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FROM BAD TO WORSE: A PORTRAIT OF OPEN THEISM AS A THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM

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I. THE NEED FOR CLEAR VISION: CHALLENGING OPEN THEISM TO UNVEIL THE FINISHED PORTRAIT

Even the novice observer of art is aware of the distinctiveness in style and technique of impressionistic painting. Were one to examine such a canvas he would discover a myriad of small brushstrokes and diverse colors. The entire canvas would be covered from corner to corner with thousands of small blots of pigment. Yet, from the right distance, these seemingly random tints and hues cohere to create the overall impressionistic impact. While each individual brushstroke is interesting in and of itself, in order to fully grasp the entirety of the artist's image, one's eyes must see the "big picture" from an appropriate distance as well.

This simple principle can be applied to the realm of theological inquiry. The ever escalating debate over open theism¹ has spurred a number of evangelical theologians to scrupulously inspect every detailed brushstroke and pigmentation of the openness "canvas." Such undertakings have, thankfully, been rather fruitful thus far, producing a small mountain of papers, articles, and books, not to mention heated interaction and debate, regarding this controversial topic. Yet, it is important to be aware at this point that, just as an impressionistic painting is impossible to fully comprehend from close range, the open theism construct likewise cannot be fully understood by standing next to the canvas and peering through a magnifying glass.

¹ So called after the high-profile Clark Pinnock, et al, publication *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994). Alternate descriptors are being used as well, such as openness, free-will theism, relational theism, and neo-theism. For our purposes, open theism and openness will be used interchangeably.

Thus far, open theism's explication of its viewpoint has been limited to the realms of theology proper and angelology, which is comparable to one corner of the entire "portrait" of openness. Thus, academic criticism of its tenets and ramifications has, for the most part, remained similarly limited in scope. Herein lies two major difficulties: 1) the leading spokespersons for open theism have yet to offer a holistic treatment of their theology;² and 2) as a result, no broad examination by evangelical theologians of the implications of open theism in all quarters of a full systematic theology has been possible. Intellectual integrity demands that one carefully consider all aspects before issuing a verdict on a system of thought. In this case, however, the exponents of the viewpoint in question do not seem to be in any hurry, to say the least, to offer the resources needed to consider the total picture. So, beyond waiting passively until openness theologians decide to paint the rest of the portrait, if indeed that ever happens, is there anything else that can be done to sketch in the overall picture in order to have a better feel for where open theism will likely come down on the spectrum of standard theological issues?

Obviously, there is no way to force openness thinkers to immediately shift to writing in such a way as to lay all of their cards out on the table and thus solve the first difficulty stated above. To a significant degree, however, it is possible to offer a response to the second difficulty. The purpose, then, of the remainder of this article will be as follows: to present a broad look at the theological implications of a full portrait of open theism, encompassing the ten standard theological categories and likely related ramifications. This is offered with the hope that by shedding a little more light on the openness canvas, the evangelical community will be better equipped to test and critique what is to come.

II. LUCID AND DISTINCT: OPEN THEISM'S PRESENTLY DEVELOPED THOUGHT IN THEOLOGY PROPER AND ANGELOLOGY

As noted above, theological investigators of the openness portrait are, at this point, privy to but one corner of the total picture. That corner is composed of the doctrines of theology proper and angelology. Let us briefly examine how the open theism painting has developed thus far.

Undoubtedly, the landmark book for the unveiling of openness theology was *The Openness of God*, with Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders,

² The only work thus far even coming close to outlining a complete view of openness theology is the little-noticed *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century*, by Clark Pinnock and Richard Brow (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994). Although Pinnock and Brow address a broad spectrum of theological areas (specifically, the doctrines of God, sin, salvation, and faith), the quality of the book remains more informal than academic and the setup more popularly thematic than systematic.

William Hasker, and David Basinger laying the foundation for further extrapolation that would soon follow.³ As they summarize in the preface,

This book presents an understanding of God's nature and relationship with his creatures, which we call the openness of God. In broad brush strokes, it takes the following form. God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.⁴

Further books by noteworthy openness writers, such as Gregory Boyd's *God of the Possible*,⁵ John Sanders' *The God Who Risks*,⁶ and Clark Pinnock's *Most Moved Mover*,⁷ deepened their position some, though most often simply summarizing, restating and further arguing the same basic tenets.

Although such authors as Gregory Boyd vehemently deny altering the traditional understanding of God's nature,⁸ Robert E. Picirilli, in his JETS article "An Arminian Response to John Sanders' *The God Who Risks*," is correct when he states that Sanders (and other openness thinkers) possess a "risk model," that "involves a serious redefinition of the God of theism."⁹ These re-definitions Picirilli summarizes succinctly as follows:

- God is vulnerable, open to the failure of at least some of his intentions.
- God is not immutable as traditionally understood, that is, he changes his mind in ways that are more than merely relational.
- God is sometimes mistaken in his beliefs about what will happen.
- God is not omnipotent as traditionally understood; his efforts are sometimes defeated.
- The attributes of God must be redefined with his love at the center.¹⁰

There is not adequate space in this article in which to detail these "theistic modifications," so to speak, and respond to them within a Biblical,

³ This is not to say that open theism was an unknown quantity until this point, only that it had not been broadly popularized.

⁴ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 7.

⁵ Gregory A Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

⁶ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998).

