that the event must occur to keep foreknowledge from being wrong. The error in that is self-evident.

To multiply examples: I “know” that Rocky Marciano retired as undefeated heavyweight champion. Am I justified, then, to say that *therefore* he could not have lost any of his fights? Of course not: that reverses the relationship between event and knowledge. Likewise, it would be foolish for me, on observing a friend's new, green car, to say that he could not have bought a red one because therefore my “knowledge” would be rendered incorrect!

A second and important response to Sanders's objection is to insist that God (fore)knows the real world as it is. He knows necessities as necessities and contingencies as contingencies; and in the latter case he knows not only what will be but what else really might be. Though he knows, for example, whether Gore or Bush will be elected, he knows just as well that the election really could go the other way. And he knows everything that will follow from the election of either one. (To use Sanders's logic, since he knows it is a contingency, depending on free human decisions, it *has* to be such a contingency!) Then it is not logically correct or necessary to say that the only possibility for the future is the one that will be.

Strangely enough, Sanders himself sees this solution at one point, when he defends those who believe in divine foreknowledge against the accusation of John Stuart Mill that God should have decided not to create those whom he knew would be damned. He says, “For SF [simple foreknowledge],

²⁸ See n. 18 above. The reader probably needs to review that article also in order to understand some of the things said here.

God's election is dependent on and is logically subsequent to the choice of the creatures, even though God's election of them is prior to creation."²⁹ Precisely.

On the broadest level, Sanders's objection is that once God decided to create the world as it is, knowing every event in its history in advance, the world cannot be other than it is and the events of its history cannot be other than they are. The answer is the same: God determined to create a world with true contingencies and foreknows it as a world with contingencies. If the world operates with human beings who make real, libertarian choices between alternatives, then that is both the world God decided to create and *the world which he foreknows*.

If, then, our formulation of such issues seems to tie us in logical knots, it is our formulation that does it, not the real world itself. In the real world, knowledge of the facts (even future facts) flows logically from the facts. If the eternal God is aware of facts before they become facts, the *knowledge* still bears the same relationship to the *facts known*. To put this simply, he knows what I will do (and what he will do in response) *only if I do it*.

Pursuing the same "logical" problem, Sanders offers that there is something unworkable about God foreknowing his own decisions. He cites Haskers to the effect that "it is impossible that God should use a foreknowledge derived from the actual occurrence of future events to determine his own prior actions in the providential governance of the world. Such a deity would then know what he is going to do before deciding what to do."³⁰

To this riddle-like logic we may respond that there simply is not anything finally illogical about God knowing in advance what he will do. His decision to act and his knowledge of his act are inseparable. Furthermore, it is nothing more than our disadvantaged position that causes us to place a "separation" between God's *eternal* foreknowledge and decisions, on the one hand, and his response *in time* to ours, on the other hand. If we understood his eternity better, we might even realize that there is no ontological distinction between his eternal foreknowledge and his actions in time. Even the God of presentism has his eternal existence outside space and time. It is just as difficult to explain how such a God interacts with people in space and time, as it is to explain how a God with foreknowledge does so.

Giving the same logical objection a slightly different twist, Sanders asks how God could interject the test of the binding of Isaac if he knew the whole story of Abraham's life in advance. The answer is the same. God knows the difference between things that have not yet transpired and those that have. Again, he (fore)knows contingencies as contingencies. Abraham is not tested until Abraham is tested in time. Prior to the test, he may fail or pass, and God knows both possibilities very well. It would turn foreknowledge on its head, then, for us to think that Abraham could not fail because God knew he would pass the test. *God knew it in advance only because Abraham*

²⁹ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 203. Perhaps Sanders is only representing how those who believe in foreknowledge would defend against Mill, rather than agreeing that this defense is legitimate for them, but this is not clear.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 201.

did pass the test in time. And God's own decisions and actions were as much a real part of temporal history as Abraham's.

Comparing our own (after)knowledge of Abraham's situation may help us see the logical fallacy inherent in Sanders's objection. We know both that he *could* have disobeyed God and that he *did* obey God and pass the test. The second we know only "after the fact," only because he did actually obey God when the time came. I would maintain that God's (fore)knowledge of the events bears exactly the same relationship to them, ontologically, as our (after)knowledge.

Still on Abraham and Isaac, Sanders insists that Gen 22:12, when God says, "Now I know that you fear God," is a problem for foreknowledge.³¹ Yet, though God knew in advance that Abraham would pass the test, *he also knew that Abraham could fail.* From the perspective of God's relationship to us in time, then, only afterward was the issue settled, and only because he passed in time did God know it, even in eternity. Consequently, God can always state his feelings and actions in terms of his interaction with us, and be entirely truthful.³²

In a similar vein, Sanders thinks that God should have been angry about David's sin when he learned it via foreknowledge, rather than waiting until the actual occurrence.³³ But God's foreknowledge knew this *as a contingency*, knew that David could withstand the temptation. The sin did not occur until it occurred, and in God's relationship with David he was angry at that point in time. Again, we must not confuse ourselves into thinking that things foreknown are already fixed.

Sanders objects further: "A problem arises regarding conditional promises, which proponents of exhaustive foreknowledge need to explain: How can a conditional promise be genuine if God already foreknows the human response and so foreknows that he will, in fact, never fulfill the promise?"³⁴ The answer is contained in the statement of the question: the promise is *conditional*. Its fulfillment is therefore as much a contingency as the condition for it.

2. *The ethical problem: does foreknowledge make God responsible for the future?* Sanders appears to accept the objection of John Hick to the effect that it is "hard to clear God from ultimate responsibility for the existence of sin, in view of the fact that He chose to create a being whom He foresaw would, if He created him, freely sin."³⁵

The issue here, after all, is whether we can justify God for creating beings who did, in fact, sin—whether he knew they would or not. Even

³¹ Ibid. 52.

