

## OPENNESS AND INERRANCY: CAN THEY BE COMPATIBLE?

JASON A. NICHOLLS\*

### I. INTRODUCTION

To some observers, the resolution concerning divine foreknowledge passed at the 2001 ETS Annual Meeting in Colorado Springs might seem rather harmless. “We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate, and infallible knowledge of all events past, present, and future, including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents.”<sup>1</sup> It undoubtedly reflects the society’s majority viewpoint. Yet this vote comes on the heels of several years of discussion and debate, albeit rather limited until recently, on the question of whether the position known as the openness of God is compatible with evangelical theology.<sup>2</sup> In fact, some are interpreting the results of this vote as the first step down the road toward outright dismissing advocates of the open view from the ETS. Scholars such as Wayne Grudem have admitted as much by characterizing the vote as a “gentle nudge” for open theists to exit the society.<sup>3</sup> But exactly why would critics of the openness view want to see this theological position expelled from the society, and why have its proponents come under such intense fire?

\* Jason A. Nicholls is lecturer in theology at Marquette University, P.O. Box 1881, Milwaukee, WI 53201.

<sup>1</sup> See David Neff’s editorial, “Scholars Vote: God Knows Future,” *Christianity Today* 46/1 (January 7, 2002) 21. As Neff reports, this resolution was passed at the 2001 Annual Meeting in Colorado Springs by a vote of 253 to 66, with 41 members abstaining.

<sup>2</sup> Witness the two plenary sessions on the openness theme given by Bruce Ware and John Sanders. A printed form of Ware’s address is now available, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?” *JETS* 45 (2002) 193–212. The openness of God, as it was originally termed (though it is sometimes also called open theism, free will theism, relational theism, presentism or simply the openness view), is a theological viewpoint which teaches that God, in limiting the full extent of his power to control all earthly affairs, enters into give-and-take relationships with his creatures. This thereby renders the outcome of the future as something that is determined partly by God and partly by humans. Hence, the openness view conceives of the future as partly closed and partly open—open to the extent that humans exercise true freedom (*viz.* a kind that is incompatible with determinism, known most commonly as libertarianism) in their decision-making. By far the most distinguishing feature of the openness view is also its most controversial. In short, the indefinite parts of the future are, properly speaking, not yet knowledge; hence, they are not knowable by anyone—including God. Critics of the openness charge that it is a position that necessarily diminishes God. Its supporters, on the other hand, counter that God still knows all that is knowable—and that the existence of a partly definite, partly indefinite future is simply the product of a self-limiting, though ultimately still sovereign God. For a helpful brief summary see Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 11–17.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, a past president of the ETS, is quoted by David Neff in “Scholars Vote” 21.

Essentially, many are contending that open theism is incompatible with evangelical theology—or, to put it another way in light of the theme of the 2001 meeting—it is alleged to have crossed an evangelical “boundary.”

Precisely which boundary has been violated? Negotiating a clear answer to this question is no easy matter, since delimiting such evangelical “boundaries” is a task replete with its own challenges. Indeed, such an endeavor—defining evangelical boundaries—too often disintegrates into a tricky debate as different evangelicals have contrasting opinions on what constitutes even the most basic of evangelical boundaries.<sup>4</sup> Yet the critics of open theism have, for the most part, leveled a rather unified and concise attack against it by alleging that openness theology is incompatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.<sup>5</sup> Given the ETS’s basic doctrinal statement, this accusation is momentous. All society members must affirm (1) that “[t]he Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs”; and (2) that “God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

Based partly upon this specific charge, North American evangelicalism is currently witnessing a growing yet sobering trend. What could be described as a climate of hysteria has been cultivated in regard to openness theology, and this has stemmed in large part from the specific charge that open theism is incompatible with biblical inerrancy. Witness the number of influential voices that are on record indicting the open view. Many of its detractors would argue that it is inconsistent with evangelical theology, and a few have even gone so far as to condemn it as a heresy that is destructive to both churches and personal lives.<sup>6</sup> My purpose in this article is not to try to counter these more dramatic accusations. But I do want to reply to a specific and increasingly pervasive criticism against the openness position—viz. that its view of God is incompatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. For, again, it is precisely on this basis that a core group of scholars is calling for the expulsion of open theists from the ETS. As I document below, a number of these critics have come to this conclusion thinking that logic somehow demands it. In short, if the God of open theism is incapable of guaranteeing the fulfillment of his purposes, the logic goes, then this risks thwarting divine providence. And if God’s providence were to be thwarted, this would in turn necessarily undermine the doctrine of inerrancy.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, one need only look to the sheer breadth of paper topics and the diversity of theological positions on those topics at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the ETS, which had for its theme “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries.”

<sup>5</sup> I have in mind here the earlier resolution passed by the executive committee of the ETS at its meeting in Nashville, TN, November 15, 2000, which alleged an “incompatibility” between open theism and biblical inerrancy.

<sup>6</sup> These kinds of accusations are not hard to come by. One need look no further than to the scholarly endorsements from such notables as Wayne Grudem, John Piper, and Donald Carson in Bruce Ware’s recent book, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

In response, I contend that this allegation is based on a misconception about the openness view. I will demonstrate how open theism, rather than undermining divine providence, can and *does* affirm providence by upholding the reality of unilateral divine intervention in the midst of libertarian freedom. I describe this interaction as one of *governed libertarianism* guided by incidents of *select determinism*. By articulating the relationship between these two concepts, then, I will show how an advocate of the openness view may continue to affirm biblical inerrancy—effectively removing all legitimate grounds for excluding open theists from the ETS on the basis of its current doctrinal statement.

Perhaps the biggest risk taken in this article is that I may at times reiterate points made previously by such open theists as Gregory Boyd, Clark Pinnock, and John Sanders. Where I am aware of this, I have tried to acknowledge it. Why add another essay to the growing theological crossfire between critics and proponents? I write because I am convinced that this specific issue—namely, to reconcile the open view with divine providence and, therefore, the doctrine of inerrancy—deserves more explicit treatment. And I am hopeful that the argument made here will fall on ears that are willing to listen—and that I am convinced need to listen. I should also underscore that, while the more prominent open theists might agree with the basic point made here, they also may not. I speak only for myself in this essay.<sup>7</sup>

This article proceeds in four steps. First, by reviewing the essence of the critiques from several major opponents of the openness view, I demonstrate how their analyses focus primarily upon a perceived inability for the open view's God to realize his ultimate purposes—hence, seeming to pose a problem with biblical inerrancy. Second, I argue that such criticisms are based on a fundamental misconception—that for God to control the future he must either exhaustively foresee it or decree it—and set forth my case for how the openness God can ensure the fulfillment of his future purposes by recourse to periodic divine intervention. Third, in consequence of this proposal, I acknowledge a crucial implication for a libertarian understanding of human freedom. Specifically, I contend that, while libertarian freedom is an essential component of God's moral system as it is generally conceived by both open theists and Arminians alike, Scripture also records select incidents of divine determinism whereby God guarantees the fulfillment of specific, indispensable pieces of his ultimate plan. I still contend, however, that, as a general rule, humans exercise libertarian freedom. To this extent the future remains open both to us and to God. Finally, in reference to the question of the "evangelical" nature of open theism, I underscore how this thesis upholds the compatibility of open theism and inerrancy. Since God may intervene at any point, there is no inherent problem with biblical texts that speak to the future fulfillment of divine plans.

<sup>7</sup> Having offered this disclaimer, it may be worth noting that Clark Pinnock read an earlier draft of this essay and by way of personal correspondence voiced his agreement with it.