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

⁸ Boyd claims that they are not challenging God's nature, but "the ontological status of the future in the present." Not only does he argue this point in his *God of the Possible*, but he also makes it quite clear in *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997). It seems to escape his logic, however, that God, as Creator, is the ultimate author of time. Therefore, any alteration to the "ontological status of the future" does directly affect how one views the nature of God himself.

⁹ JETS 44 (September 2000): 483.

¹⁰ Ibid., 483.

theological, and philosophical context. Fortunately, several theologians have issued helpful treatments in just such a manner.¹¹ The point to be made here, however, is quite simple. Open theism significantly redefines God's nature, taking it quite far from the traditional bounds of evangelical (and orthodox) theology proper. And, as we shall see, this shift in theistic boundaries will considerably affect their delineation of the subsequent areas of systematic theology. For, as Geisler and House have said, "Errors about the Person and attributes of God are serious errors. Every other teaching is connected to the doctrine of God. Errors in this foundational area affect our entire worldview."¹²

The implications of this open theology proper should be fairly obvious in the realm of angelology. The two books that have made the most significant contribution to this area of open theology are Greg Boyd's *God At War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* and, more recently, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy*.¹³ A world in which God's will can and is thwarted and where God's plans are changed according to the volition of free creatures ultimately describes a world of literal and constant spiritual warfare.

Proposing such an open world does, however, have huge theological ramifications. It virtually mutes the sense of comfort that God is, ultimately, in control, for even the minions of Satan have been given the free will to impede and even seriously harm our individual lives. Pinnock summarizes this point saying, "God is not now in complete control of the world and . . . genuine evil, which God does not want, exists."¹⁴

Boyd states, "There is a Creator God, but he must battle a formidable opponent who has of his own accord made himself evil."¹⁵ As a result, as Boyd concludes in *God of the Possible*, "The world is . . . scary. It is in a state of war, under siege by the enemy of our souls, and this is not a comforting thought. The open view grants this. Even God takes risks."¹⁶ But, given the radical free will implications of open theism in angelology, it would seem that those developing and affirming the controversial openness position are taking at least as much a calculated risk.

III. SHADOWS AND SILHOUETTES: IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND SIN

In the immediate background of the currently unveiled corner of open theism, there are faintly visible shadows and silhouettes of anthropology and

¹¹ Two notable recent contributions to this controversy are Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001) and Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

¹² Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 256.

¹³ Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001).

¹⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 36.

¹⁵ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 48.

¹⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 156.

hamartiology. It could be said that the emerging portrait of open theism, with its redefined attributes of God, has about as much to say concerning the nature of mankind as it does the nature of God. Certainly, any adjustments in the character of the Creator will entail parallel adjustments in the character of his creation. Allow us, then, to consider these alterations.

Foremost in the understanding of open theism's view of mankind are two main concepts: libertarian freedom and (free) loving relationship with God. Pinnock begins his section in *Most Moved Mover* entitled "God and the World" with the following statements:

Creating human beings who have true freedom is a self-restraining, self-humbling and self-sacrificing act on God's part. He gives us room to flourish because he wants freely chosen relationships of love with us. We are able to set purposes for ourselves and shape the future. We are capable of self-determination and responsible conduct, we can choose between loving obedience and rebellious disobedience, and can transform ourselves in the historical process . . . God sovereignly created human beings in his image in order to enter into personal relations with them.¹⁷

According to open theism, God not only created man with true freedom in order to relate lovingly with him, but he delegated tremendous power and sovereignty to his creation as well.¹⁸ As "God's partners,"¹⁹ humankind was created in order to work with God to bring the future into being. As Pinnock goes on to say, "God rules the world in such a way as to allow for creaturely input,"²⁰ and, "History is the combined result of what God and creatures do."²¹ Essentially, God shares the unfolding future with his free partners who either work with or against his perfect will for the world.

This distinctive concept of God-and-man cooperation would not be so incredibly alarming were it not for open theism's almost complete disregard for the fallen sin-nature of mankind in describing this relationship. In order to expound responsibly on the nature of man, it is necessary to differentiate between what God intended mankind to be, before the fall, and what mankind now is, after the Fall. Open theism, however, presents a very disconcerting anthropology by blurring the lines between the two. There is little apparent difference between the original state and fallen state of man in open theism, and no one in the open theism camp seems to have a problem with that perception. As Bruce Ware states discerningly, "Divine demotion

¹⁷ *Most Moved Mover*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

¹⁹ In *Most Moved Mover*, 35-45, Pinnock counts four groups as "God's partners": creation, Israel, the nations, and individuals. The individual human, however, is given the most attention and influence in the open anthropology.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

and human elevation work together in open theism. They are twins, born of the same womb, conceived in the same sin of human pride."²²

At this point it would be a drastic under-statement to say that open theism advocates are highly optimistic in their view of man's fallen nature. Noticeably absent in their writings is the biblical concept of sin as a gross affront to God's holiness, an offense that necessitates penalty.²³ Instead, sin is stripped of its inherent repulsiveness and replaced with the more comfortable and appealing idea of "broken relationship" with God.²⁴ This conclusion is reached by drawing mostly from the passages describing God as a suffering and rejected lover (Hosea, Isaiah 65:1, Matthew 23:37, and others).²⁵ Pinnock explains this concept in *Unbounded Love* as follows:

Sin is the rejection of God's love and of God's will for the world. It is a rejection of what we were created for, the rejection of a dynamic relationship with God. The judgment of God must blaze against it, but this is really the response of a rejected lover, not judicial condemnation.²⁶

From this presupposition, open theism makes the claim that sin impacts the human condition by 1) denying the relationship with God for which we were created; 2) distorting proper relationships among our neighbors (i.e., the community); and 3) refusing to be open to the coming of God's kingdom and the manifestation of his will.²⁷ These, in and of themselves, are not problematic observations concerning the nature of sin, for they are all true. The dramatic imbalance occurs in the drastic emphasis of these aspects with an almost complete rejection of the Biblical concepts of judgment, penalty, and ultimate payment for sin. With such elaboration on open theism's more

²² Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 187.