³² Ware 340 (see n. 1) offers yet another helpful objection to Sanders's interpretation of the Abraham incident. If we were to interpret Gen 18:20–21 the same way Sanders deals with Gen 22:12, we would be forced to say that God did not even know the *present* situation in Sodom when he was talking with Abraham!

³³ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 72.

³⁴ Ibid. 131. See also 74, where he observes that when God uses "if" language he is not being genuine if he already knows the outcome! Once again, this is to confuse knowledge of facts with facts themselves. God knows contingencies as contingencies.

³⁵ Ibid. 202.

presentism must hold that God created them in such a way that they could and did sin, and knew they could. Thus presentism is just as open to Hick's charge as the traditional Arminian view. Whether we can explain this as fully as God himself might, it is clear that it was God's will to create beings who could respond either positively or negatively to his love, and that is good. We are out of our league when we attempt to suggest to God a "better possible world" than the one he labeled "good."

Meanwhile, what is clear is that he did not create Adam and Even so that they *must* sin. He is therefore not responsible for that sin. That he knew they would sin is balanced by the fact that he knew they might not sin. That he created them with the potential for sin offers the same "problem" for presentism as for foreknowledge.

Sanders is right to insist that it was never *probable* that Adam and Eve would sin.³⁶ But it was always *possible*, and God knew that very well. He willingly created them with that possibility. Foreknowledge or not, he most certainly became aware that they were *about* to sin when Eve reached a certain point in her conversation with Satan. He could have stopped them at any point in the process. Why did he not do this? Whatever the answer to this question (and Sanders and I might agree on the answer), it is the same as the answer to the question why God decided to make them when he knew they would sin. To turn Sanders's dictum around again, presentism offers no more satisfactory explanation of God's decision to create Adam and Eve, who did in fact sin, than does the belief in foreknowledge.

We are not able to say that God ever had a fixed purpose to create beings who would not sin. People like Hick think that God was complicit in the sin of Adam if he anticipated it and did not act to prevent it, that there can be no good reason for his knowingly permitting the sin of Adam. We simply do not know that. Sanders frequently reminds us that we must read God's nature from providence rather than from *a priori* ideas about what he ought to be. Well, what we know for certain is that God did, in fact, create Adam with the capacity to sin, and that Adam did so. Obviously, then, his "desire" that Adam not sin was *conditional*. I am satisfied that God did not create Adam and Eve without facing fully the possibility of their sin and deciding to go ahead anyway. I am likewise confident that he did not desire their sin and did everything sufficient to prevent it *within the structure of possibilities that he, for his own good reasons, deemed best*.

Could God have prevented the Holocaust, and is he in some way complicit in it if in fact he knew it would transpire ahead of time? Of course God could have prevented the Holocaust, had he chosen to do so. His "failure" to do that (if we may use the word), though knowing it would transpire, is no more reprehensible than his failure to stop it when it started, when even according to presentism he could not help being aware of it. Nor can his failure to stop it be accounted for (or discounted) on the grounds that he knew it would occur and therefore could not change the future and make his knowledge wrong. To the contrary: he did not stop it for reasons

³⁶ *Ibid.* 45–47.

known best to him. Among those reasons, of course, is his determination to deal with human beings as free, moral agents rather than as automatons. Most certainly the Holocaust resulted from free, sinful choices of human beings. When God foreknew it, then, he knew it as a contingency. He knew it would result if and when certain people made certain decisions. He knew that they did not *have* (as necessities) to make those decisions, and that if they did not do so the Holocaust would not be. And (it would seem clear) he made every effort to prevent it commensurate with his way of governing the world.

3. *The practical problem: foreknowledge and providence.* As I have indicated, Sanders insists that the view that God has foreknowledge does not put him in any better position for providential management of the world or the circumstances of our lives. He disapproves of Jack Cottrell's view, for example, that foreknowledge is essential to God's providential management of things and proceeds to argue forcefully against it.³⁷

Sanders's main argument is still the logical problem dealt with above. He illustrates with a young lady who asks God for guidance whether to marry one suitor or another. But, he says, since God already knows which one she will marry, he cannot guide her differently, lest his foreknowledge be incorrect! As I have indicated, God's knowledge of what the young lady will do is logically dependent on her choice, not vice-versa. Before she chooses, he most certainly can answer her prayer for guidance—assuming that God does in fact answer such prayers and give such guidance.³⁸ This way of operating is not logically ruled out by foreknowledge.

Similarly, Sanders says that if God already knows I will have an automobile accident, he cannot answer a prayer for protection and prevent it! Again, to make foreknowledge a reason God cannot act is to stand foreknowledge on its head. Before I have an accident, the contingent decisions that cause it have not yet been made in the real world. The accident remains a contingency that may or may not occur until it actually happens. The knowledge of it grows from its actual occurrence (even though future to God), not vice versa.

Growing out of this, Sanders concludes that for a person who believes in divine foreknowledge to ask God for protection is no different from asking the God of presentism for protection. In fact, there is a considerable difference. A God with mere knowledge of the present does not foresee the decision of the drunken driver who will swerve to my side of the road at the last instant. He cannot therefore decide by any means available to him to delay my arrival at that spot and at that time. A God with foreknowledge can. I am not affirming that God does such things (that is a matter for another discussion), but it is clear that foreknowledge can make a difference for the better. The God of presentism can do no better than "guess" that an

³⁷ *Ibid.* 200.