## II. THE CRITIQUE: A "DIMINISHED" GOD?

As alluded to above, a number of prolific evangelical scholars are on record indicting the open view of God—witnessed particularly by the endorsements in Bruce Ware's recent book. Theologians like Wayne Grudem tell us that open theism, while the "most consistent Arminian position," nevertheless puts forward a "radical revision of the idea of omniscience"<sup>8</sup> that is "contrary to Scripture, internally contradictory, and destructive to our Christian lives." In fact, Grudem considers it a "doctrinal error that is so far-reaching that it ultimately portrays a different God than the God of the Bible."<sup>9</sup> Not only does this "toxic teaching" dishonor God, distort Scripture, and "damage" faith, John Piper estimates that, "if left unchecked," open theism will ruin churches and personal lives. D. A. Carson, too, agrees that the openness movement is inflicting "serious damage" on evangelicalism.<sup>10</sup> While stopping short of denouncing the open view as heretical, other scholars are nonetheless skeptical of its evangelical merits. Millard Erickson has voiced reservations regarding its revision of the divine attributes.<sup>11</sup> Even more recently, in his comprehensive volume on the doctrine of God, John Feinberg explains that he is in favor of "nuancing" certain attributes, yet he accuses open theists with abandoning the "traditional" concept of God and substituting a "replacement."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*, Timothy George warns readers that the open view "trivializes" God, likening its scenario to "a doctor who produced horrible deformity while experimenting with human cloning."<sup>13</sup> Finally, in addition to these basically Reformed theologians, several Arminian-minded scholars like Thomas Oden, Jack Cottrell, and Robert Picirilli are also wary of the openness view. They, too, question its biblical merits and, in the case of Oden, its evangelical legitimacy as well.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 348.

<sup>9</sup> See the pages of scholarly endorsements in Bruce Ware's *God's Lesser Glory*.

<sup>10</sup> Both Piper's and Carson's critical comments about the openness view also appear in the two pages of endorsements to Bruce Ware's *God's Lesser Glory*. Similar sentiments regarding openness theology can be found in the endorsements of John M. Frame's *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001). D. A. Carson, it should be noted, offers his own critique of the openness view in his *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> See Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) esp. 91–92.

<sup>12</sup> See John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) xxv, 432. Specifically, Feinberg is willing to nuance the traditional views of divine immutability and temporality.

<sup>13</sup> See Timothy George, "Has God Played Fair?," *Christianity Today* 45/14 (November 12, 2001) 96.

<sup>14</sup> Oden's systematic theology is an attempt to highlight the "ecumenical consensus" in Christian teaching. As he puts it, his purpose is "to set forth an ordered view of the faith of the Christian community upon which there has generally been substantial agreement between the traditions of East and West, including Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox." See Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology: Volume One* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 1998) ix. Oden's Arminianism is

Exactly what is it about the openness view that sets so many teeth on edge? As I noted previously, critiques of the openness view center on a perceived inability for the openness God to realize his purposes. To reiterate, if it is uncertain that God can fulfill his promises, some question whether we should see these as trustworthy—and can we, furthermore, put trust in a Bible that supplies such guarantees? Norman Geisler was one of the first scholars to offer a book-length challenge to this proposal, which he likened to “the latest produce in the worldview supermarket.”<sup>15</sup> Essentially, Geisler argues that because open theism, or “neotheism” as he prefers to call it, denies God’s exhaustive foreknowledge of future free acts, it must as a consequence also deny God’s complete sovereignty over human events.<sup>16</sup> To Geisler, an open future necessarily means that God’s predictions can be fallible. But predictive prophecy requires “an incredible web of free activity” in order for any of it to be fulfilled. Hence, Geisler is convinced that this eliminates predictive prophecy, prompting him to conclude that openness theology is incompatible with inerrancy.<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, Robert Picirilli, a

---

apparent from his statements about foreknowledge. “God foreknows the use of free will, yet this foreknowledge does not determine events. Rather, what God foreknows is determined by what happens, part of which is affected by free will” (p. 71). As for Oden’s consideration of the openness view as unevangelical, he labels as “pantheism” the idea that God’s knowledge grows, or that it moves from the realm of mere possibility into actuality. In addition to simple foreknowledge, Oden also ascribes middle knowledge to God (though he does not term it as such; see *Living God* 71–73). For Cottrell’s perspective on the freedom and foreknowledge debate, see his *What the Bible Says about God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984). As for his rejection of the openness proposal, see his endorsement of Ware’s *God’s Lesser Glory*. Robert Picirilli’s critique is discussed below.

<sup>15</sup> See Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New “Open” View of God—Neotheism’s Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997) 19. As Geisler sees it, open theism constitutes a “serious threat to many important doctrines” (p. 74). Upon surveying only a select few of the open theists’ biblical arguments for revising some of the divine attributes, he abruptly concludes, “Neotheism fails to establish a biblical basis for its beliefs” (p. 90). In short, Geisler aims to undermine what he believes is the logic leading to the openness view. Another of the earliest book-length responses to openness theology is Robert K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong With Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Geisler, *Creating God* 74.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 131–35. Geisler has released another more recent work on this topic, co-authored with H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001). In this work many of Geisler’s earlier arguments are more or less reiterated. However, in some new material the authors attempt to widen the distance between “neotheism” and classical orthodoxy by emphasizing selected statements from the creeds and the Church Fathers. They also stress what seems to them an apparent connection between openness and process theology (see *Battle for God* 9–11, 318–21). The open theists, as they put it, have sacrificed the God of orthodox theology by “buying into the God of process theology” (p. 275). Yet Geisler’s earlier analysis, particularly in regard to the inability of the openness God to realize his purposes, remains essentially unchanged. The authors write, “[Neotheism] denies God’s infallible foreknowledge of future free acts and, as a consequence, God’s complete sovereignty over human events” (p. 12; cf. also p. 219). Yet it is interesting that the authors later appear to contradict this very line of reasoning by acknowledging that the openness God may override human freedom to accomplish his ends. They argue that if it is God’s desire for all to be saved, and if he may at times be willing to violate human freedom in order to accomplish this end, then the openness view must

self-professed “Reformation Arminian,” assumes that openness scholars like John Sanders deny God’s exhaustive foreknowledge based entirely “on a logical objection.”<sup>18</sup> With Geisler, Picirilli agrees that every part of world history is “so interwoven” with free choices that God must either foresee “all of the future or none of it.” Thus, he concludes that the openness view’s “neo-Arminian” view of God actually weakens Arminian efforts to correct classic Reformed theology on this point.<sup>19</sup>

More recently, Reformed theologian John Frame has also offered a book-length criticism of the openness view.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, Frame pinpoints libertarian freedom as the “central issue” in the debate, even describing it as the “engine” that drives open theism. In fact, the very foundation in Frame’s critique of the open view is his contention that libertarian freedom is “an incoherent, unbiblical speculation that denies divine sovereignty and destroys what it purports to establish, namely, human responsibility before

---

swing the door wide open to universalism (p. 259). Of course, the authors fail to look at this particular issue in a more complex fashion (that is, whether God would be willing to override every human being’s freedom in order to guarantee salvation). Yet Geisler and House pull no punches when they liken the openness view to “liberal theology,” “finite godism”—even to the point of calling it a “mutant form of theism” that lies beyond the boundary of evangelicalism and challenges Christian belief “at its root” (pp. 10, 13, 18, 260–63). One might note that the authors cite rather selectively from works by the openness writers and that their attention to context is questionable. Indeed, in a couple of instances Geisler and House run dangerously close to attributing to the openness theologians positions that they clearly do not hold—such as the charge that openness necessarily reduces to polytheism. Here the authors stand alone in such an accusation, even among the open view’s detractors (see pp. 264–65).