²³ One need only consider Paul's epistle to the Romans as clear teaching of this Biblical principle.

²⁴ Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 58. This is not to say that broken relationship with God is not a part of the effects of sin, for it surely is. The problem, however, is in this unbalanced view of sin as *only* broken relationship, without taking into account the holiness of God, the wrath of God towards sin, and the fierce judgments of God against mankind for their sin.

²⁵ As a classic illustration of the unbalanced hermeneutics used in their "broken relationship" hamartiology, consider Pinnock's use of Isa 65:1 in *Unbounded Love*. That verse reads, "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name." Yet, if you continue through the passage, verse 6 reads, "'See, it stands written before me: I will not keep silent, but will pay back in full; I will pay it back into their laps—both your sins and the sins of your fathers,' says the LORD. 'Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains and defiled me on the hills, I will measure into their laps the full payment for their former deeds.'" There is indeed judgment and accountability for sin to a holy God!

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60. This concept is the focus of the entire chapter of *Unbounded Love* entitled "Diagnosis: Defective Love," 57-66. The title of the chapter itself should clue the reader in to the softened approach to the sinfulness of mankind espoused therein.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

lenient conception of man and his sin-nature, it is not surprising to find that some openness critics are willing to go so far as to designate it Pelagian.²⁸

IV. IMMINENT ELUCIDATIONS: ELABORATION IN CHRISTOLOGY AND PNEUMATOLOGY

Within the openness painting there are two specific areas of systematic theology that are substantially changed by the theology proper of open theism: Christology and pneumatology. The Evangelical Theological Society Doctrinal Basis states, "God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory." Inasmuch as evangelicals hold to the doctrine of the Trinity "equal in power and glory," the doctrines of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit will be proportionately impacted by a redefinition (and reduction) of God's power and glory.²⁹

To make use of an over-used cliché, open theism is at great pains to avoid a "like father, like son" situation in their Christological system. An observer of the openness schematic would notice that open theists, particularly John Sanders, employ the incarnation of Christ as a lens through which God the Father is viewed and ultimately understood. Sanders affirms this evaluation with the statement: "Jesus Christ in his humanity is constitutive of the very nature of God, for he is the definitive self-revelation and self-communication of God to us."³⁰ The basic premise of open Christology is this: if Christ is God incarnate and the fullest revelation of God, then the attributes exhibited by Christ while on earth, as disclosed in the Gospels, are a perfect testimony as to the ultimate character of God himself. There is not sufficient space at this point to detail the many problems with this methodology,³¹ so it must suffice to say that there are significant holes in such a hermeneutical framework. More importantly for our purposes, however, is that, working from such a conclusion, one can sufficiently evaluate how open Christology will most likely unfold in three

²⁸ Royce Gordon Gruenler of Gordon-Conwell has openly labeled the open theism construct Pelagian. See "God at Risk," *Christianity Today* (March 5, 2001): 58. Pelagianism is named after a British monk, Pelagius (c. 354-415), who taught that salvation is attainable through human works and merit. This heretical doctrine was based on the erroneous preconception of man as essentially good, rather than essentially sinful.

²⁹ How the classical doctrine of Christ could be protected from the open theism model is the topic of a paper, written by co-author A. Boyd Luter and this writer, entitled, "An Impeccable Approach to Cutting off the Openness of God at the Christological Pass." Although unpublished, it was presented at the 2001 ETS Southwest regional meeting and has contributed greatly to the Christology section in this paper.

³⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 91.

³¹ In his paper, "The Jesus Who Never Knew: Free-Will Theism and the Incarnation," presented at the Southwest regional ETS meeting of 2001, Craig W. Thompson does a commendable job of pointing out the serious theological problems associated with Sanders's appeal to Jesus as "the ultimate anthropomorphism . . . and definitive source for understanding divine providence."

basic areas of Christology: the kenosis, the humanity and deity of Christ, and the atonement.³²

In the evaluation of theology proper thus far, there has been a noticeably excessive emphasis on Christ's humanity over his divinity. With this in mind, it is then highly unlikely that anything approaching the Chalcedonian wording, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation," will be maintained in regard to Christ's nature as the God-man. If, indeed, open theists intend to utilize this traditional Christological definition, the terms will surely require much reinterpretation.³³ As openness views Christ's human incarnation as paramount to God's disclosure to mankind, then the Son's coming in human form is not so much a humbling act of self-sacrifice as it is a natural step in God's plan of revelation. Sanders states, "The divine self-disclosure in Jesus puts an end to the claim that being in the form of a human is contrary to the divine nature."³⁴

As far as the understanding of Christ's humanity and deity, there will also be some considerable changes. On the one hand, the open view will most likely resemble the liberal conception of Jesus, in that he is completely human, or more specifically, the humanized face of divinity. This emphasis on Christ's humanity is further compounded by openness's high view of humanity (even sinful humanity) in general. On the other hand, however, Christ is the "divine self-disclosure" and must exhibit profound supernatural power in his effort to combat the forces of evil that threaten his creation. In this way, the open theism's tendency to accentuate the immanence of God over his transcendence will be maintained, as Christ is a full expression of God's nature, complete with self-limitation, self-sacrifice, and suffering love, as well as the divine sufficiency to battle evil forces in reaction to their onslaught.