³⁸ Whether he operates that way or not is beyond the scope of this article to discuss.

accident might ensue, especially if there is nothing predictable about this driver's choice of route (often the case with drunken drivers).

At the time of this writing, my own church (a "free-will" one, to be sure) is about to vote on a candidate for pastor. Any member will agree that the God who sees the future can guide us better in our decision than one who does not.

As yet another aspect of the practical implications of the problem, Sanders does not see how God can sincerely make an appeal to me, or work to persuade me to respond positively, if he already knows I am going to reject it. That is a "sophistication" that results from our way of formulating the illustration. It allows a future assumed for the sake of illustration to control reality. The "solution" to this apparent difficulty is plain: the God who knows I am going to reject his appeal likewise *knows that I can accept his appeal*. Though he knows what my decision will be, the decision itself is truly (ontologically) contingent until it occurs.

Consequently, God sincerely appeals to me to do the right thing because I really can do it and his appeal may very well be the reason I decide to do so. He does not "give up" on me because he knows I am not going to obey him; he also knows I may obey. Even to those who will reject him he gives every opportunity to know and do the good—every opportunity, that is, which is commensurate with every other aspect of his providential governance of things.

Our own interpersonal relationships with fellow human beings bear on this, and especially on understanding it. All of us have experienced situations when we knew very well what some person was going to do if, in fact, we pursued a certain course of action in dealing with that person. Of course our "knowledge" was derivative, and subject to error, when God's is intuitive and perfect, but that does not invalidate the illustration. I may know (indeed, I often do) that a certain person will react with wrongdoing when I have done a right thing. But I know with equal assurance that this person does not *have* to react in that way. Does my doing the right thing, therefore, *cause* the misbehavior? In no way. God does what is right in his relationships with us, even when he knows that we are going to respond wickedly, and his doing right is in no sense the cause of our wickedness.

Likewise, I have often appealed to someone to do the right thing even though I was confident the appeal would fall on deaf ears. It was my responsibility to make the appeal, and in fact I did so with assurance that the person really could hearken. If that person, in fact, decided to do wrong against my appeal, then I had at least made a genuine effort—knowing the future was not "fixed" in some ontological way—to steer the person in the right direction. I gave that person every opportunity to do right.

Furthermore, to suggest (as Sanders does) that God cannot really be disappointed when we fail him, if he knew in advance that we would, is equally wide of the mark of understanding ourselves or God. I have often been seriously disappointed with a choice that I had all reason to believe would be made. And God is even more capable than I of working earnestly with us, and being disappointed in us, even when he knows us very well. Indeed,

surely the God of presentism knows us well enough to know certainly that we are going to fail him often; is he therefore any less disappointed when we do? Once again, Sanders is allowing knowledge that is logically “after the fact” to control the real world.

Finally, although I assume that this paper as a whole speaks to this, I should perhaps address once more the practical issue of how God can “respond” to free human actions when both the actions themselves and what he will do in response are eternally foreknown by him. Two entirely different things may be said. First, as a “fall-back” position, I may observe that this logical “problem” results entirely from our futile attempt to bring an eternal perspective into time. And this is beyond our finite ability. Only God knows the difference between the two; we cannot manage to avoid some mystery about his mode of existence. At the least, to make this observation is no worse than pleading inability to explain the interplay between God’s sovereignty and human freedom.

Even so, it seems clear to me that the principles I have already outlined apply here also. In the first place, God knows contingencies as contingencies. If there are, indeed, true contingencies in human decisions, then God’s responses are likewise contingent. He foreknew, for example, what I would decide in response to every moral dilemma I have ever faced, and what he would do in response. But in each instance he knew just as well that I might do otherwise, and what he would do if I did. In the final analysis, God’s knowledge of his own decisions cannot be separated from the decisions themselves. In eternity, he knows well the difference between contingencies and necessities. If he can know the future without “fixing” it, he can also decide what he will do in response to future human actions without “fixing” those actions.

4. *Problems with presentism.* Space allows for nothing more than a brief statement about the failures of the neo-Arminian movement in its denial of foreknowledge.

First, presentism allows for no true foreknowledge at all. At first, the neo-Arminians apparently thought God’s foreknowledge might be “selective.” They tended to say that God’s foreknowledge is limited, that he does not know in advance, specifically, the free, moral choices of persons.³⁹ It soon becomes clear, however, that one cannot stop there. What transpires in any part of the world’s history is so interwoven with the choices of human beings that knowing any part would require knowing the rest. Then either God foresees *all* the future or none of it. From Sanders’s presentation of the subject, I gather that those in the movement have now realized this. However, during a parallel session of the 2000 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Sanders was asked what God does not know. He responded

³⁹ See, for example, Clark H. Pinnock, “God Limits His Foreknowledge,” in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. D. and R. Basinger; InterVarsity, 1986) 156–58; also Richard Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism,” in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* (ed. Clark H. Pinnock; Zondervan, 1989) 121–39, and Pinnock’s summary of Rice’s view in this volume, p. xii.

that God does not know in advance the free, moral choices of persons, thus hedging on the answer. I understand his hedging, because he wants to say that God knows in advance the things he himself has determined to do. But this is not foreseeing, this is foreordaining; in such matters God really “knows” only his present determination. The neo-Arminians have clearly asserted that the future does not exist to be known; in that case God does not know the future at all. Sanders (as will be seen below) believes God planned, before the creation, to become incarnate; it is impossible to think that even if this were the case (in his view) God knew anything about when or where that incarnation could take place.

