

## DEFINING EVANGELICALISM'S BOUNDARIES THEOLOGICALLY: IS OPEN THEISM EVANGELICAL?

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Clark Pinnock is exactly right. After noting (correctly) in his *Most Moved Mover* that Arminians and Augustinians have co-existed throughout much of the church's history, and that a number of evangelical theologians today (and not just open theists) are working toward refinements in an evangelical doctrine of God, he asks, "Why draw the line at foreknowledge?"<sup>1</sup> A few pages later, he returns to this question: "In raising the issue of the divine foreknowledge, we have not transgressed some rule of theological discourse and placed ourselves outside the pale of orthodoxy. Why can an evangelical not propose a different view of this matter? What church council has declared it to be impossible? Since when has this become the criterion of being orthodox or unorthodox, evangelical or not evangelical?"<sup>2</sup>

What does Pinnock mean when he says that open theists have raised the issue of divine foreknowledge? Simply this: Open theism affirms God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present, but it denies exhaustive divine foreknowledge, in that it denies that God knows—or can know—the future free decisions and actions of his moral creatures, even while it affirms that God knows all future possibilities and all divinely determined and logically-necessary future actualities. As William Hasker explains, "Since the future is genuinely open, since it is possible for a free agent to act in any of several different ways, it follows that it is not possible for God to have complete and exhaustive knowledge of the entire future."<sup>3</sup> So, the specific denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge is embraced in open theism as central and essential to its own identity.

And essential it is. For to open theists, the very notion of the future's "openness" is only viable if future free choices and actions are both fully

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<sup>1</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 110.

<sup>3</sup> William Hasker, "An Adequate God," in John B. Cobb, Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 218.

unknown and fully unknowable to God. Were God to know some future choice, say, of what you will have for dinner this evening, since God's knowledge is infallible, it must be the case that you will have for dinner what God knows you will, in which case you are not free to choose otherwise. As central and essential as libertarian freedom is to open theism, so equally central and essential is its denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

Now, why is Pinnock right to raise this question about the openness understanding of divine foreknowledge in particular? Two answers are needed. First, it is precisely here, in open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, that the open view has separated itself from classical Arminianism specifically and from all versions of classical theism generally. Let's be clear about this: some of open theism's most basic and fundamental theological commitments are held in common with the entirety of the classical tradition.<sup>4</sup> For example, openness proponents could not be clearer in rejecting the process model of a co-eternal and interdependent God-world relationship in favor of a strong commitment to the classical doctrines of God's aseity, the divine self-sufficiency, and *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, some other of open theism's most basic and fundamental theological commitments are shared with large segments of the broader evangelical and orthodox heritage. For example, open theism shares with classical Arminianism their common commitment to the centrality of the love of God and the necessity of libertarian freedom for moral experience, worship, love, and genuine relationship.<sup>6</sup> None of these openness commitments shared in common with classical theism generally or with Arminianism specifically raises the question of its rightful place within the boundaries of evangelicalism. Rather, it is the specific and distinctive openness denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge that separates it from its otherwise endearing relationship to Arminianism and its significant connection to much of the classical heritage, and it is this denial, defended only in open theism and in no other branch of orthodoxy or evangelicalism, that raises the boundary question.<sup>7</sup>

The second reason Pinnock is right to raise the foreknowledge question is this: Open theism has, by this denial, entertained and promoted a refor-

<sup>4</sup> So Pinnock is justified to say, "The open view is also a 'traditional' view and it belongs to a family of theologies that witness to the dynamic nature of God" (*Most Moved Mover* 105).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 108–12, 138–41; John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1998) 30, 41; and Cobb and Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God* x–xi, 185.

<sup>6</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 45, writes, "Had God not granted us significant freedom, including the freedom to disappoint him, we would not be creatures capable of entering into loving relationships with him. Love, not freedom, is the central issue. Freedom was given to make loving relations possible. . . . The biblical story presupposes what we call libertarian freedom. This is plain in the ways God invites us to love him and in the ways in which he holds us responsible for what we decide."

<sup>7</sup> While in my book (Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: the Diminished God of Open Theism* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000]), I offer a more holistic critique of open theism including, of necessity, some discussion of the openness (and more general Arminian) commitment to libertarian

mulated understanding of God and God's relationship to the world in ways that are massive in its implications both theologically and practically. Perhaps when Pinnock asked, "Why draw the line at foreknowledge?" he meant us to take it rhetorically, implying that no good reason could be given. But with Pinnock's concluding chapter, I agree that "it is time now to ponder the implications" of the openness proposal.<sup>8</sup> And so, I propose in the body of this paper to take the question, "Why draw the line at foreknowledge?" seriously. Has sufficient careful consideration been given to what implications follow from this specific denial? It seems to me that before we can think responsibly about whether open theism should rightly be conceived as within or without the bounds of evangelicalism, we must ponder as carefully and fully as we can just what open theism's distinctive doctrine (i.e. its denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge) leaves us with theologically and practically. After all, open theism is nothing without this doctrine. So, if it turns out that this specific doctrinal departure has innocuous or acceptable theological and practical implications, then open theism as a model cannot be discredited on the grounds of this, its distinctive doctrinal tenet. However, if it is demonstrable that the openness denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge has seriously unacceptable theological and practical implications, then open theism as a model must likewise be deemed unacceptable.

In what follows, then, we shall consider at some length implications that follow from open theism's distinctive tenet, that is, that God cannot know the future free choices and actions of moral creatures, and hence, God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge. We will examine these implications under four broad headings, both theological and practical. Following this examination, the paper will conclude with an assessment of open theism on the boundary question.

