

THERE IS ROOM FOR US: A REPLY TO BRUCE WARE

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An encouraging feature in evangelicalism today is the fact that people are seeking a more intimate relationship with God. They want a more than dry intellectual connection with a far away and seemingly immobile deity and are longing for soul-satisfying interactions with the living God. I think that the present discussion about the openness of God may have something to do with spiritual as well as dogmatic or philosophical issues. There is today a widespread spiritual hunger for reciprocal and interactive relationships with the Father and an understanding of God which underlies and sustains it.¹

I appreciate Bruce Ware's willingness to engage open theists in dialogue and admire his own work in which he criticizes some of the assumptions underlying classical theism. When he argues that God is not unchangeable in every respect but changeable in some respects, he too is engaged in theological revision.² Nor is he alone among the evangelical theologians in reconsidering certain matters. John Feinberg admits in language reminiscent of open theists that he too seeks a middle way between classical and process views of God.³ Millard Erickson also recognizes a degree of Hellenistic corruption in classical theism and along with Grudem puts aside the ancient consensus on divine impassibility.⁴ And what about Ron Nash and Bill Craig who question divine a-temporality? Practically all evangelicals who work on the doctrine of God today (except maybe Geisler) are suggesting revisions to classical theism just as open theists are. A good discussion is taking place, and we share a common cause. If this fact were more widely known, it could not but normalize the discussion and counter the impression that only open theists are putting forth any new ideas. Critics are too modest when it comes to acknowledging their own novelties and are therefore more vehement against us than they have any right to be.

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¹ See Bruce A. Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999). Whether or not his Calvinist understanding of God theologically supports the longing of his heart spiritually is, however, less apparent. Renewal may be calling for theological reform.

² Ware, "An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability," *WJT* 47 (1985) 175–96 and "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *JTS* 29 (1986) 431–46.

³ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) 62–73.

⁴ Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 85.

Ware's decision to focus on one particular point of the open model, the so-called "present knowledge" of God, is legitimate in my books. After all, it is a novel aspect of our view which attracts attention. We are not ashamed of it, and it is an important point. Therefore it is right and proper to enquire into its implications and ask whether it constitutes a boundary of contemporary evangelical thought. The evangelical movement does embrace an astonishing variety of opinion, and we often ask such questions: are "new" theologies such as dispensationalism and Pentecostalism or "new" opinions such as the ordination of women and re-interpretation of the sacraments legitimate options? So long as there is fresh thinking (may it never cease), there will be questions to ask. Regarding divine foreknowledge, no doubt Ware has his reasons for zeroing in on it. He sees how it arises from an Arminian way of thinking and how it goes beyond it. He also laments the dreadful implications which he thinks it implies, while on my part I am impressed with its scriptural foundations and theological coherence. Ware sees it as our Achilles heel, while I view it as the logical next step in Arminian thinking, which has always been part of evangelicalism.

While focusing on the issue of divine foreknowledge, let us not lose sight of the fact that our view of this subject is only one facet (and not the most important) in a larger relational model of the divine-human relationship. According to this paradigm God gives significant freedom to creatures. God is love, and it was for a love that would be freely chosen that God created the world. Therefore, God sovereignly decided in creating the world not to control everything, but to leave room for finite persons to exist and to contribute to the unfolding of history. This meant creating the kind of world in which things might or might not be, a world whose future would be somewhat open in order to make such a relationship possible. What divine omniscience means in this context is that God knows everything about the future—both what is already settled and what is not yet settled, both what is certain and (what at this point) is only possible and yet to be decided. If he had made a world in which everything was already fixed, then the relationships of love that God seeks would not be possible.