Second, presentism likewise cannot logically provide for any eternal election at all. Sanders intends to avoid this by speaking of “corporate” election. Commenting on passages that avow that God chose us in Christ beforehand, or that our names have been written in a book from the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4; Rev 17:8), he observes, “Again, this is no problem if taken to refer to something like ‘corporate election,’ whereby God elects a course of action and certain conditions by which people will be counted as ‘in Christ.’ According to corporate election it is the group—the body of Christ—that is foreordained from the foundation of the world, not specific individuals selected by God for salvation.”⁴⁰

This is a highly unsatisfactory response to Biblical evidence and shows indecisive confusion as to whether God elects “a course of action” and “certain conditions,” on the one hand, or “the body of Christ” as a group, on the other. In fact, Sanders’s God cannot even elect a *group*: he does not know for certain whether there will be any group or any individuals who will believe the gospel. Nor is there any such thing as a group that is not made up of individuals.

The position of Arminius and Wesley on this subject is that God has elected individuals to salvation, foreknowing their faith. Sanders’s representation that there is no essential difference between their view and his simply will not stand close scrutiny.

Third, presentism must gloss over the Biblical evidence for divine foreknowledge. Most of us would affirm that there are, throughout the Scriptures, so many indications that God reads the future that the point does not need treatment. Yet one wonders whether there is any need to set forth such evidence. If I point to any one place where God reveals the future, and use it as evidence of foreknowledge, Sanders will interpret it in another way—according to one of the three possibilities stated at the beginning of this section.

In other words, Sanders already has a prepared answer for any instance we may cite. In that sense, his position is unfalsifiable.⁴¹ No matter

⁴⁰ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 102.

⁴¹ I would not claim that unfalsifiability is necessarily fatal. A number of true opinions about things, in my opinion, are unfalsifiable. At the same time, such opinions are in some ways beyond argument.

what passage I turn to, as evidence that God knows the future in advance, Sanders will turn it into something else. For that reason, and because this paper must be limited in some ways, I will forego treating the extensive Scriptural evidence.

I do wish, however, to deal specifically with one key point in the Scriptural position on this issue: namely, that the Lamb of God was slain before the foundation of the world. Sanders is obviously aware that this is a crucial matter. He clearly recognizes that his view of foreknowledge *will not allow for the crucifixion of Jesus to have been in any sense taken into account in the plan of God before the world was created*. That would mean that God foreknew the fall before he could have known it in Sanders's system, and that would bring his structure tumbling down. Consequently, Sanders spends significant space dealing with this issue.

He apparently prefers to read Rev 13:8 so that the clause "from the foundation of the world" connects to the words "whose names have not been written" rather than to the words "the Lamb slain." Thus, "All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written, from the foundation of the world, in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain."⁴²

This is certainly a possible reading of the words. The English versions are divided on this point. The AV, NKJB, NIV, REB and others connect the words with "slain." The NASB, NEB, RSV and others agree with Sanders. The same can be said for the commentaries: some link the words with "written"⁴³ and others with "slain."⁴⁴

Which, then, is the most *natural* reading of the words? Several of the interpreters suggest that the other linking would never have been thought of if it had not been for the supposed difficulty in representing Jesus as "slain from the foundation of the world." Even some interpreters who side with Sanders agree that the other linking is more natural, at least at first glance. I may add that among many of those who side with Sanders there is an acknowledged suspicion that the text of Revelation is not original at this point, and that the words "of the Lamb slain" do not even belong there.

The reason it is more natural to take "from the foundation of the world" with "slain" is fairly obvious. Nearly all the time in Revelation, prepositional phrases adverbially modifying a written verb or verbal go with the verb or verbal closest to them, either before or after. *Less than one time out of every hundred* (and there are several hundred such adverbial prepositional phrases in the Revelation) does a prepositional phrase look back across an intervening verb or verbal to an earlier one. That happens only when there is an intervening subordinate clause or phrase.

This should not be understood as proof to any degree. The fact that this can happen at all means that it *can* happen here also. Statistical incidence

⁴² Sanders, *God Who Risks* 102. He also makes allowance for the other reading.

⁴³ See, for example, David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 746-48.

⁴⁴ See, for example, G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974) 213-14.

is not good evidence for interpretation or usage of language. Even so, this suggests that a reader would probably be more likely to link the phrase with "slain."

Like others who take the less natural linking, Sanders points out that the only other time "from the foundation of the world" occurs in Revelation is in 17:8. There it definitely refers to those "whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world." That is not to be ignored, and it serves to make us more open to the same linking here in 13:8. But it fails to prove the point.

More important, even if we take the phrase with *written*, Sanders's cause is not helped thereby. The reference to names written in the book of life from the foundation of the world leaves us with election of persons to salvation, and elimination of others, as a matter of foreknowledge. I have already mentioned above that once we deny divine foreknowledge in the traditional sense, there cannot logically be any eternal knowing, on God's part, who will and who will not be saved. Indeed, he cannot know this at any time before they live and make their choices in their own time. If Sanders's views are correct, there can be no book, written from the foundation of the world, containing the names of the redeemed and omitting the names of the unredeemed.

Equally important (unless we go against all the manuscript evidence and follow those who regard "of the Lamb slain" as an early gloss on the original), we cannot finally get around the fact that the crucifixion was taken into account in the planning of God before creation. Consider carefully here that the book in which the names were written from the foundation of the world (taking it Sanders's way) is, in fact, "the book of the slain/slaughtered Lamb." It was that, therefore, when the names were written (or not written) in it. The slaughter of him for sacrifice was already, from the creation of the world, the basis for the existence of such a book.

Indeed, the other references in Revelation to "the Lamb's Book of Life" (as in 21:27) include this idea by implication. The reference to Jesus as the Lamb automatically includes the idea that he was the *sacrificial* Lamb (cf. Rev 5:6, 12 for examples, along with John 1:29). From this perspective, then, even the dropping of the words "of the Lamb slain" would not finally help Sanders's case.