## II. IMPLICATIONS OF THE OPENNESS DENIAL OF EXHAUSTIVE DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE

No doubt there are more. But I have given long and hard consideration to the question of what implications follow, both for our theology and for the life of faith, when one affirms that God does not know the future free choices and actions of moral creatures. I believe that the implications are both numerous and weighty. Consider with me implications under four broad headings: (1) God: his character, purposes, and work; (2) revelation and Scripture: their accuracy and surety; (3) the gospel of salvation: its design and truthfulness; and (4) the Christian life: its faith and hope in God.

Bear two things in mind as I present these implications. First, clearly, while some are weightier than others, all are important, and my endeavor

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freedom, here in this paper, since the question is specifically whether open theism is in the boundaries of evangelicalism, I restrict my critique strictly to what distinguishes open theism from Arminianism and all other branches of evangelicalism and orthodoxy, that is, its distinctive denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 179.

is to be truthful and honest with each. So, consider the validity of each point, the importance of each (some greater than others), but also bear in mind both the interconnectedness of many of these points and their overall cumulative force. Second, for many points made, thoroughness would require engaging possible openness responses, followed by counter-responses. I can seldom afford to do this due to time constraints. On some of the most crucial points, I will. But if I do not, please do not assume either that I am unaware of what openness proponents might say or of what answers might be given. So now, to our question: What theological and practical implications follow from the openness denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge?

1. *God: His character, purposes, and work.*

a. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge entails God's ignorance, not only of the entirety of future creaturely free decisions and actions themselves, but also of the incalculably great multitude of entailments flowing causally from whether particular free choices and actions obtain or not, and from which specific free choices and actions in fact do obtain.* Think from the beginning of human history. What if Adam, in his anger at Eve shortly after their sin, killed Eve as Cain later killed Abel? What of the proto-evangel in Gen 3:15 that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head? No woman, no seed, no human race, no Savior, no crushing. And, in Genesis 3, could God have known what Adam would or would not do? Moving ahead a bit, what if Noah, upon being the recipient of the jeering and mocking of his friends decided he would not endure such ignominy by continuing to build this ridiculous ark? And, what if Noah—the only righteous man, you recall—now joined his neighbors in their wickedness? Implausible, you say? Well, we all know that the implausible can occur in the open view. But what, then, of God's already stated purpose to destroy the whole earth and all the wicked by a flood? And we could go on, and on, and on! Just what specific actions with their accompanying entailments Adam or Eve, Cain or Abel, Noah or Abraham—and on through history—might choose were altogether unknown to God. Imagine the multitude of entailments that flow into human history from the various choices that free creatures make every moment of every day. On openness grounds, God can know neither whether particular choices will be made, nor just what specific choices in fact will be made, nor all of the entailments arising from whatever choices in fact obtain.

b. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge precludes the possibility of God's knowing from eternity past just what persons would actually be conceived and born, at any and every point, throughout the history of humankind. That is, exactly who, how many, and obviously, anything about any of them, would be completely and fully unknown to God.* Consider your own existence. Could God have known from eternity past that you would exist? On openness grounds, absolutely not! Consider the contingencies. Your parents decide to marry—yes, that particular man and woman,

not another pair. They decide whether or not to have children, whether to use birth control or not, how many children to have, and in all this the genetic combinations vary for each possible conception. None of this God can know ahead of time. What is true of you is, of course, true also for each of your parents, and their parents, and so on all the way back to the garden. The fact is, God can no more know who will be born a year from now than you or I can.

*c. Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge severely implicates the complete and perfect belief structure within the knowledge of God (even on openness standards of omniscience), since God must, at any and every moment, possess innumerable false beliefs about what will happen in the future.*<sup>9</sup> For example, John Sanders proposes that God *believed* that the man and woman in a perfect garden and apart from sin would continue in obedience, but, alas, that belief was tragically wrong.<sup>10</sup> The fact that God knew as a possibility that they could sin does not change the fact that he genuinely believed they would not—otherwise the first sin could not have been implausible to God, as Sanders claims. Now, please let us not dismiss this as a problem just in Sanders's particular presentation of open theism. Whether other open theists follow Sanders on that specific interpretation of Genesis 3 or not, the problem is inherent to the openness model. To see this, consider, for example, the openness understanding of Jer 3:7 (God says, "I thought, 'After she has done all these things she will return to Me'; but she did not return"). God genuinely believed one thing would happen but, sadly and deeply disappointing to God, the opposite came to pass instead. Concerning this passage, Greg Boyd writes, "We need to ask ourselves seriously, how could the Lord honestly say he *thought* Israel would turn to him if he was always certain that they would never do so?"<sup>11</sup> I cannot here engage Boyd's specific interpretation of this text, except to note that in Deuteronomy 31 God declares that Israel will turn away from him, and here in Jeremiah 3, a few verses later, God announces that Israel will return, demonstrating that God knows full well what Israel will do. But, the point here is that, for Boyd and open theists generally, it is literally true that in this case God *thought wrongly* about what would transpire in the future. So, while all versions of classical theism have affirmed that all of God's beliefs are true because they accord with what truly is or what truly will be, open theism envisions God as having both true and false beliefs. And when one considers the first point above, of just how much of the future God is ignorant, one begins to realize how expansive, then, must be this category of false beliefs in God's mind.

<sup>9</sup> Sanders, *God Who Risks* 205, writes, "Is it possible for God to have mistaken beliefs about the future? The traditional theological answer is that God cannot, but there are several biblical texts that seem to affirm that what God thought would happen did not come about (for example, Jer 3:7, 19–20)."