In regards to the atoning work of Christ, the conception of Christ as the sacrificial lamb will also be greatly diminished. According to Sanders, God indeed planned for the incarnation but had not planned for Christ to die for the sins of mankind.³⁵ This is based primarily on the fact that God did not foresee that mankind would fall in sin and, therefore, could not have ordained the death of the Son from eternity past. In addition, Christ's willingness to lay down his life for humanity's salvation was wholly contingent on his free will. Sanders suggests that Jesus could have chosen against the way of the cross, thereby prompting God to produce a "Plan B"

³² These areas assuredly do not cover the breadth of Christology. Rather, they are the most obvious points of impact in the openness system, and thus most helpful for a brief inquiry such as this.

³³ The probability of openness redefining the Chalcedonian wording is further supported by the notorious charge open theists make in regard to the supposed "Hellenistic influence" exerted on the works of the later Church Fathers and theologians. The doctrines set forth by Chalcedon, then, would, in their traditional orthodox understanding, be considered highly questionable by most open theists.

³⁴ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

for mankind's reconciliation.³⁶ Finally, the work of Christ on the cross is not so much a work of blood atonement and propitiation for the sins of humanity but mostly a demonstration of God's sacrificial love for his creation. Pinnock summarizes this idea: "The cross is God at work in healing relationships. It is not a penal offering . . . but a loving sacrifice to bring the alienated home to love."³⁷

As far as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is concerned, parallel modifications will also be made to his nature and work in the world. These changes are compounded by the need expressed by Clark Pinnock for open theism to "court" the Pentecostal community for acceptance.³⁸ Thus, the Holy Spirit must not only adopt a more central role in their theology, but their pneumatology also must absorb their changes to the attributes of God.

The powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit on the Father's behalf are stressed by Pinnock in *Most Moved Mover*: "Signs and wonders signal a new phase of history, which will culminate in the new creation. The outpouring of the Spirit and his gifts on the church is characteristic of the age of the messiah and his reign in the kingdom of God."³⁹ This is accompanied by a considerably unrestricted view of the Spirit's gifting in the body of Christ, manifested in everything from tongues to prophecy to preaching (for males and females) to healing. Pinnock states in *Unbounded Love*, "Let there be room for the expression of every kind of gift and personality in our churches."⁴⁰ This more charismatic emphasis on the Holy Spirit's outpouring of gifts within the church is not in itself a non-evangelical viewpoint. The problem, however, is that, while there is much said regarding the miraculous and supernatural, very little has been said that addresses the Spirit's person or his works of conviction, regeneration, and adoption.

In addition, because the work of God in the world can and is thwarted by free will agents, the Holy Spirit's ability to work is also affected by great spiritual struggle. The first set of free agents that are able to limit the Spirit's work is humankind. Pinnock states,

Limited expectations on our part diminish God's freedom to act. Often there is a worldview impediment. We may shrink from believing God's promises and close ourselves off to God's gifts Without openness to God there is no power. God likes to act when we ask him to and, in effect, limits his power to do mighty works. God makes himself dependent on the prayers of his people.⁴¹

Thus, human beings, in their lack of faith and prayer, can impede upon the Holy Spirit and his work in the world.

³⁶ Ibid., 103. See also Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 102-104.

³⁷ Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 105.

³⁸ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 12.

³⁹ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁰ Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 174-175.

⁴¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 135.

The second set of free agents to limit the Spirit is the demonic realm, which can and does obstruct God's operation in his creation. Pinnock cites the "angel of Persia" in Daniel 10 as proof that, "God cannot just do anything he wants, when he wants to."⁴² So, although his will and ability for great works are ever-present, according to openness, the ability of Holy Spirit to accomplish such desires are significantly limited in the free world that God created.

V. GRAY AREAS: BIBLIOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

The systematic categories of Bibliology and ecclesiology are termed "gray areas" at this point, in that open theism has barely touched on them and, thus, a clear outline of an openness Bibliology or an openness ecclesiology is nonexistent. There is some pigment on the canvas, so to speak, but, in place of the clarity one would desire in a portrait, there is a muddy gray. Let us attempt, therefore, to clear up the picture.

The significantly altered view of God presented by open theism, lacking in omniscience, omnipotence, and ultimate sovereignty, makes equally far-reaching changes in the area of Bibliology. As Geisler and House observe, "To affirm that the Bible is the Word of God is totally dependent for its strength on what is meant by the word *God*. If by *God* is meant a finite, limited being, the whole of traditional theology comes crashing down."⁴³ What is one to do with the affirmation that, "All Scripture is God-breathed,"⁴⁴ when the God who breathed Scripture is, according to open theism, vulnerable, not immutable, sometimes mistaken, and limited in knowledge?