<sup>18</sup> See Robert E. Picirilli, “An Arminian Response to John Sanders’s *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*,” *JETS* 44 (2001) 491. Cf. also his “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” *JETS* 43 (2000) 259–71, esp. 260–61. For Picirilli, “there is no real (or logical) conflict between ‘certainty’ and true ‘contingency.’” In other words, certainty need not equate to necessity; rather, it can allow for contingency. Picirilli may or may not be aware that this position has been argued before. Indeed, the certainty-necessity question was a hot topic in the debates over the mantle of Jonathan Edwards in the tradition of the New England Theology. See Jason A. Nicholls, “‘Certainty’ with ‘Power to the Contrary’: Nathaniel William Taylor (1786–1858) on the Will” (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> See Picirilli, “Response” 479, 491. The chief problem with Picirilli’s critique is that it fails to explicitly recognize the difference between his atemporal, or timeless, view of God as opposed to the openness view’s temporal God (see his “Response to Sanders,” esp. 473, 479). Picirilli is chiefly concerned with defeating what he perceives as the logical force driving the openness proposal—that the prior certainty of God’s foreknowledge renders these events less than free. He believes that if he can demonstrate how certainty could be compatible with freedom, then the open view of God would become needless.

<sup>20</sup> See John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* 19. It might be noted that Frame, from the outset of his book, has difficulty describing the open view without recourse to an immediate critique. Indeed, his actual exposition of the central tenets of openness theology takes up little more than a page (see pp. 23–24). Readers might also find distracting Frame’s repeated warnings that we be “careful” lest we be “carried away” by the persuasive rhetoric of the open theists. Yet, ironically, he chides that the expositions from open theists sound more like “motivational talks” or “political speeches” than serious theology. As Frame would have us believe, the appeal of open theism is based more on such “rhetoric” than on any real substance. I would not concede Frame’s point here, though I do agree that it is unhelpful to promote such theological rhetoric (see *No Other God* 15–24, and esp. 15, 18, 19, 21).

God.” To him, it is a “kind of bondage to unpredictable chance.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to this, Frame also charges that the open view leaves the future “completely open,” even to the point of risking “the possibility of Satan’s victory.”<sup>22</sup> Although he levels no direct accusation regarding the compatibility of openness with inerrancy, he does find it “a happy inconsistency” for open theists to believe in an authoritative, inspired Bible.<sup>23</sup> In the end, Frame charges that open theism, because it is based upon a libertarian view of freedom, destroys moral responsibility and undermines any orthodox doctrine of original sin—not to mention a legal view of the atonement and the doctrine of assurance.<sup>24</sup> He ultimately concludes that open theists, in order to make their theology consistent with libertarian freedom, have essentially denied God’s sovereign lordship over creation.<sup>25</sup>

A couple of the more formidable Calvinist opponents of open theism focus even more sharply on the inability of the openness God to realize his ultimate purposes. To John Feinberg, open theists posit a “gambler God” who restricts the use of his power “to cater to the whims of our freedom.”<sup>26</sup> Since God has “little, if any” knowledge of what people will do in the more distant future, like us, he too must “wait to see what happens.” Hence, this God

<sup>21</sup> See Frame, *No Other God* 119, 212, 20. My thoughts on the nature of libertarian freedom in an open system are contained in the subsection below. However, here I would respond briefly by countering that libertarian freedom—while certainly an important conviction in open theism—is far from constituting *the* key tenet. In fact, open theists like Gregory Boyd have emphasized that it is his reading of Scripture regarding the nature of God and the future rather any anthropological considerations that drives his thinking (see Boyd, *God of the Possible* 11–18, 22–24, 147–48). Moreover, I might also add that libertarian freedom is a conviction widely held in many diverse theological traditions. In this sense Frame’s work is as much an attack on Arminianism in general as it is on open theism in particular. Furthermore, Frame shows that he fundamentally misunderstands the heart of openness theology when he portrays it as a system in which libertarian freedom functions as a kind of litmus test for all other doctrines (see Frame, *No Other God* 119). Finally, it should be pointed out that Frame offers only a straw man version of libertarian freedom, one in which a human agent is said to be able to choose with “equal ease between alternatives.” I doubt many defenders of a libertarian view of freedom would describe it in this way—and certainly no open theist would. Here Frame has built upon the work of R. K. McGregor Wright, an earlier critic of the openness view (see Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism* 43–44). For some of my thoughts on both the nature and extent of libertarian freedom, see the subsection below, 2. *Human Freedom*.

<sup>22</sup> Frame, *No Other God* 18. I find this a troubling (not to mention unwarranted) accusation in light of the fact that open theists have consistently stressed God’s final and ultimate victory over evil (see e.g. Boyd, *God of the Possible* 147–56; Sanders, *God Who Risks* 124–29, 228–36, 267–68; Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God* 7).

<sup>23</sup> Frame, *No Other God* 206. This is a position shared by Steven J. Wellum, as I discuss below. Frame seems to think that because open theists almost never formulate doctrines of biblical authority, let alone inerrancy, it is somehow fair to infer that they must have a problem with the doctrine of inerrancy (p. 207). Of course, at best this would be an argument from silence.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 206–8. He also infers that there is a natural gravitation in the openness view toward annihilationism—the consequence of an over-emphasis on love as God’s primary attribute.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in Frame’s mind, free will “leaves us in despair,” and the only gospel of grace is “a gospel of divine sovereignty” (see *No Other God* 212).

<sup>26</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 800–801. Feinberg is much more charitable toward the openness view in terms of its philosophical merits, even while still questioning its legitimacy on biblical and theological grounds (see pp. 759, 761, 770).

may have to “scrap” some of his plans and work toward his goals in ways other than originally intended.<sup>27</sup> Bruce Ware, perhaps one of the most outspoken and prolific critics of the open view, likewise questions whether such a potentially incapable God would be worthy of our trust or confidence.<sup>28</sup> For if the openness advocates are correct, then this “god” can be mistaken and even regret some of the things he has done. Furthermore, Ware continues, because their “risking” God remains ignorant about the future, this necessarily affects his plans, his counsel, and his predictive ability. In sum, insofar as the openness “god” lacks certainty about the future, his providential control of history is necessarily compromised—for, as Ware sees it, “the higher the risk, the lower the control.”<sup>29</sup> The open view, then, posits a future that is so “risk-filled” that it renders God incapable of triumphing, and this, of course, conflicts “fundamentally” with biblical teaching.<sup>30</sup>

Steven Wellum’s recent article also zeroes in on the openness/inerrancy compatibility question. Like several of the other critics, Wellum estimates that it is impossible for the openness God to guarantee the fulfillment of any of his predictions—given his relative ignorance of the future coupled with the constraints imposed upon him by libertarian freedom.<sup>31</sup> Yet Wel-

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 648–49. Suffice it to say that Feinberg finds presentism’s handling of predictive prophecy “inadequate” (p. 770). Yet Feinberg is to be credited for recognizing that God may be able to guarantee the accomplishment of some of his plans, though this will mean “that on at least some occasions libertarian free will must be overridden.” Otherwise, there could be no guarantee that God’s ends are achieved (p. 682). The fundamental problem in Feinberg’s critique, though, is that he forgets an important concession that open theists seem willing to make—that God may periodically overwhelm libertarian freedom (see pp. 682; cf. 763, 767–68, and esp. 772–74).