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 45–49.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 60 (italics in original).

d. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge severely implicates the complete and perfect wisdom of God who sometimes looks back at his own past decisions and now, in retrospect, determines that what he previously decided may not in fact have been the best decision. Just how often this occurs, we could never fully know, but given his expansive ignorance and innumerable mistaken beliefs about the future, we might expect that there are likewise many misguided decisions that are simply, and sadly, unavoidable for God.* Since the quality of our decisions is affected centrally by the quantity and quality of the information relevant to those decisions, and since many of God's decisions relate to what he or others should do in the future, it is clear that God's ignorance of the vast majority of the future of human affairs cannot help but give God less than perfect judgment and lead him to make faulty decisions. Hear David Basinger's words: "[S]ince God does not necessarily know exactly what will happen in the future, it is always possible that even that which God in his unparalleled wisdom believes to be the best course of action at any given time may not produce the anticipated results in the long run."<sup>12</sup> The now-well-known Suzanne story told by Greg Boyd in *God of the Possible* also comes to mind here. Had God only known that this prospective husband would prove to be so hurtful, his leading, one would presume, would have been different.

Now, is the God of open theism absolved here, because in formulating his wise plans he does in fact make use of all available and logically possible knowledge, so that it would be unfair to discredit the perfect wisdom of his decisions just because he did not take into consideration knowledge of the future, which knowledge it is logically impossible to have? No, to the contrary, what it exposes is that a God lacking exhaustive foreknowledge is intrinsically and unavoidably fallible and faulty in making his future plans. He may have unparalleled wisdom, as Basinger states, but if God himself evaluates his decisions in retrospect and says, "Things did not work as I had hoped; this is not what I intended and I do not like what happened; knowing what I now know, I would have done differently," then in no real sense could misguided plans, whether unintentional or not, whether unavoidable or not, be said to arise from One with perfect wisdom.

e. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge severely implicates the complete and perfect rightness of God's actions, since God may do things that he later realizes, in retrospect, were not best.* God not only makes misguided decisions, but he then implements them in action. And rather than finding this a troubling notion, open theists seem to make use of God's mistaken decisions and actions as part of their explanation of why God sometimes changes his mind about things he has said or done. As one notable example, recall how Sanders suggests we might understand God's promise never again to flood the earth: "It may be the case that although human evil caused God great pain, the destruction of what he had made caused him even greater suffering. Although his judgment was righteous,

<sup>12</sup> David Basinger, "Practical Implications," in *Openness of God* 165.

God decides to try different courses of action in the future.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, God reasons, “Although just, this may not have been best. Certainly, I won’t do this again.” How often may God so evaluate his own actions as less than best? We have no way to know, but given his expansive ignorance and mistaken beliefs about the future, we may someday be surprised to learn how many times, and in how many ways, God regretted doing what he did, thinking when they occurred, “I wish I had acted differently.”

*f. Open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge encourages in its followers adherence to a view of God which is strikingly and centrally similar to the biblical idolatry denounced in Isaiah 40–48. What is true both of the God of open theism and of these idols is that neither can declare what specific future events will unfold, events that involve innumerable future free choices and actions of human beings.* But the true God can! For example, the expansiveness and comprehensiveness of God’s foreknowledge claim in Isa 46:10 (“Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done”) is then expressed in concrete form in 46:11 (“calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my purpose from a far country”) as he predicts the coming of a man, Cyrus no doubt, whom he knows will accomplish his purposes. That is, God knows specific future events, people, free choices and actions, and their effects. But, which of the idols can do this, asks the Lord! Furthermore, God says of the worshippers of those idols who do not know and cannot declare such future actions of free creatures, “he who chooses you is an abomination” (Isa 41:24), and of the idols themselves, “Behold, all of them are false; their works are worthless, their molten images are wind and emptiness” (Isa 41:29). By its denying of God’s foreknowledge of future free creaturely choices and actions, open theism is vulnerable to the charge of commending as God one whom the true God declares is false and worthless.

*g. Open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge dishonors and belittles both the true and living God and the divine Son of the Father by denying to both one of their self-chosen bases for asserting the uniqueness of their deity, namely, that God alone, as God, knows and declares what the future will be.* In Isa 41:23, God challenges the idols, “Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods.” They cannot; but God, because he is God, declares the future. And what God declares, over and over again, involves countless future choices and actions of his free creatures (e.g. Isa 41:21–29; 42:8–9; 43:8–13; 44:6–8; 45:1–7, 18–25; 46:8–11; 48:3–8). Jesus likewise is here dishonored, for just like God in Isaiah, so too Jesus asserts his claim to deity as resting in part on his ability to declare the future. In John 13:19, Jesus says, “From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He.” Is it mere coincidence that just a few verses later we hear Jesus declare unequivocally to Peter, “Truly, truly, I say to you [not:

<sup>13</sup> Sanders, *God Who Risks* 50.

‘Probably, probably, I tell you my well-informed prognostication’], a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times”? How dare we deny to God what God himself has chosen as a basis for asserting his own unique deity!

h. *Open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge advances a hermeneutic that could reasonably (that is, on general openness hermeneutical criteria) be used to advocate yet greater divine deficiencies than merely God’s lack of exhaustive foreknowledge with its attending drawbacks.* For example, one can easily imagine the openness hermeneutic proposing, from a literal, straightforward reading of texts, God’s lack of exhaustive present knowledge, God’s lack of exhaustive past knowledge, God’s specific spatial locatedness, God’s poor memory and unavoidable forgetfulness, God’s sometimes uncontrolled temper, God’s increase in wisdom and insight through the counsel he receives from others, and more. I can hear the next generation of open theists now: “If God wanted us to understand that he needed help remembering things, how could he have made it any more plain than he did in Gen 9:13–16? For here, God says, ‘When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant’ (9:16). How could it be clearer! When God sees the rainbow, then (and only then) does he remember!” Given openness hermeneutical theory, what would prevent this extension of their beliefs? All one needs to do is explain how some biblical statements that teach God’s perfect knowledge (e.g. Ps 147:5) are actually restrictive (i.e. perfect in restricted senses), to accommodate God’s limited knowledge of the past and present as evident in other texts. And, by openness standards, would this not make God even more glorious? Because, after all, which is easier—running the world when it is your nature to remember everything, or doing so when you have to work hard at remembering (and you just might forget), and yet you succeed in steering the world to its desired outcome? The openness hermeneutic is driven by its commitment to deny to God knowledge of future free creaturely choices and actions. If this hermeneutic is allowed legitimacy, use may be made of it to propose even greater dishonor to God.