For some reason Ware mentions only the possibly negative implications of our view and neglects the possibly positive ones. I would like to correct that impression, if I can. A major point is this: any divine *kenosis* or self-emptying of God, in which God limits the exercise of his properties in order that significant creatures should exist, is balanced by a *plerōma* or fullness of glory in which God experiences real gain and not at all diminishment as Ware thinks. The very act of self-emptying allows God to experience something truly wonderful—namely, loving relationships with creatures that would otherwise have been impossible. We need to see that, alongside what looks like subtraction and loss, there is addition and gain, namely, the richness which is added to divine experience by enjoying these relationships. The self-limitation of God makes possible and renders visible wonderful new forms of divine glory. Open theists do not serve a diminished deity. God could have created a world whose future would be completely settled, but he chose something different. He made a world the future of which would not

be exhaustively foreknown in order to let finite creativity flourish. And, I should add, there is no real “loss” here for God, since it is only a question of how God’s power, which is his alone, is exercised.

The beauty of the open view of God and omniscience is that it takes the Bible seriously when it presents history as real drama, not a marionette show. It presents the drama of creation and redemption with real tension, as the participants experience communion with God and anticipate the outcome of the story. There is integrity in the freedom to choose in response to God’s call, and (therefore) specifics of the future are hidden by God’s choice even from his own eyes. Though God’s foreseeing is marvelous in extent, not all matters are settled ahead of time. Though God is sovereignly moving his plan forward, his foreknowledge includes seeing the possibilities of choice as to the outcome of the interactions of God and humanity. Our notion of omniscience takes the biblical story as its frame of reference and allows for the genuine freedom of creatures, even to maneuver themselves out of the range of the divine reach. No conception of foreknowledge that empties our understanding of movement, tension, and purpose can fit the biblical saga. The story will have a consummation, but not at the expense of elements of genuine openness and even the resistance which characterizes narrative action.

If (on the other hand) God possessed exhaustive definite foreknowledge, that would mean that the future is already determinate and human freedom illusory. In that case the resolution of alternative courses of action would be resolved, not by the actual decisions of women and men here and now, but by divine predestination. Ware’s view of this matter is a person-destroying conception of God’s knowledge which is conceived of along the lines of his knowing the sum total of facts—past, present, and future—and not the knowledge of a loving Father who grants his creatures freedom and lets the future be in some degree contingent on their decisions and not closed in every detail from eternity. As the parent of a daughter, I honored her as a person and as a free, responsible agent. I gave her space to grow up in and freedom to be herself. I knew that, only if I did not destroy the mystery of my child’s individuality, could she grow up to be a mature loving person. God’s knowledge is unimaginable, and his wisdom enables him to deal with any contingency that may arise but that does not eliminate contingencies or mean having to know in advance every detail of what “might be.”

It is clear to me, both from Scripture and experience that, although God’s purposes remain constant, his particular actions are always fitted gracefully into the demands of specific historical situations. I see God working out his purposes in intercommunion with persons and not determining the whole flow of history from the beginning. Some people have the impression that a God who did not know every single detail of the future would not be worthy of worship. On the contrary, surely a God who could realize his purposes in the context of a community of personal agents would be much more awesome. The kind of foreknowledge he would need in this situation of lively interaction with creatures is the kind that, while immense, would allow for responsiveness to the contingencies that arise in significant history. To my way of reading, the Bible does not picture God as a being whose

every action has been determined once and for all or who knows every detail of what must necessarily be. On the contrary, God is seen as a living being who acts in the situations confronting him, sometimes trying one course of action, then trying another. These are not naïvely anthropomorphic ideas, but the Bible's way of conceiving of God as living and active and genuinely responding to other free beings with whom he is dealing. Our view involves no derogation of the divine knowledge. It simply shows that God's power and knowledge are so great that he is able to govern with wisdom even a universe in which the free agents are present and acting.