It is clear, then, that Rev 13:8, regardless of how the words are read, means that the crucifixion was taken into account in the planning of God "from the creation of the world."

We should add to this 1 Pet 1:18–20, where we read that we were redeemed (literally) "by means of the precious blood—as of a lamb without spot and without blemish—of Christ, foreknown before the foundation of the world."

The main question is what is incorporated in the "foreknown." Grammatically, the word refers directly to Christ, and Sanders capitalizes on this to avoid the idea that the atonement was taken into account in any sense before the creation of the world. In order to sustain this, he is forced

to the view that it was Christ's *incarnation* that was pre-planned, not his *atonement*.⁴⁵ In his view, of course, God could not have foreknown that the human beings he had decided to create, as free agents, would sin and need atonement. Consequently, that could not have played any role in God's eternal plan for the Christ. But he could have planned for the incarnation as a manifestation of his love, regardless of whether mankind were to fall into sin or remain holy. In this way, the pre-planned incarnation would be one of those plans God made in advance, indicating something he was going to do regardless of the human situation.

This is a highly unusual move. One doubts that many interpreters would follow him. But that is not so important as the fact that the view seems totally to ignore the context of Peter's words. The Christ "foreknown" here is very clearly the Christ whose blood—like that of the sacrificial lamb—redeems us. This is so obvious that it needs no evidence beyond calling attention to it.

III. THE "RISK" MODEL OF PROVIDENCE

Sanders's third thesis, which I sum up as the risk model of providence, finally involves a serious redefinition of the God of theism. What this involves is not easy to express in a few lines, but it includes (in addition to the denial of divine foreknowledge, treated above) the following.

- God is vulnerable, open to the failure of at least some of his intentions.
- God is not immutable as traditionally understood, that is, he changes his mind in ways that are more than merely relational.
- God is sometimes mistaken in his beliefs about what will happen.
- God is not omnipotent as traditionally understood; his efforts are sometimes defeated.
- The attributes of God must be redefined with his love at the center.

On the one hand, it seems clearly Biblical to speak of God as angry, moved to compassion, disappointed, grieved, and glad. As a personal being, he is affected by our choices and acts in response to them—in time and space, as I have indicated earlier.

But the ways in which Sanders develops and expands on this are often questionable or seriously problematic.

1. *Some preliminary considerations about language.* I think Sanders often fails to recognize the elasticity—not to say ambiguity—of human language. We may say two things that *seem* contradictory, when both are true. We may say, for example, that "God does not change," and that "God changes," without intending contradiction—or else the laws of logic about contradiction would be violated. Both sentences depend, finally, on what one means by them, on perspective and context.

⁴⁵ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 101–2.

Even so, we must not contradict ourselves.⁴⁶ Instead, we must take great care in how we use words. For at least one of these two sentences we should find different words or otherwise qualify them properly. Propositions are sometimes ambiguous, and we who write on Biblical and theological matters must be very careful to speak unambiguously.

Especially is this necessary when we use language to describe God, and Sanders has not always been as careful as he should. I begin by agreeing wholeheartedly with much that he says about antinomy, anthropomorphisms, and accommodation. He is right to reject antinomy as a way out of theological or Biblical difficulties (though, as he observes in the same discussion, this does not rule out paradox, mystery, or metaphor).⁴⁷ He is right to label “discourse that lies outside the boundaries of consistency and coherence” as “nonsense.” So long as something remains a contradiction for our minds, we cannot affirm it of the God who made our minds.

Sanders also rightly rejects the idea that Biblical references to God’s repentance and anger are so anthropomorphic that they do not reveal God truly.⁴⁸ All human language, as he points out, is anthropomorphic; we are not capable of any other kind. Even so, the God who made human beings in his image, and gave them the gift of language, most certainly knows English—or any other human language—and is capable of communicating truly to us in that language. Even in metaphor the truth is spoken, though not in a directly *literal* way. What we know of God in terms of his relationship to us we know truly, though this knowledge is not exhaustive.

The old distinction between speaking of God *univocally* and *analogically* may have some value in highly technical discourse. For the most part, however, it does not serve us well. The Bible itself makes no such distinction. Regardless, when we speak of God as immutable, for example, we speak both anthropomorphically and truly. And when we speak of him as angry and repentant, we likewise speak anthropomorphically and truly. If we cannot finally know and describe him in human language, we cannot know and describe him at all. As Sanders observes, we are then “locked into the frozen silence of absolute ineffability.”⁴⁹

Further, this does not mean that such descriptions are *mere* accommodation. Again, Sanders rightly recognizes this, rejecting those who would regard Biblical descriptions as less than fully true-in-themselves because God is accommodating himself to our supposedly different mode of understanding. Most certainly, we know that God is not identical with the created order, that he is above the space and time framework he has created for man, that our knowledge of him is not exhaustive. We know this from special revelation, of course, and not from providence where God reveals himself to us as he is in relationship to us. But even this special revela-

⁴⁶ Nor do I mean that postmodern relativism about propositions is correct. In the example, both sentences really communicate truth when properly qualified.

⁴⁷ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 34–37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 19–23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 23.

tion is in human language. Again: God speaks human languages fluently and truthfully.

2. *Are God's desires and intentions the same?* One of the fundamental issues involved in Sanders's work is whether God's will or plan will ultimately prevail. But the discussion itself is characterized by Sanders's ambiguous or inconsistent use of words. Especially important in this regard is his use of *desire* and *intention* (and other words with similar meanings) to refer to aspects of God's program.