## 2. *Revelation and Scripture: their accuracy and surety.*

a. *Open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge is derived from what can arguably be called, in light of the entirety of orthodox and evangelical interpretive histories, a pervasive misinterpretation of Scripture.*<sup>14</sup> Open theism misunderstands both the so-called restricted future determination texts (e.g. Isa 46:8–11) and the so-called future openness texts (e.g. Gen 22:12). Concerning Isa 46:8–11, the broad and sweeping claim to know the end from the beginning is unjustifiably narrowed in open theism,

<sup>14</sup> A major burden of *God’s Lesser Glory* is to defend this claim. See particularly chapter 4, “Assessing Open Theism’s Denial of Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge,” and chapter 5, “Scriptural Affirmation of Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge.” The brief discussion of this claim in the paragraph below is a mere sampling and sketch of the relevant evidence.

while the specific implicit reference to the calling of Cyrus shows God's knowledge of what open theists deny God can have, that is, of innumerable future free actions associated with the birth, naming, rearing, rise to power, reign, and successes of this future king. Concerning Gen 22:12, to say that God only learns that Abraham fears God when he raises the knife over the bound body of Isaac contradicts, first, God's intimate and perfect knowledge of our hearts (1 Chr 28:9; 1 Sam 16:7); second, God's knowledge of Abraham's faith and hope in God as celebrated in Romans 4 and Hebrews 11; and, third, Abraham's own belief, while travelling to Mt. Moriah, that God would raise his slain son Isaac from the dead (Gen 22:5; Heb 11:19).

b. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge renders unintelligible and ultimately ad hoc the overall course and development of biblical redemptive history, with its intentional, built-in, forward-directed, and anticipatory type and anti-type, prophecy and fulfillment structure.* If God's dealing with free human persons is likened to a "choose your own adventure" book,<sup>15</sup> then it is impossible to build in at the outset clearly defined and specifically designed typological and prophetic features that require exactly certain outcomes and no others for their later fulfillment. So the question is this: Does the story line of the Bible read more like a "choose your own adventure" book or, for example, like a carefully crafted and intricately navigated mystery novel?

c. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge distorts and denies the reality of many specific and inviolable divine predictions that involve future free human decisions and actions.* Deut 18:22 states, "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken." Admittedly, this is a complicated area, for God also says in Jer 18:7–10 that he may say one thing and then, if his people change, will change what he had said. I do not believe Jeremiah 18 cancels out Deuteronomy 18. Rather, in Jeremiah God is announcing again his standing purpose to extend mercy to those who repent and discipline to those who turn from him. But not all of God's declarations are in this kind of context. So many, many prophecies in Scripture announce simply what others will certainly do, or what will certainly happen. And as we know, often when these are fulfilled just as God prophesied, the Scripture writer will note that this happened just as the Lord said—e.g. 1 Kgs 21:17–24 concerning Jezebel is fulfilled in 2 Kgs 9:30–37, and the author writes, "This is the word of the Lord, which he spoke by His servant Elijah" (9:36). Steve Roy conducted a comprehensive survey of Scripture on this question and counted, among other findings, that there are 1,893 texts that state predictively that God will do something or other in or through human beings, and 1,474 texts that state predictively what human beings will do, apart from God directly acting in or through them.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Boyd, *God of the Possible* 42–43, 150–51.

<sup>16</sup> See the full tabulation of Roy's findings as listed in Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 100, n. 2.

Regarding predictions that are fulfilled through the future actions of free agents, will it do to account for these predictions by any one of the three categories advanced by openness proponents: (1) predictions of God's unilateral determination that require for their fulfillment no future free human choices; (2) predictions based on probabilities of what most likely, but not certainly, will occur; or (3) predictions containing explicit or implicit conditions by which God may in fact act differently than he states in the prediction? The answer is no, but the main problem here is not with these three categories *per se*, but with what they omit. Open theists leave out one major category of predictive prophecy, that is, specific and inviolable divine predictions whose fulfillment involves, in some direct or indirect fashion, future free creaturely choices and actions. Perhaps no better example can be given than Daniel 11. Consider just the first four verses:

In the first year of Darius the Mede, I arose to be an encouragement and a protection for him. And now I will tell you the truth. Behold, three more kings are going to arise in Persia. Then a fourth will gain far more riches than all of *them*; as soon as he becomes strong through his riches, he will arouse the whole *empire* against the realm of Greece. And a mighty king will arise, and he will rule with great authority and do as he pleases. But as soon as he has arisen, his kingdom will be broken up and parceled out toward the four points of the compass, though not to his *own* descendants, nor according to his authority which he wielded, for his sovereignty will be uprooted and *given* to others besides them.