<sup>28</sup> Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory* 9–10.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 18–20, 153. Ware reasons to this conclusion based upon his belief that “God’s claim to deity and the expression of his glory correspond to the extent to which he rules unthwarted over heaven and earth.” Ware reveals that his viewpoint here is largely informed by his interpretation of Isaiah 40–48. However, if his claim is true, then every Arminian would seem to be worshipping a diminished God, since even a traditional Arminian would say that God’s will is often thwarted (though his foreknowledge of these instances still be exhaustive). Moreover, I am convinced that the Isaian material cited by Ware is best seen as making a case for God’s omnipotence rather than exhaustive omniscience. Isa 44:24–26 explains how it is only the omnipotent Lord “who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers.” Ware might rebut with 46:10, where God claims that he “makes known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.” However, 46:11 explains to us precisely *how* God is able to accomplish this miraculous feat: “What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.” Therefore, it is not as though God has somehow peered into a fixed and unalterable future; rather, God is powerful enough to accomplish what he predicts that he will do. For further treatment of this and other passages adduced by Ware, see Jason A. Nicholls, “Omniscience in the Divine Openness: A Critical Analysis of Present Knowledge in God” (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997) 76–88. Additionally, it should be noted that Gregory Boyd levels a similar argument in his recent “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *JETS* 45 (2002) 239–40; cf. also Boyd’s *God of the Possible* 29–30.

<sup>30</sup> Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory* 143, 147. In Ware’s estimation the openness view renders God “deficient” in view of his limits—“limited knowledge, limited power, limited control, limited sovereignty, and hence, limited glory.” Hence, it is “without foundation,” then, that the openness proponents declare confidence in God’s glory (see pp. 19, 146, 157).

<sup>31</sup> As Wellum puts it, a high view of Scripture requires that “unless God is able to foresee and know everything that will happen, then he cannot *guarantee* that predictive passages of Scrip-

lum adds an additional line of attack relative to the doctrine of inspiration specifically. In short, he asks how one can have assurance that the original authors of the Bible, if they possessed libertarian freedom, actually composed an error-free text. In the past this line of critique has been leveled in the general direction of Arminians everywhere, but Wellum insists that this problem becomes “insurmountable” for the proponents of open theism exclusively.<sup>32</sup> For while classical Arminians are able to appeal to divine foreknowledge (be it either simple or middle) as a guarantee that the biblical authors would “get it right,” open theists lack this luxury.

Wellum’s rather unique challenge is worth considering.<sup>33</sup> And although my response to the general assumption fueling this basic line of critique unfolds more fully in the next section, a preliminary reply to Wellum may be in order here. A couple of points deserve note. First, it should be clear to readers that Wellum’s argument is constructed upon his persuasion that evangelicals need an airtight logical guarantee to affirm that the Bible was inerrantly inspired. In short, Wellum seems to be suggesting that the doctrine of inerrancy can only hold up if one can prove that it is logically impossible for the biblical authors to err. In other words, if any logical possibility for the occurrence of an error had ever existed, then Wellum is convinced that this would threaten to undermine our doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the astute observer will also recognize that this argument is essentially nothing more than a critique against the basic concept of libertarian freedom, and here I would concur with Norman Geisler’s insightful rebuttal. Geisler reminds us that libertarianism simply renders error possible, not necessary. And in view of the Wellum argument, I would strongly underscore that simply because it might have been theoretically possible for a biblical writer to err as he wrote under the Spirit’s inspiration does not mean that he necessarily had to err—or that any writer in fact did. Second, and getting more to the heart of the issue, I might point out that although a determinist like Wellum would require lock-sure, impeccable logical guarantees for his doctrine of inerrancy, many others of us are willing to accept

---

ture will be an *infallible* and *inerrant* revelation of his will.” See Steven J. Wellum, “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience, Inerrancy, and Open Theism: An Evaluation,” *JETS* 45 (2002) 274.

<sup>32</sup> Wellum, “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience” 269, 276.

<sup>33</sup> At the same time, though, I must confess that I really do not regard this issue as a big problem. All members of the ETS do, in fact, agree annually that we have an inerrant Bible. In my mind, and as far as continued fellowship in this society is concerned, this should be the decisive issue. Perhaps, then, it would be wise to be particularly cautious before judging the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of a view in light of what its critics perceive as its implications.

<sup>34</sup> Clearly I am taking issue with Wellum’s assertion that this kind of a guarantee “underpins” the doctrine of inerrancy (“Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience” 270). Indeed, for Wellum it seems that only a theory of middle knowledge can work. Yet after making this concession, it is not surprising that Wellum then deems Molinism unsatisfactory for a libertarian since it fails “to deliver what it promises”—for given libertarianism, he asks how there can be any certain knowledge of what people *would* do in every possible circumstance. Hence, it seems that in the end only determinism can work—at least this is what Wellum would have us believe (see “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience” 269 n. 48).

the truthfulness of Scripture based on its own self-attestation. Paul affirms that all of Scripture has a divine origin, and it is for this reason that it deserves our trust and confidence (2 Tim 3:16–17).<sup>35</sup> Evangelicals must be able to accept this truth with or without the perceived benefit of airtight “proof” from syllogistic formulas. The driving issue, then, is not that open theism necessarily undermines the doctrine of inspiration. Rather, it is that a determinist like Wellum feels that his confidence in an inerrant Bible—that is, a one hundred percent, lock-sure, philosophical kind of confidence that logically precludes absolutely any chance of error—would be jeopardized in an open view.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, here it might help to highlight Wellum’s own concession. For at the end of the day, he himself realizes he must concede that an open view does not *necessarily* undermine the doctrine of inerrancy—that is, he acknowledges that it is indeed logically possible for an open theist to affirm inerrancy. But in view of Wellum’s noted desire for guarantees, it seems odd that he ends up judging open theism unevangelical and even “unbiblical” because, as he puts it, its compatibility with inerrancy “seems” to him “highly improbable.”<sup>37</sup> Would not Wellum want indisputable guaranteed proof showing that open theism logically undermines the doctrine of inerrancy before declaring it unbiblical? For the sake of both prudence and consistency, this burden of proof should be required both ways.<sup>38</sup> My last line of response to Wellum applies equally to the other aforementioned critiques, and so we leave it for the next section.

<sup>35</sup> What I mean here is that based on what we believe the Holy Spirit to have said through Paul in 2 Tim 3:16, God “breathed” Scripture. My commitment to the veracity of the entire biblical canon is rooted in this verse, even while a significant part of this commitment grows out of faith and is confirmed by the witness of the Spirit. Moreover, at the end of the day, if we were completely forthright regarding our basis for affirming Scripture’s absolute inerrancy, I suspect that a number of evangelical thinkers would also testify to placing at least one leg in the realm of faith—to the degree that they rely on Scripture’s own self-attestation for its truthfulness. At least it appears that scholars like Wellum are not too far from this position (see his “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience” 268). Cf. also R. C. Sproul’s helpful essay on topic, “The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit,” in *Inerrancy* (ed. Norman Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 337–54.

<sup>36</sup> Granted, I would have to concede that the kind of human freedom affirmed by libertarianism implies an element of risk. As I demonstrate below, however, this can be minimized or even eliminated without capitulating to a completely closed, determinist worldview. But if even this level of risk is too much (and it would seem that *any* risk is too much for some determinists), I would remind my Calvinist brothers that they may continue to freely choose *not* to embrace libertarianism.

<sup>37</sup> Wellum, “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience” 268, 270, 272, 276, and 277.

<sup>38</sup> Hence, it is for this reason that I find it especially surprising (and all the more disappointing) that Wellum goes along with other critics and puts open theism “outside the limits of evangelical theology” (ibid. 277). For if the openness view does not necessarily contradict inerrancy, then I am puzzled as to why he would denounce it in this way. Is it because the openness view carries implications that he himself believes are potentially dangerous? The same can be said for a number of viewpoints represented in the ETS, yet strangely it is only the openness view that has received such exclusionary treatment. For instance, like many other Arminian-minded thinkers, I continue to be wary of Calvinism’s implications for evangelistic and missionary effort, not to mention petitionary prayer. But simply because I cannot appreciate or be convinced by the Calvinist rationale for these endeavors does not mean that I am ready to break fellowship with these brothers and sisters. On the contrary, I work hard to understand their positions and have even cultivated an appreciation for their logic—even if I continue to find it less than convincing.