He says, for example, "Divine risk taking allows for some things' occurring in the creation that God does not specifically intend to occur. God does not want sin and suffering, for instance."⁵⁰ Here *want* in the second sentence is a synonym of *intend* in the first. And this use, I suspect, reveals a fuzziness of thinking about the ways God can be disappointed, or his will be "thwarted," and the ways that cannot happen.

In my view, every interpreter of Scripture must make some distinction between God's desires and his intentions, as each of these represents certain aspects of his will—whether these or some other words are used for that purpose. Historically, both Calvinists and Arminians have drawn such distinctions, though not always using the same terminology. Surely it is Biblical to indicate that some of God's desires for his personal creatures are not achieved. Most certainly God desires personal fellowship with every person, he desires that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9).⁵¹ At the same time, it is clear that not all are saved and that consequently God's desires in this respect remain unachieved. The reason for this is a more fundamental and constitutional will of God about the nature of man and the conditionality of salvation.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34) expresses this well and at the same time reveals the nature of God. Jerusalem's resistance prevented the accomplishment of divine desire. In that sense, the will of God can most certainly be thwarted. But in the sense that he provided for human beings the constitutional nature of moral responsibility, his will is not thwarted.

In human history it is God's deliberate and willful *intention to permit* sin—for reasons best known to him. At the same time, he never desires or causes or makes sin necessary. Consequently, while it exists within his permissive will, sin is always a violation of his will. He is always hurt, offended, dismayed, disappointed by it. And Sanders is correct to point out that God's provision for the choice between right and wrong does not mean that the options are equally "O.K." with God.⁵²

Thus to speak of God's *intention* is to speak of his purpose, and surely there is a fundamental sense in which God's purpose is always achieved.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 171.

⁵¹ Space does not permit interaction with the standard Calvinistic interpretations of such passages.

⁵² See for example Sanders, *God Who Risks* 223.

Sanders apparently (but inconsistently) allows for this. He approvingly cites Vincent Brümmer, "Although the agent does not *want* these in the strict sense of intending them, he does want them in a minimal sense of *consenting* to their occurrence."⁵³ He also approves of Keith Ward's words, "Whatever God intends inevitably comes about."⁵⁴ Had Sanders followed their lead in careful use of terms, his presentation might be less subject to criticism on this point. When he is speaking most carefully, he acknowledges that "God gets what he wants"⁵⁵ in that what he wants is a world where persons in his image have libertarian freedom to accept or reject his love. Only, here *intends* would have been a better word than *wants*.

This leads to the question of whether God is "in control" of all that happens. Here Sanders recognizes the ambiguity of words and the necessity of careful distinction: "God is not controlling everything that happens. . . . God is, however, in control in the sense that God and God alone is responsible for initiating the divine project and for establishing the rules under which the game operates"⁵⁶ But once this is acknowledged, as it should be, we can proceed immediately to admit that our issue with the Calvinist is not over whether or not God is in control. The issue, instead, is what his ultimate plan (purpose, intention) is, and the method of his "control" in accomplishing that. Sanders's overall approach blurs rather than clarifies this issue.

God has never *intended* to save those who finally reject his grace—universalism notwithstanding. It does not help any discussion of the issues to gloss over that. In the best use of the word *intentions*, then, I would suggest that God always achieves what he intends. Insofar as his overall plan or purpose (his intentions) is concerned, his will for humanity is carried out. Insofar as his *desires* for all are concerned, his will is not always done.

I would suggest that whatever God purposes *constitutionally* must take precedence over all other aspects of his desire. He has constituted human beings with a personal nature, moral responsibility, and freedom of choice.⁵⁷ Consequently, in this overarching sense, persons are in fact fulfilling the will of God *when they choose for or against* him. He desires that all respond positively, at the same time intending that all be free to respond either way. Both are ways of referring to his *will*.

3. *Is God's overall plan successful?* This question follows logically and is likewise discussed by Sanders in an ambiguous way. Does God ever *fail*? While we sometimes fail to act in ways he *desires*, to say that God fails, regardless how carefully qualified, communicates instead that he fails to achieve his *intentions*, and this is never justified, in my opinion.

Sometimes Sanders acknowledges this in a backhanded way: "God does not exercise meticulous providence in such a way that the success of his project is, in all respects and without qualification, a foregone conclusion."⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid. 220.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 229.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 228.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 215.

⁵⁷ He has done so only by "enabling" (prevenient) grace, as Sanders indicates (*God Who Risks* 245).

⁵⁸ Ibid. 40.

But why this qualifier, “in all respects and without qualification”? Is God’s project *in some respects* and *with qualification* a “foregone conclusion”? If it is, then that is what God intends to achieve, and he will not fail. God’s true, ultimate, overall “project” is correctly seen for what it is *only* when those “respects” and those “qualifications” are stated.

Again, Sanders observes that “the real question is whether or not God has the wisdom, love, power, and faithfulness to continue working with his project until he brings it to the fulfillment he intends. And this is answered in the affirmative, based on God’s track record, regardless of one’s view of the type of omniscience God has.”⁵⁹ But “the fulfillment he intends” is, precisely, the accomplishing of God’s will. That fulfillment, as even Sanders acknowledges, will come to pass.

The historic position of both Calvinists and Arminians is, after all, that God will achieve “the fulfillment he intends.” Sanders would have us believe that he radically disagrees with classical theists on this point. In the end, however, he has misled us, disagreeing only about what fulfillment God intends. Lurking behind his insistence that God fails is this almost hidden acknowledgement that God will succeed.

4. *Is God immutable, or does he change his mind?* If God does “change his mind,” is this a contradiction of immutability? Again, careful use of words is important. God said he would destroy Nineveh in forty days, and then did not do so; that at least *seems* to be a change of mind. But the key to such passages is to understand that conditions are usually implicit, if not explicit, any time God as a person deals with other personal beings. The Ninevites did not understand Jonah’s announcement to be absolute and unconditional.