Much of the evangelical community has traditionally been united in its unswerving affirmation of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. The Evangelical Theological Society itself, in one of its two statements of Doctrinal Basis, affirms that, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." We all can assert with Millard J. Erickson that, "the departure from belief in complete trustworthiness of the Bible is a very serious step, not only in terms of what it does to this one doctrine, but even more in terms of what happens to other doctrines as a result."⁴⁵

Clark Pinnock, the unofficial senior theologian of the open theism camp, wrote two of the most definitive books of the twentieth century on the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture in his pre-openness days.⁴⁶ Some may

⁴² Ibid., 135.

⁴³ Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 256.

⁴⁴ 2 Tim 3:16a. All scriptural citations are from the *New International Version*, unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 252.

⁴⁶ Clark Pinnock, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967) and *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1971).

say, therefore, that this purported drastic departure from the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture alluded to above is an over-exaggeration or false implication of the open theism system. Consider then the following excerpt from the footnotes of *Most Moved Mover*:

We may not want to admit it but prophecies [of scripture] often go unfulfilled God is free in the manner of fulfilling prophecy and is not bound to a script, even his own. The world is a project and God works on it creatively; he is free to strike out in new directions. We cannot pin the free God down.⁴⁷

Such conclusions drawn by Pinnock should not be shocking considering the open view of God's nature. It is supremely important to realize that the character of the God of open theism is such that the doctrine of an inerrant and infallible Word of God is almost impossible to maintain. Logically, if God is sometimes mistaken and routinely changes his mind, then his revelation, likewise, would contain similar imperfections.⁴⁸ Where an all-knowing, all-sufficient God presumes an all-knowing, all-sufficient Bible, the exact opposite can be posited for the God of open theism and his revelation. Put simply, "The [open theistic] God is simply too weak to support the superstructure of an infallible and inerrant Scripture."⁴⁹

Obviously, from Pinnock's statement above, the possibility of an imperfect revelation does not seem to raise much concern for open theism. Consider his comments concerning inerrancy from the pages of *Unbounded Love*:

Claims for the inspiration of Scripture in the Bible are practical and functional more than theoretical The issue is not whether the Scriptures are inspired and infallible. The question is what sort of authority they have and what sort of truth they convey We know it to be the inspired Word of God because of its effect on us.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 51. In this same citation, Pinnock lists fifteen prophecies that, he claims, remain unfulfilled to this day.

⁴⁸ To be sure, Open Theists would not call God's lack of knowledge or his fluctuations of will imperfections. In their proposed system, the more vulnerable and changeable God is, the more truly sovereign he becomes (see Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 148). This argument, however, will not carry over into the characterization of God's Word. If his written Word is changeable in this sense, it is imperfect, at least in part. And, logically, imperfection in part adds up to imperfection in the whole. An errant Bible is simply unacceptable in consistent evangelical Christianity.

⁴⁹ Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 279.

⁵⁰ Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 161. The chapter concerning the Bible entitled "Feeding Love," is representative of a type of functional neo-orthodoxy. Broadly speaking, God's Word is inerrant and infallible in regard to matters of practice and how it affects us in our relationship with God. It is God's infallible and inerrant Word in that it affects, changes, and draws us closer to God.

Sadly, this is a far cry from his admirable 1967 statement that, "The foundation of theology is only as secure as the Bible is trustworthy. *Sola Scriptura* and Biblical infallibility are inextricable."⁵¹ It has become painfully clear from his works and several interviews that such a steadfast grasp on the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture as foundational to theological reflection is no longer evident.⁵²

Although one cannot always speak of the part (in this case, Pinnock) standing for the whole (open theism) in regard to their stance on the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, it is less than comforting to observe that no other open theism proponent has addressed the issues stated above. And, until other openness thinkers do fill this loud silence in regard to Bibliology, the logical transference of the open God's characteristics (i.e. vulnerability, limited knowledge, and error) onto that of his written Word is enough to raise serious questions as to the probable Bibliology of open theism. At this point, Geisler and House summarize very well:

On the premise that God is only guessing the results of many free choices, it is reasonable to assume that some prophecies *are* in error. It is begging the question to assume that it just so happened that all of God's guesses turn out to be right. If any prophecy possibly might be wrong, the doctrine of inerrancy fails in theory. If any in fact do miss the mark, then the Bible not only can err, but is in error. Logically speaking, [open theism's] denial of biblical inerrancy is inescapable.⁵³

The application of open theology to the arena of ecclesiology is a bit more problematic than the assessments of Bibliology outlined above. This difficulty exists primarily in an apparent tension. On the one hand, open theists are quick to emphasize the individual free will of a Christian, his personal standing before God, and his particular relationship with God. On the other hand, open theists are also just as quick to emphasize the significance of the community of Christians in mutual agreement, dependence, service, and ministry.⁵⁴

So, how does one wed these two perspectives to forecast an open ecclesiology? By applying these basic positions to some specific areas of ecclesiology, one could expect a few significant changes to the traditional doctrine of the Church in the following ways: 1) the blurring of the lines between the local church body and the universal body of Christ, characterized by a move toward ecumenism and cross-denominational

⁵¹ Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 71.

⁵² Consider *Unbounded Love*, 160-167; *Most Moved Mover*, 20-21; and "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

⁵³ Geisler and House, *The Battle for God*, 258.