While I would take issue with each of the preceding analyses at various points, I am nevertheless convinced that all of these critiques are helpful insofar as they shed light on an important dimension in openness theology—the relationship between human freedom and God’s ability to realize his providential purposes. Indeed, it does not take long to recognize that the critics of open theism generally follow a consistent (though I would argue disappointing) pattern. They incorrectly assume that the openness God can have no knowledge of the future at all; hence, by logical implication, they in turn denounce what they perceive as its detrimental impact on God’s ability to realize his providential purposes. For if God does not know the outcome of the future, the argument goes, and if he cannot at any time override our freedom lest its integrity be destroyed, then how can he guarantee the outcome of any of his plans or hope to guide the course of human history? And to put this specifically to the inerrancy question, how is the Bible itself—insofar as it makes predictions that might be thwarted by human decisions—not also at risk of being proved wrong? This is not to mention, moreover, the related issue raised by Wellum regarding the initial composition of inerrant Scripture—written by agents endowed with libertarian freedom. In the minds of some critics, these questions are too difficult to answer satisfactorily; hence, they are convinced that this necessarily renders an openness position incompatible with the doctrine of inerrancy. Before offering a rebuttal below, I want to again emphasize that this common line of critique helpfully illuminates what appears to be the central concern that many have with the open view. For while Calvinists and Arminians may indeed differ on the extent of God’s providential purposes—whether they are specific or general—both agree that the Bible presents a God who realizes at least *some* purposes. But the question stands as to whether a proponent of the openness view can affirm this—that is, can the God of open theism accomplish even his ultimate purposes—and can open theism, therefore, continue to be upheld as a position compatible with inerrancy and, thus, remain a viable evangelical alternative? I am convinced that it *can*.

### III. THE ARGUMENT: CORRECTING A MISCONCEPTION

I believe that this pattern of critique is based on a fundamental misconception about the open view—namely, the assumption that the only way for God to control the future is either by foreseeing it or decreeing it. In other words, simply because God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of all future contingencies—either through the classical notion of foreknowledge or through God’s sheer awareness of what he foreordains—this does not render him incapable of controlling the future’s outcome. As my argument unfolds, it naturally breaks into two sections. The first deals with God’s providential control. In the second section I consider a crucial implication for human freedom. In short, many scholars construct their critiques on the foundation of an unwarranted assumption. They suppose that the open view utterly disallows libertarian freedom to be compromised or infringed upon in any way. Hence, they are ready to conclude that, insofar as free human

choices run contrary to divine wishes, God's purposes may be unavoidably thwarted. I begin, then, by first examining the open view's conception of God's providence as it relates to his control.

1. *God's providential control.* Must God necessarily decree every aspect of the future in order to control it? It might be helpful for us to remember that even those loosely associated with the Arminian theological tradition have consistently objected to both the philosophical merits of this idea as well as to the way in which the biblical material has been used to support it. On the contrary, it is almost customary for Arminians to argue that God simply decides on his course of action in view of his exhaustive foreknowledge. I might note that openness scholars have seriously questioned whether this simple foreknowledge really offers God any more providential control, but to debate this point exceeds our immediate purpose.<sup>39</sup>

The case I am interested in making here regards God's ability to control the final outcome of a partly unforeseen future by means of specific, periodic, unilateral intervention—something that might be called his *select determinism*. That God possesses the ability to intervene in our world, as well as the reality that he has actually done so on various occasions as recorded throughout Scripture, I trust are points that need not be argued here. The more pressing question to address regards the frequency of such interventions. In short, how often must God intervene in order to realize his purposes?

The answer to this question is directly shaped by one's view of divine providence. Quite simply, how extensive are God's purposes? For if one were to believe that God's providence is meticulous in that it extends to all actual events, then God must always be at work in every aspect of every event that ever occurs in our world. A recent proponent dubs this "specific sovereignty," meaning that God devises plans for all things inasmuch as he foreordains and controls everything that ever happens.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, if we were to believe that God, in creating our world, decided to endow his creatures with libertarian freedom, this would mean that their particular actions could not be controlled.<sup>41</sup> Adherents of both models of providence would agree that to the extent that God gives us libertarian freedom, he cannot control its outcome.<sup>42</sup> As just noted, however, they disagree on the *extent* of God's providence—whether it is general or specific. And while Calvinists and Arminians will continue to debate this issue, what is crucial for us to note here is

<sup>39</sup> David Basinger has argued this point at length. See his "Divine Knowledge and Divine Control: A Response to Gordon and Sadowsky," *RelS* 26 (1990) 267–75; and "Simple Foreknowledge and Providential Control: A Reply to Hunt," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993) 421–27; cf. also John Sanders, "The Uselessness of Simple Foreknowledge for Providence," in *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 200–206.

<sup>40</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 645. Feinberg buttresses his view with Eph 1:11 as its chief support, making his case for a model he terms "compatibilistic specific sovereignty" (see *No One Like Him* 682).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 643–44.

<sup>42</sup> See David and Randall Basinger, "Introduction," in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Free Will* (ed. Basinger and Basinger; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 13. Cf. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 644.

that the open view, like traditional Arminianism, advocates only a general view of providence, or general sovereignty. Granted, the more specific we see God's purposes in our world, the more frequently he would need to intervene to keep all of them on track. But in the openness view, as John Sanders explains, God works toward "general purposes in connection with the achievement of the divine project." In this model, God realizes his purposes in "general structures" or in "an overall framework" that allows for significant input from human beings.<sup>43</sup> While certainly free, then, to "micromanage some things," God essentially "macromanages" the overall "creation project."<sup>44</sup> In fact, Sanders points to the exodus and the incarnation as two major biblical events that are distinguishable examples of God's "micromanaging," if you will. The vast majority of the time, however, Sanders believes that God's "normal way of operating" is to allow his creatures significant freedom.<sup>45</sup> Hence, when compared to a model of specific sovereignty, the number of times God would need to intervene in an openness model is much less—since the frequency of his intervention would be determined by the number of events that must occur in order to bring about his long-range, more general purposes. And, again, the openness proponent would underscore that the fulfillment of God's ultimate, nonnegotiable plan actually constitutes only a relatively small portion of all of the events that ever transpire in our world.

Perhaps a practical example will help to clarify. For instance, to the best of my knowledge, it is extremely unlikely that where I choose to eat breakfast on a given morning will bear any impact upon the fulfillment of God's ultimate plan. Recall that, from an Arminian perspective, a very large part of God's general purpose is simply to see that his saints carry forth the gospel message into a world which he will one day judge (e.g. Matt 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). Granted, it is certainly possible that I could have a conversation with my breakfast waitress that tended toward spiritual matters. In fact, it is within the realm of possibility that our conversation may prove highly instrumental in her coming to faith one day. But we must recall that, in the general model of providence that the openness view advocates, it is highly unlikely that this waitress's decision about the gospel would play an intricate, necessary role in God's ultimate unthwartable plan. So far as I know, God has made no specific predictions in his Word regarding such a waitress—or, for that matter, anyone else I have met thus far in my lifetime.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 213–14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 213. Though tempting, I will not take the time here to expound upon the benefits of the "macromanagement" perspective—especially in regard to the authenticity of divine responses and the theodicy question.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 213–14. As Sanders puts it, God establishes the "rules" under which the divine plan operates—and in this way he remains in control. As the leader and governor of this system, God is competent and endlessly resourceful as he works toward the fulfillment of his overall project. He makes some decisions by himself, but also includes the decisions of others and so, in this sense, works *ad hoc* (cf. pp. 215–17).