The number of future free choices and actions predicted—either explicitly or implicitly—from just these four verses boggles the mind! Now, do not misconstrue the point. My argument is by no means dependent on Daniel 11; this chapter is merely illustrative of hundreds of such passages. Give Daniel to the critical scholars—well, don't, but you could—and you still have the rest of your Bible filled with specific, inviolable divine predictions involving future choices and actions of free creatures.

d. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge makes it impossible to affirm Scripture's inerrancy unequivocally prior to the fulfillment of any and all of its specific and inviolable divine predictions that involve future free human decisions and actions; that is, insofar as there are such predictions, whether they are fulfilled or not depends on future free choices and actions of which God can have no advance knowledge and over which he has no ultimate control.* It seems, then, one faces a dilemma: either one denies the reality of the many specific and inviolable divine predictions that involve future free human decisions and actions or one accepts these predictions and acknowledges that the truth value of them is in question due to their relationship to future free agents who may or may not do what was predicted. In the first instance, one has the formidable task of accounting for hundreds of texts the church has interpreted for two millennia as literally predictive of future human actions (e.g. seventy-year captivity, life extended by fifteen years, destruction of Jeroboam's altar, naming and activities of Josiah, naming and activities of Cyrus, birth in Bethlehem, di-

vided clothing, unbroken bones, rich man's tomb, three denials); in the second, one can no longer in principle affirm the inerrancy of Scripture's predictive teachings, when those predictions are of future actions and events that might go contrary to what was predicted.

Clark Pinnock seems to vacillate between these options, holding one and then the other. Apparently in line with the first approach, he writes, "the fulfillment of a prophecy may differ from what the prophet had in mind,"<sup>17</sup> indicating, I take it, that prophecies are conditional or have a level of imprecision that allows for unexpected kinds of fulfillment. But then, in an explanatory footnote to the same discussion, he continues apparently in line with the second approach, saying, "We may not want to admit it but prophecies often go unfulfilled" and as examples he offers, "[D]espite the Baptist, Jesus did not cast the wicked into the fire; contrary to Paul, the second coming was not just around the corner . . . ; despite Jesus, in the destruction of the temple, some stones were left one on the other."<sup>18</sup> This would seem to suggest that what was prophesied was simply mistaken. So, in the first instance where "God is free in the manner of fulfilling prophecy," one can maintain inerrancy only at the price of denying specific, inviolable predictions involving free creatures; yet in the second instance, where "prophecies often go unfulfilled,"<sup>19</sup> it seems difficult to see how inerrancy is not abandoned when admitting that predictions simply failed.

*e. Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge severely implicates the complete and perfect accuracy of God's word, since God may state something that he believes to be true but later realizes, in retrospect, he was mistaken and in error.* To put it bluntly, God unavoidably lies, but he never means to. For example, in Jer 3:19–20, God states that Israel would prosper and would follow him, but in fact they forgot the Lord their God. For open theists, what God states in 3:19 is shown to be wrong in light of what Israel does in 3:20.<sup>20</sup> Because of God's massive ignorance regarding the future of human affairs, it is entirely possible for God to say things about that future which prove wrong. Although formally, he means always to speak the truth, materially, what he says may in fact be mistaken and in error.

### 3. *The gospel of salvation: its design and truthfulness.*

*a. Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge precludes the possibility of God's knowing from eternity past whether sin would enter his created world.* Pinnock says that when God created free creatures, he "accepted a degree of risk with the possibility, not certainty, of sin and evil

<sup>17</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* n. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Both statements are found in the same footnote (*ibid.*).

<sup>20</sup> See Sanders, *God Who Risks* 132, 205; and Boyd, *God of the Possible* 60. Ironically, Boyd charges the classical view with entailing the view that God lies, if God has said one thing knowing it not to be true as he said it. Clearly, what God's intention was as he made such a claim has to be carefully considered. For discussion on this issue, see my *God's Lesser Glory* 92–98.

occurring.”<sup>21</sup> For Sanders, sin was not only not foreknown, its occurrence in the garden was, to God, “implausible.”<sup>22</sup> However, if God did not know that sin would occur, he could not predetermine to save, prior to the creation of humans and the actual sinful action they commit. At best, God could have a contingency plan in the event that sin occurred. But consider 1 Pet 1:19–20: We were redeemed “with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For *He was foreknown before the foundation of the world*, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.” And Rev 13:8 is translated (either “the saints’ names are written from the foundation of the world,” or “Christ was slain from the foundation of the world”), God’s eternal purpose has been to save sinners. Surely the gospel is not God’s *ad hoc* plan B, but if sin is a mere possibility, perhaps even an implausibility before Genesis 3, then no set plan would already be in place. The gospel, however, announces God’s eternal and set purpose to save, which means he knows the sin that will occur and he has already planned for our rescue before he even creates.

b. *Open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge renders it impossible for God to have foreknown and chosen those who would be saved in Christ—in either the Calvinist or Arminian understanding of these doctrines—before the foundation of the world.* This is so, in part, because God could not have known then even who would exist. The specific individuals who will populate human history along with any and all of their future choices and actions cannot be known by God in advance of their very lives. He cannot have known you until you come into existence. But notice in Rom 8:29 that Paul uses a relative pronoun, “whom,” to indicate what God foreknew: “whom he foreknew, these he predestined . . . , and whom he predestined, he called, etc.” And Eph 1:4 says that God chose “us” in Christ before the foundation of the world. Whether this is corporate or individual, it refers to a specific group comprised of those who will be saved. God knows who we will be before he creates, and he knows whether we will be among those saved.

c. *Open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge jeopardizes the substitutionary nature of Christ’s death for our sin.* Because God cannot know in advance just who will be living at any and every point of human history, therefore, when Christ died on the cross, he simply could not, in any real sense, have substituted in his death and payment of sin for you or for me. While his death could have been quite literally in the place of, or as a substitute for, those living up to the point of his death, this could not be the case with those to be conceived and born in the future. While advocates of limited and unlimited atonement differ over the question of for whom Christ died, all agree that when he died, he died in the place of sinners, that

<sup>21</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 41–42.