For God to be omniscient means that he knows everything any being could know. He knows everything that could possibly exist and everything that does actually exist. He knows things, not merely in an abstract way, but directly. He is always responding in sensitive ways to everything that happens in the world by the free choices of his creatures, and the content of his knowledge changes as creatures in the world act in new ways. No being can know in advance exactly what a free agent will do, though he may predict it with high probability. God knows that whatever he wills and determines will come to pass but, if God is free and creatures are free, he cannot know in advance always exactly what will happen. This is not a limit on God's foreknowledge, but characteristic of the world that God decided to make. I do not see how one can have genuine freedom (human and divine) and exhaustive definite foreknowledge. Future free acts, by definition, cannot be known in every detail and for certain even by God. It is enough to say that God knows everything any being could possibly know, which leaves room for human persons to act and also room for God to act, since the future is open to both. The future is still being formed—everything has not been decided. God cannot be taken off guard by what happens, but can accomplish his goals in more ways than one. The Bible portrays the world as a moral order, which presupposes libertarian freedom and a degree of uncertainty as to how things will exactly work out.

In his essay, Ware neglects to say anything about the scriptural foundations of our view. Granted, it is an awkward subject for him, since what he needs to establish cannot be proved. His tactic has to be one of imagining the worst implications conceivable of our view, since it is difficult to deny the obvious fact that the Scriptures suggest in many places that God does not know everything about the future as settled fact. The truth surfaces in so many ways. God expected Israel, his vineyard, to yield grapes, but it did not. God even asks why this happened and what more he could have done (Isa 5:1–4). To Jeremiah, God says that it had never entered his mind that Israel would build altars to Baal (Jer 19:5). In a word to Samuel, God said that he regretted making Saul king (1 Sam 15:10). These are not the words of a God with exhaustive definite foreknowledge. God also speaks about the future in conditional terms, because some matters of the future are unsettled. God says: "If you truly amend your ways, I will let you dwell in this place" (Jer 7:5–7). God says: "It may be that they will listen that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on them" (Jer 26:3b). God changes plans when persons change their behavior. God often

makes, in addition to absolute promises (that he will do so and so), conditional promises (that he will do so and so, if persons do such and such). This does not suggest that God already knows how they would act. God commands Jeremiah to make a proclamation and says that it “may be” that they will hearken and turn from their evil ways (Jer 26:3). Evidently God did not know at this time how they would decide. Clearly, the future in certain respects is open, and what people decide can change the course of events. The future contains unactualized possibilities that can go either way. Even for God some things are not completely settled, making sense of God’s uses of the term “perhaps” to indicate his uncertainty on his part regarding the future. For example, he says concerning Israel: “Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house” (Ezek 12:3). God orders Jeremiah to preach and adds: “It may be that they will listen” (Jer 26:3a). From such texts it is fairly clear that God is not absolutely certain how people will respond to his word. Evidently, he does not know the future in exhaustive detail in speaking of what may or may not be. Similarly, God consults with Abraham about the future. God had not finally decided what the fate of Sodom should be. Its destruction was still only a possibility, not yet a certainty. Therefore God took Abraham into his counsel. God told Moses that he was considering burning in wrath against the people, but then changed his mind after Moses interceded. At that point Israel’s future was still open as far as God was concerned. Thus he asks questions about the future and ponders what to do. God asks: “What shall I do with you Ephraim?” (Hos 6:4). God has a book of life, but the contents can be changed as human behavior changes. Names can be blotted out (Rev 3:5).

Contrary to the resolution of the ETS in 2001 that the Bible “clearly” teaches exhaustive definite foreknowledge, the fact is that Scripture often indicates that the future is partly settled and partly not settled. God does not know everything in advance, because he does not want to know everything in advance. God awaits the responses of his creatures and keeps the future open. You can only get around these facts by dismissing the inconvenient evidence. One has to accept one set of texts that are interpreted in a deterministic fashion and put aside another set that are inconvenient. It surprises me when critics say with one breath that they defend the inerrancy of the Bible and with the next breath explain why they cannot possibly accept a whole block of material which is plainly relevant. One has the impression that texts are not considered inerrant unless they fit the system. How odd of them to be accusing us of denying inerrancy.