<sup>46</sup> Make no mistake, I am not saying that God's ongoing general *purpose* does not include the salvation of individual people—it most certainly does. Rather, I am simply saying that Scripture does not speak of any specific person I have ever known as being an indispensable part of God's ultimate, unthwartable plan.

In addition to their notion of a more general and overarching providential plan, open theists also affirm that God's specific plans may change. While some may find it disturbing to think that each one of us may not necessarily be a part of God's ultimate, unthwartable plan, many others of us are not disturbed. I, for one, find it very reassuring to know that my life can always be a part of God's ever-changing, ongoing plans which the Apostle tells us will ultimately work together for good (Rom 8:28). In fact, practically speaking, in light of the reality that my sins often carry ruinous consequences, I am actually quite encouraged to know that God is continually willing to renovate and even reformulate many of the specific plans that he has for my life. Hence, rather than be shaken by the thought that God often changes or readjusts his plans, we should renew our confidence and hope—knowing that depraved people can continue to serve in his purposes no matter how devastating their sins.

But let us not leave this latter point without a biblical example. An excellent illustration of a failed plan re-conceived can be found in the biblical account of Noah and the flood. The early chapters of Genesis reveal God's original hope to see his creatures living in worshipful obedience. Much to his disappointment, however, instead he saw "how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" (Gen 6:5). In response to this undesirable development (and with great patience, one might add), God eventually decided to scrap the initial plan, but not his original and primary purpose—to create a race of beings that would willingly choose to glorify him. And so he "started over," so to speak, with what the text describes as the only righteous man left—Noah. Not surprisingly, God gave him the same command that he had originally given to the first couple ("be fruitful and increase in number"), establishing a new covenant with him (Gen 9:7–9). Granted, the resilient Calvinist could counter that God had planned from eternity to accomplish this objective in precisely the way we now see it recorded in Scripture. And how can this be refuted? For one could always insist that, rather than the original setup with Adam and Eve, God had intended all along to start a new race through Noah. But does not a straightforward, fair reading of this passage reveal at least a hint of divine disappointment (Gen 6:7, "for I am grieved")? And could not an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise God have found a more efficient and less grievous means of instituting the human race? Why not simply skip Adam and Eve and begin with someone more righteous like Noah? Certainly I am not suggesting that there is something wrong with the way God's plan has actually unfolded—so long as we can agree that the many sinful events recorded in the first six chapter of Genesis were not a part of some original divine script. Indeed, it seems clear that *something* had been thwarted.

2. *Human freedom.* I imagine that the group who might have the biggest problem with what I am advancing in regard to incidents of select determinism would be the Arminians. And given what I am proposing here, my case would be incomplete without acknowledging an extremely crucial implication for human freedom. For if we are allowing that God unilaterally

intervenes in our world in such a way as to guarantee the fulfillment of his plan, then this must mean that there are times when God overrules obstinate free wills. A very weighty question, then, faces us: How is one to understand libertarian human freedom if it is a power that can, without warning, be overwhelmed, overridden or even revoked by an omnipotent God?

In short, I believe that the key lies in how one conceives of human freedom as an integral component of God's moral system. The open view, like Arminianism in general, is no doubt built upon an understanding of God as some kind of a moral governor. Theologians have historically been preoccupied with elucidating and justifying God's dealings with humanity, and some have favored the idea that God is the administrator of a moral government system. As a matter of fact, in America's late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the term "moral government" was used to refer to God's rightful authority over human beings with the purpose of securing their right moral action as revealed through the medium of his written Word.<sup>47</sup> As all of us know, however, humanity utterly failed, making it necessary for God to provide some kind of an atonement. Still, this does not negate the fact that, at least from a generally Arminian perspective, God continues to deal with people as a moral governor. This means that he gives us commands that he expects we *can* obey.<sup>48</sup> Arminian-minded thinkers generally agree that humans must possess, then, at least some degree of an ability to obey, an ability to make real choices in view of genuine alternatives. Translated theologically, one could say that though we are thoroughly depraved, no one *has to* sin, or *must* sin—sinning is not an inevitability inasmuch as everyone retains power *not* to sin. Otherwise, proponents of this perspective have argued, it would be immoral for God to expect our obedience.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> My summary of what is known as the moral government theory is based on the works of an early nineteenth-century New England theologian, minister, and Yale professor by the name of Nathaniel William Taylor (1786–1858). For Taylor's complete system, see his *Lectures on the Moral Government of God* (2 vols.; ed. Noah Porter; New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1859; reissued, New York and London: Garland, 1987). For Taylor's more brief and abstract definition of a moral government system, see 1.7.

<sup>48</sup> See esp. Deut 30:11–14: "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. . . . No, the word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." See also vv. 19–20, where Moses clearly sets before the people a choice between "life and death, blessings and curses."

<sup>49</sup> Moral government theory, though a popular concept among many New England theologians including Jonathan Edwards, did not originate on American shores. This theme is perhaps nowhere more strongly evident than in the theology of Nathaniel Taylor, who was himself indebted to Bishop Joseph Butler's argument for the benevolence of God's moral government. Taylor matured Butler's theory into a more exact system by carrying his fundamental principles to their commonsensical conclusions. See the Introduction by Noah Porter to Taylor's *Lectures on the Moral Government of God*, 1.v. Cf. also William Sutton, "Benevolent Calvinism and the Moral Government of God: The Influence of Nathaniel W. Taylor on Revivalism in the Second Great Awakening," *Religion and American Culture* 2 (Winter 1992) 23–47, esp. 26–27. Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752) studied both law and divinity at Oxford, was ordained in 1718, and eventually served as Bishop of both Bristol and Durham. His most significant work, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), appeared at the height of the Deist controversy and forwarded an empirical argument in favor of religion that was built upon a moral government theory. A modern edition of *The Analogy* is available with an introduction by Ernest C. Mossner, *The Analogy of Religion*

In this way, then, freedom with a power to choose otherwise is a principle that is essential to the view that God is administering a moral system—at least as it would generally be conceived by openness advocates and Arminians. But if, as an open theist might allow, God can intervene and override this freedom, would not such a system be compromised and therefore risk being entirely nullified?

I am convinced not only that such interventions *need not* nullify, but that the biblical material proves that they *have not* nullified, his moral system. The key lies in understanding the *usual* or *normal* way in which God interacts with his creatures. Yes, God can and has overwhelmed human freedom, but I would argue that the recorded instances of this actually occurring are relatively infrequent and almost always temporary.<sup>50</sup> Again, I appeal to the Scriptures. Perhaps the toughest case study continues to be the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.<sup>51</sup> In various places the text alternately indicates that both God and Pharaoh were responsible for the hardening. Yet the reader is also given a strong sense that Pharaoh was following a course of action that was, as someone like John Feinberg might put it, in accordance with his desires. Some might want to call this compatibilistic freedom; I am comfortable with labeling it just plain determinism. The point is that Pharaoh's ability to choose otherwise must have been temporarily suspended—for how else could God speak to Moses in absolutes and with any guarantee? The point is unavoidable: God would indeed see to it that the particulars of this plan were accomplished, and he would do so by taking advantage of the time-proven status of Pharaoh's heart. Hence, he could reveal to Moses ahead of time that Pharaoh's course of action would now be lock-sure. That is, God would "guarantee" that Pharaoh acted in accordance with the general bent of his already-hard heart. In fact, though conclusive proof on this point may be elusive (I continue to study this issue), one could speculate that when God does unilaterally intervene and determine in instances like these, perhaps he does so only subsequent to the time-proven status of people's hearts.<sup>52</sup> In

---

(New York: Frederick Unger, 1961). For further background see Mossner's *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason* (New York: Macmillan, 1936); cf. also Robert E. D. Clark's article, "Butler, Joseph (1692–1752)," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (gen. ed. J. D. Douglas; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, 1978) 170.