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, *God Who Risks* 45–46.

is, actual sinful people whose death and payment for sin he took upon himself. Hence, the substitutionary nature of the atonement can only obtain if God knows not only those prior to Christ's death, but also those yet future for whom Christ died.

d. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge jeopardizes Christ's actually bearing "our sins in his body on the cross" (1 Pet 2:24).* At the point in human history when Christ was crucified, not only would it be impossible for God to know whether and who would come to exist in the future (so he could not actually substitute for them in his death), in addition God would also be clueless regarding what sin(s) would be committed in the future. Therefore, there could be no actual imputation of our sin to Christ (*à la* Isa 53:4–6, “. . . the Lord has caused the *iniquity of us all to fall on Him*”; 1 Cor 15:3, “Christ died for *our sins*”; 2 Cor 5:21, God made Christ “who knew no sin *to be sin . . .*”; 1 Pet 2:24, “He Himself *bore our sins in His body on the cross*”). Since no future sin yet existed, on openness grounds, God could not know any of that future sin for which Christ's atonement was meant to pay. The effect of this and the previous point is to see the crucifixion, as it relates to people conceived after Christ's death, as an impersonal and abstract sort of substitution and payment. He cannot really have died personally in their place nor for their very own sin. In fact, Christ would have had reason to wonder, as he hung on that cross, whether for any, or for how many, and for what sins, he was now giving his life. The sin paid for could only be sin *in principle* and not sin *by imputation*, and the people died for were a blurry, impersonal, faceless, nameless, and numberless potential group.

e. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge renders unsure God's own covenant promise to bring blessing and salvation to the nations through the seed of Abraham.* Open theists take the test of Abraham in Genesis 22 as a *real* test, presumably one Abraham could fail, thus disqualifying him from being the covenant partner through whom God would bring blessing to the world.<sup>23</sup> Concerning this test, Sanders writes, “God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count for collaboration toward the fulfillment of the divine project. Will he be faithful? Or *must God find someone else* through whom to achieve his purpose?”<sup>24</sup> But, if so, how shall we understand God's promise to Abraham in Gen 12:2–3: “I will make *you* a great nation, and I will bless *you*, and make *your* name great; and so *you* shall be a blessing, . . . and in *you* all the families of the earth will be blessed”? If this covenant could be fulfilled through another, then what does God's word mean? Furthermore, if Abraham fails this test, what assurances can we have that another, and then another, and then another, might not also fail?

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 52–53; and Boyd, *God of the Possible* 64.

<sup>24</sup> Sanders, *God Who Risks* 52–53 (italics added).

f. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge renders uncertain the execution of God's plan of salvation through the delivering up of his Son by crucifixion on the cross; or, if God foreknows and predestines the death of Christ, then, by openness standards of freedom and morality, it renders Christ's obedience and offering himself up to be crucified to be the determined, constrained, and morally vacuous actions of a divinely engineered robot. We shall consider each possibility in order.* First, while it is harmful enough to the surety of God's covenant commitment to say, as Sanders has, that, had Abraham not obeyed, God might seek another through whom to fulfill his covenant promise to bless the nations, it is altogether more devastating to the truthfulness of God's long salvific covenant pledge to suggest that Christ, as a free agent, might not have chosen to go to the cross. Sanders writes, "Although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. The path of the cross comes about only through God's interaction with humans in history. Until this moment in history other routes were, perhaps, open."<sup>25</sup> Though startling, does not the open view require this possibility? If Christ is a moral agent and if his actions are free, it follows that Christ could choose to be given over or not, and then it follows that God cannot have known, prior to his choice, just what Christ would do. In light of Psalm 22, Isa 52:13–53:12, Acts 2:23, 4:27–28, and 1 Pet 1:20, this implication of the open view contradicts precious biblical teaching while it undercuts the certainty and surety of God's eternal saving promise and purpose.

But, second, some may be aware that Greg Boyd asserts a different position from Sanders on this point, claiming that "Scripture portrays the crucifixion as a predestined event" even if "it was not certain from eternity that Pilot [*sic*], Herod, or Caiaphas would play the roles they played in the crucifixion."<sup>26</sup> Boyd explains, "Since God determines whatever he wants to about world history, we should not find it surprising that the central defining event in world history—the crucifixion—included a number of predestined aspects. It seems that the incarnation and crucifixion were part of God's plan from 'before the foundation of the world.'<sup>27</sup> Of course, holding this position has the advantage of avoiding the implication just noted, namely, of the uncertainty of the cross if God cannot know in advance what Christ will choose to do. Yet I am startled and incredulous that any open theist would want to solve this problem by asserting that the event of the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible* 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 44–45. Boyd's full last paragraph of this discussion reads, "While Scripture portrays the crucifixion as a predestined event, it never suggests that the individuals who participated in this event were predestined to do so or foreknown as doing so. It was certain that Jesus would be crucified, but it was not certain from eternity that Pilot [*sic*], Herod, or Caiaphas would play the roles they played in the crucifixion. They participated in Christ's death of *their own free wills*" (*ibid.* 45; italics added). Yet it seems impossible that, when Boyd says, "it never suggests that the individuals who participated in this event were predestined to do so," that he would include Christ's actual choice to go to the cross as left uncertain. If so, in what meaningful sense could we see "the crucifixion as a predestined event"?

crucifixion was divinely foreknown and predestined. After all, even if God may not know the roles that Pilate or Herod might play, if the event of the crucifixion is predestined, must God not know, at bare minimum, that his Son *will choose* to go to the cross? But just call to mind the strong and emotionally-charged language open theists regularly offer to the notion that God *cannot foreknow* what creatures *freely* do. If God knows what they will do, their actions cannot genuinely be free. Rather, they are robots, and there can be no true love, no true moral action, and no true relationship between the constrained agent and God. In fact, some open theists go so far as to call God's predetermination of future actions, carried out in a non-consensual manner, as instances of divine rape!<sup>28</sup> What can save Boyd's position from being charged with entailing, on openness grounds, that the crucifixion of Christ, as predetermined by God, constituted the most egregious act of divine coercion perpetrated in the history of the universe? Furthermore, if the event of the crucifixion was predestined, does this not require that every act of Christ's earthly obedience was also constrained, since what was predestined was (obviously) an *efficacious* crucifixion, that is, the crucifixion of a *truly sinless* atoning sacrifice? But if his life of obedience and crucifixion was constrained, is it not, then, morally vacuous, and is not the cross, then, worthless? And further yet, if the event of the crucifixion was predestined "before the foundation of the world," does this not entail God's foreknowledge of sin? How could God *predestine* a crucifixion to save from sin if sin is not certain? But, what then of human freedom and moral responsibility in choosing originally to rebel against God? My own view is that consistent open theism will follow Sanders, not Boyd, on this point. In any event, I will proceed by unfolding the implications of open theism assuming Sanders's view.