⁵⁴ This is a distinctively postmodern emphasis. The now prevalent postmodern philosophy, generally, holds the harmony and collaboration of the community in very high esteem, particularly when delineating the boundaries for ethical, moral, and religious beliefs and behavior.

unity;⁵⁵ 2) an increased accentuation given to the work of the church in and for the world (the wider community);⁵⁶ 3) the adoption of an egalitarian view of the role of women in the local church, including the ordination of women as pastors and preachers;⁵⁷ 4) An encouragement of what amounts to self-centered, self-absorbed church members.⁵⁸ Although not immediately recognizable as drastic theological changes, as all four listed above have been, or are currently being, encountered by evangelicalism, such moves inherently constitute broader and more far-reaching ramifications in the area of ecclesiology.

VI. EXTRAVAGANCE AND INTENSITY: RADICAL RAMIFICATIONS IN SOTERIOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY

As the open theism portrait becomes clearer to the theological observer, the most extravagant and intense changes to the traditional canvas will most likely be perceived in the areas of soteriology and eschatology. Within both categories the doctrines of God (Father, Son, and Spirit), man, sin, and angels intersect, and this combination of factors provides a much higher likelihood for radical deviations, which, as we shall see, is exactly what occurs.

As we address soteriology, it is helpful to restate that the open view of sin is essentially very shallow. The focus is not on the offense of God's holiness but the broken relationship between God and man. Thus humanity is not so much in direct opposition to God as they are simply walking in the wrong direction. In addition, the metaphor of mankind as a slave to sin is highly emphasized, as if sin is an outside evil oppression rather than an intrinsic evil infection.⁵⁹ This profound departure from the traditional view of sin will affect the entire openness doctrine of salvation as it unfolds.

Because of the limited knowledge of the God of open theism, the concept of divine election becomes a bit sketchy.⁶⁰ The concept of election must somehow be moved from divine prerogative into the realm of human

⁵⁵ Pinnock is the only open theist to have offered anything approaching an ecclesiology thus far. But, this concept is quite obviously espoused by him in *Unbounded Love*, 136-137. It should also be noted on pp. 15-23 of the same book that Pinnock alludes to the unity of Christianity with other world religions. These soteriological implications will be addressed later.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130-132.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

⁵⁸ Truly, how can someone avoid self-centered ideals, even narcissism, when the God they serve supposedly changes his plan and purposes to meet their specific needs and supplications, without concern for the wider needs in the Body of Christ, much less the "Thy will be done" sense that it is God, not us, who know what is best for our lives?

⁵⁹ Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 73.

⁶⁰ Picirilli, in his *JETS* article "An Arminian Response to John Sanders," 480-481, even goes so far as to say that open theism, "cannot logically provide for any eternal election at all." He goes on to argue convincingly that, "Sanders' God cannot even elect a *group*: he does not know for certain whether there will be any group or any individuals who will believe the gospel. Nor is there any such thing as a group that is not made up of individuals."

responsibility and free choice. The only descriptive mention of this concept that has been found thus far is by Pinnock in *Most Moved Mover*. His brief explanation proceeds as follows:

God elects a people in Christ—we do not elect ourselves—and wants all people to belong to it. Individuals receive their own election by becoming part of the elect body. We find our own identity as God's chosen by participation and incorporation in the body of Christ The election of individuals is not irresistible. God longs for creatures to elect God in return and not isolate themselves from him by resisting the election that has been given to us all in Jesus Christ.⁶¹

Thus, election has nothing to do with divine foreknowledge or predestination. According to openness, we are all of the elect in Christ, and the saved are those who realize that election and respond to it in faith.⁶²

Although the work of the atonement of Christ was addressed above, the actual effects of the atonement are what apply to the subject matter at hand. There is unquestionably no room for any sort of "limited atonement" in open soteriology. With an emphasis on the supreme love of God for the entire world, it is almost guaranteed that, according to openness, the atonement can be applicable universally for all people. In addition, the word "atonement" itself is typically replaced by the more relational term "sacrifice" in the writings of open theists.⁶³ This use of sacrifice to describe the work of Christ on the cross is keeping in line with their emphasis on the familial relationship between God and mankind. Clark Pinnock states:

Let us try to set our thinking about the atonement in personal, not legalistic terms. The real issue is a broken relationship, not a breach of contract . . . God is healing relationships through this action. He is drawing wayward children home and re-creating right family relations. . . Christ is not appeasing God's wrath. . . . We are not talking retribution or criminal proceedings. The cross is a revelation of a compassionate God. Suffering love is the way of salvation for sinners.⁶⁴

Greg Boyd alludes to another rather extreme adjustment to the atonement, in his book, *Letters from a Skeptic*, when he says:

⁶¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 164-165.

⁶² This concept of the "elect in Christ" is strikingly close to Karl Barth's theory of election found in his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957). Millard J. Erickson gives a helpful summary of Barth's concept of election in his *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., 934-936. We suspect that this resemblance to the father of neo-orthodox theology is not a mere coincidence.