<sup>50</sup> Sanders certainly allows that God can intervene in our world, and he believes that the integrity of God's "creation project" would be overturned only if God were to do so "habitually" (see Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 258–63).

<sup>51</sup> Of course, I am not overlooking Christ's prediction of Judas's betrayal, which might constitute an arguable "second" (see Matt 17:22; 20:18; 26:21–25; cf. Mark 9:31; 10:33; 14:17–21; Luke 9:44; 22:21–22). However, in this instance Jesus had the benefit of witnessing Judas's outward behavior over approximately a three-year ministry period. There are also scriptural instances of Jesus reading hearts and knowing the disciples' thoughts. Thus, when an opportunity arose for Judas to betray Christ to the Jewish religious leaders (perhaps through an outworking of divine providence), one could argue that Judas was simply acting consistent with what the Son of God already knew to be his time-proven character and intention.

<sup>52</sup> I will not attempt to resolve the particular questions of moral responsibility in instances such as the Pharaoh account. Suffice it to say that he was justifiably held responsible for his stub-

other words, and again I speak only for myself, I do not see the testimony of Scripture as a whole presenting to us a God who forces or compels people to act contrary to their chosen pattern and basic intention.<sup>53</sup> And once again, we must recall, in view of the wider biblical narrative, those occasions where he has intervened in such a dramatic, overpowering manner are relatively *infrequent* and almost always temporary.<sup>54</sup> As a general rule, then, I would affirm that God created moral agents capable of choosing between real alternatives, and he accordingly commands our obedience.

It is not every day, I realize, that an Arminian-minded thinker welcomes into his system the potential for divine determinism. Some might be tempted to think (or fear, depending upon one's perspective) that this somehow undermines Arminianism. Yet I have tried to make it clear that the decisive issue is whether one sees these instances of determinism as God's standard *modus operandi*—which I clearly do not. Still, lest it be thought that I stand alone in this rather significant concession regarding libertarian freedom, I appeal to Thomas Reid—a thinker whom most historians mark as the centerpiece in the Scottish philosophical tradition. Reid (1710–96) was professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, and he delivered what

---

bornness—a state of character that quite likely existed long before God guaranteed a particular outcome, witnessed by the various pharaohs' continued enslavement and harsh treatment of the Israelite people (see Exod 1:8, 22; 2:15; 2:23; 3:9–10). Cf. Richard Rice, "Biblical Support," in *The Openness of God* 51.

<sup>53</sup> Please note that I am not saying that God *could* not do this—rather, I believe that he *does* not. Open theists and Arminians alike would refer to this as the concept of "self-limited" sovereignty. Perhaps Paul's "potter and clay" analogy in Romans 9 provides the best glimpse into the concept of self-limited sovereignty—revealed especially in Pauline statements such as "Does not the potter have the right to make . . . ?" (Rom 9:21), and, "what if God, choosing to . . . ?" (9:22). In these instances, the heart of Paul's argument is not that God has actually done so, but that in retaining ultimate, unthwartable power, he could have.

<sup>54</sup> In fact, occasions which might come closest to divine coercion—*viz.* causing people to act contrary to their wills—would be the historical accounts of Jonah (Jonah 1:1–2; 1:17–2:10) and Paul (Acts 9:3–19). Neither man originally intended to do what God, in a manner of speaking, essentially guaranteed would be done—that Jonah would preach repentance to the Ninevites, and that Paul would preach the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles. Of course, Bruce Ware disagrees that the openness God's interventions would be infrequent. He writes, "One would have to invoke God's ad hoc intervention in literally multiple thousands of details, and God would have to constrain free choosing to the point of eliminating it in as many cases." This, Ware concludes, would disrupt the normal flow of life and make a "mockery" of libertarian freedom (see Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 140–41; cf. 152). Here, however, I believe that Ware might exaggerate his case—basing his analysis on his own understanding of providence as specific or meticulous rather than general. Moreover, if God is truly sovereign, then it must always remain within his prerogative to periodically withhold or override our libertarian freedom. Indeed, it may even be true that in some selected instances that human decision-making does look something like what Ware and other Calvinists would call "compatibilistic"—though, of course, as an Arminian-minded thinker I would be hesitant to call this "freedom" in any genuine sense. And I would also strongly stress that this is not God's normal method of operation. On this specific issue see Clark Pinnock, who lists what he sees as several constraints on God's intervention in our world in light of our freedom's integrity and the complexity of the cosmos. See Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 148.

some would envision a classic defense of libertarian freedom.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it is no secret that his “Common Sense” principles provided extensive philosophical footing for American political thinkers, biblical scholars, theologians, and even religious practitioners.<sup>56</sup> Reid clearly taught that humans have power over the determinations of their wills—which is more than having mere power to choose what we want. For him, liberty was “the power of the agent to do well or ill,” “to determine this way or that.”<sup>57</sup> Yet even Reid understood that a person’s self-determination has limitations. Freedom may not necessarily extend to all of our actions, or even to all of our voluntary choices. Many things people do by “instinct,” and others by “habit,” without any thought or will at all. In general, however, Reid insisted that liberty “extends to every action” for which we are *accountable*.<sup>58</sup> Reid also recognized that the truth that human freedom is a gift from God, and that this fact carries some important implications. For one, the gift of freedom may be abused—as witnessed by the massive failure of the human race. Moreover, Reid also emphasized that because our “Maker” has graciously given us this gift, at God’s pleasure “it may be enlarged or diminished, continued or withdrawn.” He went on to explain, “No power in the creature can be independent of the Creator. His hook is in its nose; he can give it line as far as he sees fit, and, when he pleases, can restrain it, or turn it whithersoever he will.” Hence, Reid conceived of liberty as something that may very well at times be “restrained by divine interposition.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> For more on Reid and his concept of free agency, see Nicholls, “‘Certainty’ with ‘Power to the Contrary’: Nathaniel William Taylor (1786–1858) on the Will” 100, 115–23. Other current works specifically on Reid include *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations* (ed. S. F. Barker and T. L. Beauchamp; Philadelphia: Philosophical Monographs 3, 1976) and *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid* (ed. Marvin Dalgarno and Eric Matthews; Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic, 1989).

<sup>56</sup> The juxtaposition of the principles of the Scottish philosophy with the rising Jacksonian-democratic ethos of early nineteenth-century America in the literary works of many conservative theologians is a familiar theme for historians of American Christianity. Indeed, some would argue that common sense principles also supplied the intellectual basis for many of the nineteenth-century developments in the technique of revivalism, especially as embodied in the figure of Charles G. Finney. A number of works are helpful for tracing its overall impact in America. For a study of this philosophy from an American literary vantage point, see Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961). For studies from a more strictly intellectual standpoint, see Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America* (2 vols.; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977) 1.203–393; and D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972) 35–60. For evaluations tending in a biblical/theological direction, see esp. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology,” *CH* 24 (1955) 257–72; Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); Mark A. Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37 (1985) 216–38; and George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) esp. 83–181.

<sup>57</sup> See Thomas Reid, *Essay on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (ed. Sir William Hamilton in *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*; Edinburgh and London: Maclachlan, Stewart, and Co., and Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1846) Essay IV, chap. I, 599–602.

<sup>58</sup> Reid, *Active Powers* 600–601.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 601.