Once we understand God’s meaning, whether stated or not, to be that Nineveh will be destroyed *if there is no repentance*, we understand likewise that God did not “change his mind” in any absolute sense. I am confident that it was *always* God’s “mind” to destroy Nineveh if there was no repentance and to spare her if there were. Jonah himself apparently understood, and feared, that this was the case (4:2).

All things considered, then, while the expression *changes his mind* might be used appropriately, in a relative sense, of God, it should not be used without very careful explanation of its meaning. Even so, we are forced to acknowledge that the perfectly good Biblical word *repent* has essentially the same meaning. The various versions’ translations of this word (by “relent,” for example) do not really relieve this, though they serve to illustrate the need for very careful analysis of what it means when used of God. And I think that what I have just said about “changes his mind” will apply equally well to “repents.” If we speak of God’s eternal and absolute “mind,” he does not repent or change it. But if we speak of his actions in time, indicating his relationship to us, he does. He responds, in other words, to our meeting or not meeting the conditions he establishes for our relationship to him.

Even Sanders occasionally comes close to clarity: “The essence of God does not change, but God does change in experience, knowledge, emotions

⁵⁹ Ibid. 133.

and actions.”⁶⁰ Had he left “knowledge” out of this last clause, he might well have been defending the traditional view of God’s immutability!

God’s immutability (of essence, knowledge, and will) is to be understood in light of his *eternity*. His “changing” relations with human beings is to be understood in light of his *creation*. When the implications of these two things are well and carefully developed, we have adequate explanations of the apparently paradoxical affirmations we sometimes make.

If God is eternal, then in his essential nature he is immutable. He needed nothing to be perfect and self-fulfilling. Sanders frequently acknowledges that God did not need to create.⁶¹ On the other hand, if in fact he did create this space-time realm we occupy, he created something that did not otherwise exist, something not identical to him which has a real and changing history of its own. The God who created that changing world knows and interacts with everything that is happening therein *as it changes*. He “experiences” this changing world and responds to the choices of the free creatures he placed within it, in his image. He follows and interacts with their response to both his loving and his judicial acts. He likewise experiences joy or grief over their response and his actions toward them are contingent on that response, *in the space-time continuum he created*.

It is correct, then, to say both that God does not change (what he is essentially) and that he does change his mind (relative to our responses to him). Nor is this antinomy: the latter clause simply means that his actions depend on our responses to the conditions he (sovereignly) establishes.

5. *Is God ever mistaken?* Sanders does not shrink from saying that God is sometimes mistaken, and more than a careless use of words is involved. Only his rejection of divine foreknowledge (dealt with above) allows him to affirm that God can be mistaken.

Nor does Sanders’s distinction between the strict and the more loose use of the word “mistake” help. Though he agrees that God is never mistaken in the strict sense; he thinks that God is sometimes mistaken in the sense that he really believes something will come to pass that does not. By any definition, this is still a *mistake* and a denigration of God’s *gnosis*.

Sanders’s illustrates: “God had thought Saul would be a good king, but in the end he had to turn to David.”⁶² This is a poor choice of words. Better to say that God *desired* that Saul be a good king. Indeed, God knew that Saul *could* be a good king and graciously gave him every opportunity to be the good king he could and should have been. In the end, Saul rejected God’s desire and gracious help and God chose David to succeed him. (To suggest that, *if God knew Saul would fail him this would change our understanding of the interaction*, is a specious sophistication.⁶³)

⁶⁰ Ibid. 186, 187. (The following quotations are from these pages.)

⁶¹ See *ibid.* 41, 119 for examples.

⁶² Ibid. 119.

⁶³ I say this against both the neo-Arminians, who think God did not know, and the Calvinists, who believe not only that he knew but also that he willfully foreordained it.

Sanders's best example seems to be Jer 3:7, 19–20: that God really expected that “the people of Jeremiah’s day would repent and return to him, but they did not, to God’s dismay.”⁶⁴ Surely God was dismayed, but that he really thought the people would repent is not grounded in the context. Any number of passages in Jeremiah make plain that God did not expect Judah to repent and that judgment at the hands of Babylon was now both certain and necessary. Jer 1:17–19 and 5:14–19 are but two examples of a pervasive theme in the prophecy.

Sanders’s problem is that he does not think God could, in fact, be emotionally grieved by Israel’s rejection if, in fact, he knew they would reject him. Yet this is both a logical and theological fallacy. Nothing in the proposition “God knew that Israel would reject his love” logically entails “therefore God could not be dismayed when they did.” Indeed, this is the very thing the Bible relates to us constantly.

Theologically, we do God a serious injustice when we postulate that if he knows something in advance it does not affect him when it happens. Nothing in our theology requires that. Indeed, it is not even true for human experience. Often, I foresee (though not intuitively, like God) that this or that wrong is certain to be done. This anticipation does not in any way lessen the grief I experience when what I expected comes to pass. God is able to plead genuinely and honestly with people he knows very well will reject him. He is able to give every gracious opportunity to those he knows will not hearken. And one reason he can do this is that *he knows very well that they can respond positively.*

6. *Is God vulnerable, does he risk?* These are favorite words of Sanders, likewise not always used unambiguously. If by “vulnerable” one means that God opens himself to being accepted or rejected, that human beings may submit to his plan or snuff at it and do “despite to the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29), then the word is acceptable. Sanders usually uses the word in this sense, referring to the vulnerability of love: “The beloved can make the lover delighted or angry, joyous or grief stricken, frustrated or fulfilled because the lover cares about what transpires in the relationship.”⁶⁵

If, however, one means that God is open to “defeat” in anything more than a relative sense, it is not a helpful word to use. Most certainly, God’s *desires* for individuals are often not achieved, but his overarching plan is not subject to defeat (as treated above); in that sense God is not vulnerable.