⁶³ See Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 55-59, and *Unbounded Love*, 99-110.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

The sacrifice of Christ embraces more than those who consciously embrace it To "go through" Christ, then, cannot be exactly the same thing as "believing in" Jesus Christ. There apparently are people who are covered by Christ's blood who do not even consciously know Him.⁶⁵

Pinnock further supports this ambiguous concept of a universally applied atonement by stating, "One can receive a gift without knowing exactly who it comes from Faith may even occur in the context of another religion, since the issue is not how far one is from God but in what direction one is traveling."⁶⁶ This apparent "slippery slope" towards universalism is not an advantageous position for theologians attempting to legitimize their theology in the evangelical community. Nevertheless, it is a slope their soteriological sled is sliding down.

Based on their doctrines of God and man, the open soteriology must also adjust the grace of God so that it is viewed as totally resistible. There are two sides to this coin, the first being absolute human freedom, for as Pinnock reminds us, "We have to choose God if we want to be with God We have the freedom to refuse his love, even at the risk of destroying ourselves. It is our choice, not God's choice."⁶⁷ Thus, God's respect for human freedom, according to openness, is such that he does not interfere at all with the free will of humankind. On the other side of the coin is the concept of what openness calls God's "persuasive love."⁶⁸ Pinnock summarizes this concept: "God's grace is a persuasive not a coercive power. God does not force people to love him, as if that were possible, but pursues personal relations . . . grace is given to all and calls for a response."⁶⁹

Finally, the concept of perseverance is completely shattered in lieu of God's ironclad deference to the human will. Pinnock does not shrink from completely denying the doctrine of "perseverance of the saints" saying,

The continuation of salvation depends, in part, on the human partner because the relationship is personal and reciprocal. One perseveres by persevering Believers are secure under the condition that they continue in faith, which is a process not completed until the end of the journey. One may fail to persevere until the end and not receive what was promised It is not over until it is over.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions about Christianity* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1994) 158.

⁶⁶ *Unbounded Love*, 32. To be sure, Pinnock is the most brazen of all the open theists in his unflinching references to the possibility of universal salvation. Nowhere is this emerging doctrine of universalism more obvious than in the pages of *Unbounded Love*.

⁶⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 162.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

Here again, although respect is given to the power of God, the human will and its libertarian freedom wins out against the sovereignty of God over his children. Not only must we choose to be of the elect, choose to fall under the work of the atonement, choose to access God's extended grace, but we must also choose to persevere until the very end. It should be obvious that the weight of human responsibility in salvation is considerably heavy in the model of open soteriology outlined above.⁷¹

The term eschatology literally means "the study of last things." Constructing an open eschatology, then, is particularly complicated in that the open God supposedly cannot foresee the future, much less the "last things." How then does one compose a doctrine concerning a topic about which God supposedly has no knowledge in advance? Somehow, open theists do not consider this a significant problem and have given not a few clues as to how their doctrine of last things will play out.⁷² This brief look at open eschatology will be addressed in two basic areas: the eschaton itself (i.e., the second coming, tribulation, millennial reign, etc.) and the final states of the individual (i.e., heaven and hell).

Somehow, although they deny the exhaustive foreknowledge of God, open theists maintain that God is, nevertheless, certain concerning the approaching eschaton. Exactly *how* certain God is, however, is open for debate. On the one hand, Sanders states, "God does not exercise meticulous providence in such a way that the success of his project is, in all respects and without qualification, a foregone conclusion."⁷³ Yet, on the other hand, Boyd states that, "[God] predetermines and thus foreknows whatever details he needs to in order to ensure that the overall plot stays on course."⁷⁴ Although they would assuredly deny that this is a "have your cake and eat it too" situation, there is really no other way to interpret this line of thinking apart from a possible serious difference of opinion inside the openness camp. Boyd makes the point that the second coming of Christ and other matters of the eschaton are literally affected by the choices of human beings.⁷⁵ Thus, the end times are not exhaustively known or settled by God in advance, for we are able to either hinder or speed their coming. But, he admits, they are in a real sense partly known, for God has pre-ordained that Christ will return, the end will come, and Satan will be defeated. He states, "While God's will is not consistently carried out in world history, for this depends on the free cooperation of free agents, it will be carried out in the eschaton."⁷⁶

⁷¹ Some observers may have noticed that the outline of open soteriology above was composed parallel to the well-known Calvinist TULIP. This was done purposefully so as to touch on the more significant issues in soteriology in a way that is easily comparable to the more traditional theological systems (i.e. Calvinism, Amyraldianism, and Arminianism).

⁷² Greg Boyd has devoted an entire book to dealing with topics such as this, although a good deal of what he presents leaves the reader with more questions than answers. See *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.

⁷³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 40.

⁷⁴ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 150.

⁷⁵ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 108-109.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 421.

Yet, the coming eschaton is, in fact, dependent on the free will of free agents (i.e., humankind and the satanic realm). Openness, thus, would like to maintain that in one sense, God does know the end times with certainty (for he has ordained those parameters), but, in another sense, God does not know the end times with certainty (for much of its coming is dependent on free will agents). This line of thinking logically digresses into incoherence. Either God foreknows the end times completely or he does not. And, in observation of the openness pattern to depend heavily on human choices to determine the future, open theism must eventually come to the conclusion that he does not. Add to this equation the diminished view of God's prophecy in the Scriptures as sometimes proven erroneous, and the coming eschaton becomes nothing more than a calculated gamble on God's part, with a hopeful, though risky, guess at his victory over the forces of evil.