*g. Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge renders uncertain, by extension of the uncertainty of Christ's crucifixion, the resurrection of Jesus by which alone do believers in Christ have hope (1 Cor 15:17).* Are the predictions of Jesus' future resurrection in Psalm 16 and by Jesus himself (e.g. Matt 16:21) probabilistic or conditional in nature? Does Peter understand these predictions this way in Acts 2:24–32 when he quotes Psalm 16? Surely not. In Acts 2:31, Peter states, "[David] looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay." But if the resurrection was not in question, then neither was the crucifixion merely probabilistic or conditional. Rather, both were set, fixed, certain, sure, and absolutely foreknown by God.

*h. Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge jeopardizes the legitimacy of God's justification of OT saints by faith (e.g. Gen 15:6).* Recall that in Rom 3:25–26 we are told that God passed over sins previously committed for the demonstration of his righteousness at the present time.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Sanders, *God Who Risks* 240.

So, what grounds the legitimacy of God's justification of OT believers is, not their sacrifices, not their faith *per se*, but the future payment of Christ's death on the cross, by which God demonstrates now, in Christ, that he is righteous in having forgiven those he did (as well as forgiving others yet future). But consider: For God to extend justification to OT saints, apart from knowing their sin would be paid by a subsequent death for sin, would be to extend what was in fact a groundless and unjustified justification.

i. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge renders illusory the salvific value of OT atoning sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin.* The type/antitype reality in the OT sacrificial system requires the certainty of the future death of Christ, that is, the "lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world." But, of course, since God cannot have known whether his Son would freely offer himself as the once-for-all atonement for sin, God's institution of the sacrificial system was, strictly speaking, a legal fiction. There was then no basis in the OT period itself by which God could forgive sins through those sacrifices. Only if God knows with certainty that sin's debt will be paid in the future death of Christ can those OT sacrifices function as types by which God can genuinely forgive.

#### 4. *The Christian life: its faith and hope in God.*

a. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge undermines the Christian's confidence in the reliability and certainty of God's wise counsel and guidance for the Christian life.* Consider the Suzanne story in Boyd's *God of the Possible*. What assurances can she be given that God will do any better in his future leading than he has in the past? After all, according to Boyd, he accepts the notion that God truly did give his best counsel and guidance when he encouraged her marriage to the man that both he (God) and she learned over time was so deeply hurtful. Denying that God knows the future in this way undermines confidence and trust in accepting and following God's leading.

b. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge undermines the Christian's hope that affliction, suffering, and trials in life are permitted by God for what he knows will turn out to be ultimately good purposes (e.g. Rom 8:28; cf. Rom 5:1-5; James 1:2-4).* Adding to the above point is the problem that any assurance we might have had that these hardships are part of a bigger, wise, and good plan is now taken away. God's plans change, and, frankly, many, many things happen that he wishes did not. God simply cannot give assurances that things will work out for good because he does not know how the future will unfold. Face it, we may encounter gratuitous evil at any turn, unexpected and unwanted by God, and utterly pointless in its purpose for us. Do not expect God to know what you and I cannot know, that is, that there are good purposes ultimately for this suffering. Accept it; this is the nature of life lived with a God lacking such knowledge of the future.

c. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge promotes presumptuous Christian prayers, in which we are encouraged to work together with God at devising what is best for the future.* Oh, the implicit arrogance embedded in the notion that God takes into consideration what I think before he and I decide together what is best to do, as if I, or we, could possibly contribute something that could be joined with God's understanding and wisdom resulting in an overall better plan. But hear how positively this is portrayed in the open view. Sanders writes:

It is God's desire that we enter into a give-and-take relationship of love, and this is not accomplished by God's forcing his blueprint on us. Rather, God wants us to go through life together with him, making decisions together. Together we decide the actual course of my life. . . . To a large extent our future is open and we are to determine what it will be in dialogue with God.<sup>29</sup>

How strikingly this contrasts with Jesus' approach to living life, who said repeatedly, "I have come to do the will of my Father who is in heaven." How presumptuous to think that we, together with God, could arrive at a better overall plan than the one God alone, in his infinite wisdom, can devise! The words of Isa 40:13–17 reveal how utterly foolish and deeply offensive this appeal in open theism is.

d. *Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge calls into question the Church's ultimate eschatological hope that God will surely accomplish all his plans and purposes, exactly as he has told us in Scripture that he will, and openness assurances that he will succeed ring hollow, in that not even God knows (that is, can know) what unexpected turns lie ahead and how severely these may thwart his purposes or cause him to change his plans.* Openness advocates want it both ways. They want high risk, and they also want high assurance of God's success. They cannot have it both ways. Clearly, what wins in the open view is risk; what loses is assurance of God's success. If even God cannot now know the outcome of his purposes with free creatures, we certainly cannot be sure whether those plans and purposes will prevail.

### III. OPEN THEISM AND BOUNDARIES FOR EVANGELICALISM

So we return to Dr. Pinnock's questions: "Why draw the line at foreknowledge? . . . What church council has declared it to be impossible? Since when has this become the criterion of being orthodox or unorthodox, evangelical or not evangelical?"<sup>30</sup> Allow me two comments, and then my conclusion.