With Reid, then, I would heartily concur that humans exercise what might be described as a *governed libertarianism*.<sup>60</sup> Our freedom often has divinely established limits. In this way God is able to keep his ultimate purposes on track through periodic instances of determinism—something I would call his *select determinism*. In those circumstances in which the results of our choices might risk thwarting a divine purpose, God intervenes. In fact, by understanding God's moral system in this manner, one is also able to make better sense of his wisdom. In other models, whether that of meticulous providence or the traditional Arminian view of simple foreknowledge, God simply follows a kind of "blueprint" that he either foresees or has long ago preordained. And so, while it might be true that God, in either of these scenarios, did at one time exercise good judgment in planning the events in our world, both would require far less wisdom than an openness model. In a world where the future is partly open, God must continually exercise his wisdom, constantly making the appropriate adjustments in order to ensure the accomplishment of integral pieces to his ultimate plan. Surely this requires more wisdom—insofar as God must refashion, retool, and re-adapt his plans in response to that libertarian freedom that he, of course, ultimately still governs.<sup>61</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The overarching intention behind this essay, then, has been to show that an openness view and inerrancy can indeed be compatible. The openness view need never, nor has it yet done so to my knowledge, deny God's providence. For inasmuch as open theists are willing to make room in their system for the possibility of periodic instances of divine intervention, none of God's unconditional predictions will be at risk. God always retains the prerogative to unilaterally intervene in our earthly affairs—yes, perhaps even to the point of controlling, overwhelming or overriding libertarian freedom on occasion. In this way, divine providence (albeit a more general view) is protected. To put it a bit crassly, one could say that the openness God, either by his wisdom or sheer dint of power, is imminently capable of "getting what he really wants." And since God's non-negotiable, future plans can be guaranteed in this way, there is no inherent conflict with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. What God promises to accomplish, he will see that it *gets* accomplished.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Gregory Boyd has also expressed that God's providential "parameters" may "condition" the scope of human freedom without outright eliminating it. In this sense, Boyd seems to agree that creaturely freedom is balanced within a God-ordained overall structure. See *God of the Possible* 43–44, 51; cf. Sanders, *Risks* 213–17.

<sup>61</sup> For a similar observation see Sanders, *Risks* 182–84; cf. also Gregory Boyd's *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's DiPolar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) 336.

<sup>62</sup> It is not insignificant, I might add, that in the Book of Isaiah God can be found appealing to this very ability as a mark that distinguishes him from any rival deities (see Isa 44:6–46:13; notice esp. 44:26; 45:21; and 46:10–11).

By the same token, though, I recognize that open theism (like Arminianism in general) is rooted in the essential conviction that God is the governor of some kind of moral system, and that he, as a *general rule*, respects the integrity of free human choices.<sup>63</sup> Yet I have argued that this simply requires that divine intervention and/or control of human choices be the *exception* rather than the norm. Of course, as noted, I am aware that a concession like this carries a significant implication for one's view of freedom. But again, by appealing to Thomas Reid, a champion of libertarianism, I have demonstrated that this allowance does not necessarily require one to utterly abandon libertarianism. Together, open theists and Arminians may continue to speak of libertarianism as the general manner in which humans choose—that is, the usual way in which finite creatures are permitted (under God's ultimate sovereignty) to execute their decisions.<sup>64</sup>

Hence, one must not think that the openness advocates, when faced with what might appear to be conflicting biblical evidence, are overlooking, ignoring, or simply rejecting scriptural teaching, thereby scrapping inerrancy.<sup>65</sup> On the contrary, I have argued that their conceptions of God, his power, and his plans have been frequently misinterpreted—and the consequence of this has been accusations of violating this critical evangelical boundary. Indeed, it seems that what the open theists themselves desire most is that their admittedly fresh conception of God continue to be tested and evaluated in view of the biblical evidence and in the broad context of the evangelical theological community. And as I understand the mission of academic organizations like the ETS, they provide the perfect environment for investigating and critiquing such ideas. For regardless of whether one is convinced of the openness view's efficacy, I trust that this essay has shown that the openness view has no problem *de facto* with inerrancy. And I sincerely hope and would expect that theologians will continue to discuss and debate the

<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Arminian-minded thinkers as a whole consider that a libertarian understanding of free will—with its ever-present power to choose the opposite, or “power to the contrary”—is the backbone for any genuine sense of moral responsibility. For example, see James Arminius in *The Works of James Arminius* (3 vols.; trans. James Nichols and William Nichols; London, 1825, 1828, 1875; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986, 1996) 2.712, 722; cf. 1.760–62. For a typically Arminian view of freedom from a more recent scholar, see Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) 50; cf. Clark Pinnock's discussion of freedom in his recent *Most Moved Mover* 126–29.

<sup>64</sup> Granted, the frequency and extent to which God may actually have to intervene in the human decision-making process in order to keep his overarching plan on track is a significant question, and one that warrants further discussion. Of course, as indicated earlier, the view of providence to which one holds (specific or general) would be a crucial factor here. And while it exceeds both our purpose and space to attempt a more extended answer here, I am persuaded that it is topics such as these that warrant further exploration in evangelical circles.

<sup>65</sup> I should note, however, that John Feinberg has critiqued openness advocates like John Sanders and Richard Rice for customarily selecting narrative passages and using them as a key for interpreting God's interactions with the world (see Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 691). Feinberg may at least be correct in that part of the difference between his and the openness model does, in fact, center on which passages one sees as normative and to which precedence is subsequently given. He directs us to Sanders's two chapters of OT and NT evidence for a relational view of providence in *The God Who Risks* 39–139.

internal consistency and feasibility of the openness system, not to mention its biblical warrant. But for such to occur—that is, to foster genuine, fruitful exchange among conservative theologians of contrasting opinions—heresy-hunting and gestures of an ETS expulsion first must cease.<sup>66</sup>

This essay makes a very basic point—perhaps one that is already quite clear to openness advocates. However, judged by the reaction to open theism in certain circles, my point is not obvious to everyone. My intention here, then, was *not* to mount a persuasive biblical case for the open view. Instead, I have simply demonstrated how accusations of a diminished God—based on the charge that he is unable to guarantee the fulfillment of his plans—are unfounded. Yet the most important contribution is my explanation for how open theism remains compatible with inerrancy. For even in the openness view, God still retains both the ability and the prerogative to intervene in human affairs in those instances when, in his perfect wisdom, he deems it absolutely necessary. This was a prerogative that God had when he initially inspired human authors to compose an inerrant text, and it is one that he has always retained throughout human history. Clearly God still has this prerogative today. In this way, I have shown how an open theist may affirm God's providence, and insofar as divine providence is preserved, there is no inherent difficulty with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Hence, in view of the above remarks, one would hope that the critics of open theism might pause to seriously reconsider their unfounded allegation that the openness view is incompatible with inerrancy. And I am also hopeful that this essay may have positive value insofar as it begins to help shift the bulk of current discussion away from debating what critics allege are the philosophical and theological implications of the openness view and toward more substantial interaction with its supporting biblical material.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> I find it particularly troublesome, for instance, when I see the open view judged heretical by Calvinists who are unable to stop thinking like Calvinists. If nothing else, I hope to have shown how it is misguided to denounce the openness view according to what its critics *allege* are its logical implications. To be fair, the openness view must be judged according to the broadly Arminian worldview that it embraces—one guided by general sovereignty and with far less particulars in a divine plan. It would be both inappropriate and unfair to hold it up against a Calvinistic worldview involving a specific view of sovereignty which rests upon a premise that every human being's destiny constitutes an indispensable part of a preordained, all-encompassing divine historical plan.

<sup>67</sup> I say this not to diminish the attempts made by several of the leading voices in the openness debate—most notably Bruce Ware, John Frame, John Sanders, and Gregory Boyd—to focus on the biblical merits of the position. Indeed, I would concur with John Frame when he reminds us that the decisive issue facing theologians everywhere is not whether openness theology is new, or even whether it is true to its evangelical heritage—the issue is whether it is biblical. Of course, I suspect that Professor Frame and I might have different answers to this question (see Frame, *No Other God* 40).