The second major section of eschatology has to do with the final state of humankind in one of two destinations, either heaven or hell. According to openness, the free will choice of each free agent will ultimately determine their destiny at the end times. With their unilateral emphasis on the love of God, it should not be surprising that some open theists have virtually denied a literal eternal hell.⁷⁷ It is ironic that a system of thought that boasts of its more straightforward reading of Scripture would so easily conclude that the passages describing Hell should be interpreted figuratively, or even re-routed to support other conclusions. Pinnock, a professed annihilationist, states, "the biblical images of destruction and ruin can be taken to mean the termination of existence . . . the fires of hell, then, do not torture but rather consume the wicked."⁷⁸ Boyd, who presently holds to a modified Barthian conception known as "*das Nichtige*,"⁷⁹ says elsewhere, "the metaphors [of hell], you see, vary greatly, and none of them are to be taken as a literal 'snapshot' of what hell is going to be like."⁸⁰ Although they sufficiently remold the doctrine of hell to fit their purposes, the question no one in the open theism camp seems to be asking is this: if the Biblical picture of hell is to be taken figuratively, with a loose interpretation of its ultimate severity and finality, then what of the biblical picture of heaven?⁸¹

⁷⁷ See Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*, 161-165, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 319-357; and Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 88-95.

⁷⁸ Pinnock, *Unbounded Love*, 91.

⁷⁹ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 338-357. A brief explanation of Boyd's modified *das Nichtige* can be taken from his glossary: "The trinitarian warfare theodicy amends this concept . . . by postulating free agents who can choose against God's will and thus can invest negated possibilities (*das Nichtige*) with being. When God ultimately wins his war with evil and becomes 'all in all' (1Cor 15:28; cf. Eph 1:10, 22; Col 1:22), the choices of evil beings against him will be exposed as 'the nothing' that they are. Hence, hell is eternally chosen nothingness."

⁸⁰ Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*, 162.

⁸¹ Every major openness writer is completely unhelpful at this point. There is barely even a mention of heaven in any of the openness works cited in this paper. This is a very puzzling phenomenon for a system so vehement about the final triumph of God.

VII. THE AWKWARDNESS OF AN INCOMPLETE PORTRAIT: WHY OPEN THEISM'S RETICENCE TO SYSTEMATIZE, THOUGH UNDERSTANDABLE, IS UNFEASIBLE

At this point in time, the open theism construct possesses the advantage of being a popular rogue theology fueled both by publicity and theological furor. With notable theologians such as Clark Pinnock trumpeting this new theology, the notoriety of open theism, with good or bad connotations, will certainly not allow it to quietly fade away from the landscape of evangelical theology. On the flip side, however, this considerable attention to openness theology also entails that the open theologians themselves not simply hunker down theologically where they are at present. We are at a crossroads. The intensity with which open theism is being probed demands that it be developed further and presented to the evangelical community. To ignore this reality would be foolish, since it infers they are hiding something. Sadly, though, open theists as a whole remain silent (almost seemingly agnostic) concerning the remainder of their theological portrait.

Thus, in the face of this theological "loud silence," this paper has presented a broad sketch of how open theism will most likely be played out in the remaining areas of systematic theology. The conclusions in regard to a full-blown openness system reached from this undertaking can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The doctrine of Scripture as God's Word is greatly minimized in its significance, to the point that a form of functional neo-orthodoxy is what remains.
- 2) God is vulnerable, not immutable, not omnipotent, sometimes erroneous, and directed primarily by his central attribute of love.
- 3) Christ is more man-like than God-man, with an emphasis on his humanity and his incarnation functioning as the lens through which God is revealed.
- 4) The Holy Spirit is minimized to the position of powerful agent of God's love without importance given to his foundational operations of conviction, regeneration, and adoption.
- 5) Angels, and demons particularly, are nearly equal adversaries for God and possess significant power in their freedom.
- 6) Man is elevated to a position of partnership with God in the construction of the future instead of simply being the most notable creature of God's creation.
- 7) Sin is minimized and becomes a serious defect in the God-man love relationship rather than a deadly condition with the gravest of consequences.
- 8) Salvation is not only demoted to the level of simple course-correction, but it is possibly available apart from Christ in the forms of other religions.

- 9) The church is a community in the world of other religions, working with the purposes of social-justice and benevolence at the forefront.
- 10) Eschatology is a calculated risk on God's part, a hopeful, but ultimately, less than certain guess (especially, Biblical prophecy) in regard to final victory.

The conclusions reached in this article are, obviously, carefully educated extrapolations as to how the complete openness portrait will probably look. Yet, based on what has been considered above, the following challenge must be issued: To be completely forthright about their viewpoint, open theists should fill out their theological construct and unveil the finished product to the evangelical community without further delay. Ultimately, their success as a viable theology (whether evangelical or otherwise) is largely dependent on their ability to legitimize their views within all the doctrinal *loci* of systematic theology. Until such reasonable systematization takes place, open theism cannot be viewed academically as other than, at best, a piecemeal view or, as it is more commonly at present, a creative theological aberration confined largely to two isolated theological areas, yet virtually an unknown quantity in the broader theological picture. So, if the above general sketch of open theism as a theology is considered to be inaccurate in its extrapolation and critique, it is sincerely hoped that some spokesperson in the openness camp will come forward and not just correct the misunderstanding but also lay out an overall open theism position. Their credibility and reputation (and foothold) in the evangelical community depends upon it.