What, then, of *risk*? If one means only that God’s offer of grace may be spurned and he may be treated abusively in word or attitude, then most certainly there is some risk in God’s chosen way of give-and-take dealings with other persons. As Sanders says, when he is using the word appropriately, “God took a great risk in opening himself up to being grieved.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Sanders, *God Who Risks* 132.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 177.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 172.

It seems clear, however, that what Sanders generally means by “risk” *finally and necessarily involves God’s not knowing how things will turn out*. He cites favorably the definition of William Hasker to the effect that risk means that God makes decisions that are “not informed by knowledge of the outcomes.”⁶⁷ He appears to equate “risk” with an expectation on God’s part that might not come to pass.⁶⁸ He even suggests that one may believe in foreknowledge and yet affirm that God’s decisions and plans for the future are not based on or “informed by” that knowledge. But this is incoherent: God cannot know and at the same time ignore his knowledge. Sanders goes on to avow (though he may be paraphrasing David Basinger), “If God establishes a creation in which the outcome of at least some undertaking is indefinite, then God takes risks.”⁶⁹ Here “indefinite” apparently means “unknown.” Sanders’s use of “risk” is predicated on presentism’s denial of divine foreknowledge, and in that sense the word is not justified.

7. *Do the traditional attributes of God need revision?* The result of Sanders’s development of the concept of God is, finally, a revisionist theism.⁷⁰ Sanders believes that traditional theism’s concept of God is unbiblical and reflects Greek philosophy. Especially is this the case when God’s attributes are discussed. For him, Western theology has tended to emphasize “the more abstract and impersonal attributes of omnipotence and omniscience,” when the “ultimate ontological category” is *personhood*, the “root metaphor” is “a personal God in loving relations with creaturely persons,” and four attributes must be at the forefront: “love, wisdom, faithful freedom, and almightiness.”⁷¹

I cannot pursue in detail the serious problems in this. The attributes of God do not fare well when played off against one another. Nor does this discussion give God’s holiness the place it deserves. Whatever God’s attributes are, each is as “important” as the others. Nor is it helpful to suggest that God’s omnipotence and omniscience are “impersonal.”

Any discussion of God’s attributes, one by one, is a matter of convenience for us. For God himself, they are in perfect equilibrium and interpenetrating. God’s love would not be what it is apart from his holiness, and vice-versa. None of his attributes stand in tension with any others.

Sanders quotes Emil Brunner’s observation that “[t]o think that it is correct *first of all* to deal with the metaphysical Being of God, and *then* with His Love, as His ‘ethical attribute,’ means that the decisive element in the Biblical Idea of God has not been perceived.”⁷² This much of Brunner’s words is correct: God’s attributes cannot be distinguished from his essence. Love is God’s essential nature. But so are holiness and omniscience and all his other attributes.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 170.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 45–46.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 171.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 13: “the classical attributes of God need some revising”; 19: “This study is an attempt to bring healing to certain aspects of the God of classical theism.”

⁷¹ Ibid. 175.

⁷² Ibid.

For Sanders, then, the traditional descriptions of attributes like omniscience and immutability will not suffice, and God's love must become the attribute from which all others take their meaning. I have attempted to make clear that God does enter into give-and-take relationships with us, in time and space, and that he is subject to various feelings as a result. But this does not mean that the traditional list of the attributes of God must be adjusted. What Sanders misses is that it is still true, for example, that God is immutable in essence, knowledge, and will, as discussed above.

Sanders often criticizes those who play off one Scripture against the other and choose which will prevail. He emphasizes, correctly, that the solution is to find an understanding that enables us to credit both of them fully. Even so, he sometimes makes the same mistake, and this is one of those places. As I have suggested, some of the things we say about God are describing his eternal, essential nature. And some of the things we say about him are describing who he is in his relationship to us. (It is not quite clear whether Sanders agrees with Feuerbach's rejection of this distinction.⁷³) In his essential nature, God does not change—else we could not count on him at all. In his relationship to us, God feels and is affected by the things we do and think, and acts accordingly. Nor is this an artificial distinction that creates antinomy. Both are equally, but not exhaustively, true.

Sanders is wrong, then, to reject (or, at least so seriously to qualify as to negate) terms like immutability or infinity as attributes of God. They truly describe who God is. His opponents are equally wrong to pass off as mere anthropomorphism and mere accommodation (or merely analogous) the Biblical descriptions of God as angry, pained, or acting conditionally in response to our choices. These also describe who God is. On both sides, the words must be carefully defined, but they are complementary, not contradictory.

IV. CONCLUSION

Sanders is right to opt for a view of God and humanity that sees them in give-and-take relationships. The personal God made human beings personal, and persons deal with each other by influence and response rather than by cause and effect. That much he shares with classic Arminianism.

As a whole, however, Sanders's work is too flawed to be helpful. It does not promote a better understanding of God or contribute to the evangelical Arminian correction of classic Reformed theology. This neo-Arminian view will, in fact, weaken Arminian efforts along these lines.

The root of its error is found, specifically, in its denial of divine foreknowledge, based on a logical objection that turns foreknowledge on its head. Growing out of that, then, is the concept of a God who, because he does not know the future, may be mistaken in his expectations and does not always know the results of his decisions and actions. This revisionist theism does not offer an appealing alternative to classic theism. Sanders's claim that his view is in the same "family" as classic Arminianism must finally be rejected.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 30.