I agree with Ware that implications of model are important, though they do not negate the truthfulness of a position and cut in both directions. In a discussion like this, both sides are going to imagine where the views of the other party are going to land them. For example, in my opinion, Ware’s own view of these matters (exhaustive definite foreknowledge based on the theory of meticulous divine sovereignty) requires him to negate the dynamism of history and the give-and-take relationships between God and humanity which are central to the whole biblical story. The implications of his views are frankly fatalistic. They eliminate human freedom and take away human

responsibility; they make God the author of sin and discourage motives toward exertion; they make God unjustly partial and make nonsense of petitionary prayer. Indeed, it makes nonsense of our discussion here. What can it possibly mean for Ware to appeal to us to change our minds? Can we do that unless God has ordained it? Is this matter (and every other matter) not settled from eternity? Besides, is it not the case that our errors glorify God and afford him an opportunity to magnify his wrath? In speaking to us as he does, Ware is acting as if he were an open theist himself. Indeed, he has no other choice. Unless he resigns from life, he has to act as if what he says and does makes a difference. Thus he acts as if the future were open and the open view true. It is essential for him to keep his theology separate from his practice or else he would experience paralysis.

I wish that Ware understood the heart of the biblical faith better. I wish he were not so deaf to the biblical love story, filled as it is with pathos and drama, focused as it is on persons, not molecules. Because he sees the future as determinate and fixed, he assumes an impersonal and person-destroying concept of God's knowledge. He thinks of God's mind as if it were a kind of encyclopedia of all facts and not a knowing of persons. Apparently, he wants a world where there is no real narrative and where all accounts are already settled. In short, he wants a robotic world where God gets everything except the one thing he wants most, freely chosen and loving relationships. I say to him that God does not want robots, but creatures to love him freely. Sovereignty in the mode of control is not the only or even the highest form of sovereignty. My idea of a "diminished" deity is one who cannot manage the world unless he has exhaustive definite foreknowledge based upon predestination. It is surely a weak view of God's capabilities to maintain that without a crystal ball his plans would be frustrated and could not come to fruition. Is God so lacking in wisdom that, unless he controls everything, he could not be certain of accomplishing anything? It is surely a more exalted view of God to think of him as resourceful and wise enough to handle any and every challenge that may arise from his having created a significant universe. Administering a universe where God is in complete control must be a cinch when compared to running one in which the deity has to deal with a myriad of possibilities.

It is easy to make fun of an opposing viewpoint. Critics say that our view implies that God is severely lacking in information and has to guess the future. In my view, God has an awesome intelligence. God knows everything that could possibly happen and is prepared for whatever will actually happen. Once we enact a possibility, God is prepared for it, as if it were the only possibility. He is ready for anything that may transpire. Is it not plain that it requires a great deal more intelligence to run a universe with a myriad of possibilities than to run a universe which is scripted. And as for wisdom, none at all is required if everything is settled in a divine blueprint.

My appeal to Bruce and fellow members of the ETS is that they would try to think of this current discussion about divine omniscience in more positive terms. One can see it, even without agreeing with it, as a sign of vitality, not a sign of decline. Without diminishing our convictions at all, I think

that we should encourage fresh thinking based on Scripture. Dealing harshly with open theists will create a chill in our gatherings. There is plenty of variety in our Christian traditions. There is not a single line of thinking on a whole host of issues. Let us be careful not to define the boundaries of evangelicalism too narrowly. There is room for us. Evangelicalism is a big tent. It is a family of denominations and theologies. No simple list of doctrines can define it. The boundaries keep changing.

From time to time, as is happening now, special interests will arise and claim to represent the whole of the movement theologically. We must resist such moves and stem the current move to make scholastic Calvinism (in effect) the only true evangelical theology. Let them create a society for that if they wish to, but let us not allow the ETS to become the property of a sect within it. We do not want to go back to the fundamentalism that was negative, defensive, and reactionary. We do not want to lose the theological consensus that we have enjoyed. This would be foolish. Surely we can work together. Again, we appreciate this opportunity to give a response to Ware's work and hope that this will not be the last time we are allowed to speak our mind.