First, no church council took up this matter, because no serious proposal was ever set before the church that would deny what all Christians believed without question, namely, that God, as God, knew the future, as well as the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 276–77.

<sup>30</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 106, 110.

past and present, exhaustively. Because church councils, creeds, and confessions are occasional in nature, and because no reason ever occasioned councils or synods to speak on this issue, therefore God's exhaustive foreknowledge was accepted without defense or formal creedal declaration. But does this history not also imply that when something as fundamental and basic to Christian commitment as, in this case, its confidence in God's exhaustive foreknowledge is questioned, or rather denied, that Christians ought to unite to declare now what we believe on this matter? In other words, as the church in past generations felt obligated to face these weighty doctrinal deviations and give voice to its most cherished and non-negotiable commitments, so too in our day thoughtful Christians, particularly Christian leaders, must speak out on the openness proposal to say what the glory of God, the truthfulness of Scripture, and our own consciences require.

Second, while the question of theological boundaries for evangelicalism is highly complicated, I agree with Derek Tidball, who writes,

The word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word for "good news" which takes us to the heart of the matter. Evangelicals are "gospel" people. . . .<sup>31</sup> As gospel people, evangelicals stress that the heart of the gospel is the cross of Christ, usually insisting on that interpretation of the cross known as substitutionary atonement; that a personal response to Christ's work on the cross, usually called conversion, is necessary; that the fruits of the gospel should be subsequently seen in the believer's life and that the good news should be shared with all people through evangelism. . . .<sup>32</sup> Every definition [also] draws attention to the central place given by evangelicals to the Bible. They count it as their supreme authority and though they may differ over theories of inspiration and methods of interpretation they believe it to be the trustworthy record of God's revelation of himself to humankind, having superior authority to any other means of direction in the church (such as tradition, reason or contemporary scholarship), sufficient for all the church's needs and to be treated with the utmost seriousness as a guide both to what we are to believe and how we are to live.<sup>33</sup>

For evangelicals, what is central is gospel, cross, salvation, conversion, life of faith, and good works, and the Bible that reliably and sufficiently reveals the truths we believe and by which we live.

But given open theism's distinctive and essential tenet, namely, that God cannot know future free creaturely choices and actions, it is clear that certain central evangelical convictions are compromised to promote the open view. Consider where open theism leaves us in three areas discussed

<sup>31</sup> Derek J. Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals? Tracing the Roots of the Modern Movements* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994) 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 12–13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 12. For literature on evangelicalism, see the helpful bibliographies provided in Edith L. Blumhofer and Joel A. Carpenter, *Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: A Guide to the Sources* (New York: Garland, 1990); Norris A. Magnuson and William A. Travis, *American Evangelicalism: An Annotated Bibliography* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill, 1990); *idem*, *American Evangelicalism II: First Bibliographical Supplement, 1990–1996* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill, 1997); and Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 289–308.

above that accord with these central evangelical commitments. We are left with a *Bible* somehow now devoid of specific and inviolable divine predictions involving future free human actions, an unintelligible canonical interconnectedness, a pervasive new interpretive proposal regarding hundreds of biblical passages, and the possibility of revealed predictions which are, frankly, wrong. We are left with a *gospel* unable to account for the eternal design of God's foreknowing and purposing to save those who God knew would sin against him, a gospel that jeopardizes the legitimacy of OT sacrifices and divine justification of sinners, a gospel where the substitutionary nature of Christ's death for sin and sinners arising after the crucifixion is, at best, impersonal and abstract, and a gospel where God's covenant promise to save and the very death and resurrection of Christ are rendered uncertain in God's salvific plans. And *Christian faith* is left possessing a heightened estimate of our own contribution to the unfolding future at the expense of God's diminished knowledge, wisdom, and certainty, a faith that cannot but be unsure of God's word, second-guessing God's direction, and ultimately lacking in confidence that God's purposes will prevail.

And yet another, perhaps the most troubling area implicated by open theism is our understanding of God himself. Now, is it legitimate to ask whether changes in understanding God relate to the evangelical boundary question? The answer must be, yes. Evangelicals have not declared their distinctiveness or identity on the question of God, simply because this has been an area of substantial agreement with the broader orthodox and universal church. But now, within our own ranks, the openness proposal makes it incumbent for evangelicals to declare whether the open view of God is acceptable. Well, where does open theism leave us here? In short, it leaves us with a God who lacks massive knowledge of future human affairs, who possesses innumerable false beliefs about that future, whose wisdom is less than perfect, whose plans can prove faulty, whose actions might be regrettable, whose word may be mistaken, whose self-claim to deity is undermined, a view of God whose inability to declare future free human actions renders him strikingly similar to the pretender deities denounced by God himself.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

My conclusion is this. The cost to doctrine and faith by open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge is too great to be accepted within evangelicalism. It would be easier to say, let the discussion continue (which it will regardless, to be sure) and allow difference of opinion here as we do in other matters. After all, drawing the lines will no doubt be perceived by some as narrow, perhaps "fundamentalistic," and unloving, though these perceptions will be unfounded. Yet, to fail to challenge a proposal as massive in its harmful implications for theology and for the church as found in the openness proposal would be utterly irresponsible, and by its neglect, our failure would constitute complicity in the harmful effects these doctrinal innovations have for our evangelical theology and for the life of the church.

So, with deep and abiding longings to honor God and his Word, to see the church strengthened, and to retain whatever integrity evangelicalism has through its core commitments, I would urge this conclusion: open theism, by its denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, has shown itself to be unacceptable as a viable, legitimate model within evangelicalism. May God grant mercy, wisdom, strength of character, fidelity, and love as we endeavor to follow him and his word in the days ahead.