

Liberty Baptist  
Theological Seminary

THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF OPEN THEISM WITH THE DOCTRINE OF  
INERRANCY

A Report

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Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Theology

by

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with all things, the first-fruits of my praise goes to God: Father, Son and Spirit. I pray this work brings Him glory and honor.

To my love and wife, Heidi Ann: You have been my calm, my sanity, my helpful critic, and my biggest support. Thank you and I love you.

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## ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this thesis is to show that the doctrine of open theism denies the doctrine of inerrancy. Specifically open theism falsely interprets Scriptural references to God's Divine omniscience and sovereignty, and conversely ignores the weighty Scriptural references to those two attributes which attribute perfection and completeness in a manner which open theism explicitly denies.

While the doctrine of inerrancy has been hotly debated since the Enlightenment, and mostly so through the modern and postmodern eras, it may be argued that there has been a traditional understanding of the Bible's inerrancy that is drawn from Scripture, and has been held since the early church fathers up to today's conservative theologians. This view was codified in October, 1978 in the form of the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy. These three sources provide more than ample understanding of Biblical inerrancy by which to measure the views of open theism.

Open theism criticizes a traditional view of God's attributes, not the least of which are God's omniscience and sovereignty. The underlying agenda for their efforts is to retain a high view of man's free will. The end result of their efforts is an explicit denial of the full and complete Divine omniscience and sovereignty of God as presented in the Scripture, which in turn commits a violation of the doctrine of inerrancy. The implications of such denial are significant to the doctrine of God and a high view of Scripture.

(238 words)

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CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION

**Statement of the Problem**

The foundation of Christian beliefs is its doctrine. What a person knows and thinks about God is translated into what he believes in faith, and what he believes in faith gets translated into his acts of worship. Therefore, as it is important to worship God correctly, it is important to first know God correctly. To do otherwise is to worship a false god. This concept lies at the foundation of this defense of the Christian doctrines. It is important to meet any such falsification of Christian doctrine with staunch opposition, as they are the foundation of heresies.

False doctrines have been introduced by false teachers throughout history. This was evident in Paul's warning to Timothy, to teach and insist on sound doctrine, against those who teach otherwise.<sup>1</sup> This was the task with which Paul was charging the young pastor. Paul knew that false teaching against the word of God would lead people astray. Peter echoed this sentiment, when he warned of false teachers who would introduce destructive heresies that would lead people to destruction.<sup>2</sup> Some modern conservative theologians, such as Norman Geisler, emphasize this same warning today, noting that what Christians think about God can ultimately affect understanding in other areas of theology and how it bears out in faith. Norman Geisler declared, "Errors about the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6:2-3.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 2:1.

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.”<sup>3</sup>

The second and third order doctrinal effects of an incorrect view of God can clearly be seen when one examines the theological dissensions between those who hold to a traditional view of God and those who offer an alternate view of God.<sup>4</sup> This is certainly no less true in the ongoing debate between those who hold to a traditional view of God’s omniscience and those who are advancing the doctrine of open theism, sometimes known as open theology or openness. Open theism presents a particular challenge to the doctrine of inerrancy as it contradicts explicitly what Scripture has to say regarding God’s omniscience, to include His knowledge of the future and sovereignty over its course and outcome.

This dissention has seen public expression in the ongoing debate between Bruce Ware, defending an orthodox view of God’s omniscience; and Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, and John Sanders, who support open theism. At the heart of this debate has been the discussion on whether or not one can hold to open theism and still affirm the doctrine of inerrancy. While this debate came to a head during the 2001 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society’s (ETS) 253 to 66 vote to pass a resolution affirming

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<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler and H Wayne House, *The Battle for God*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 256.

<sup>4</sup> This conflict can be seen when examining the discussions and debates of a number of Christian doctrines (for example how one’s view of the doctrine of creation subsequently impacts the doctrines of hamartiology, anthropology (humanity), and even soteriology. The focus of this thesis will be on how the views of open theism have a deleterious effect on the doctrine of inerrancy, specifically how it openly contradicts a Scriptural understanding of God’s attributes of omniscience and sovereignty. This conflict will be laid out in detail in subsequent chapters.

God's, "complete, accurate, and infallible knowledge of all events past, present, and future, including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents."<sup>5</sup>

The importance of this issue cannot be overstated. Inerrancy is the critical foundation for Christian doctrine. All that Christians know about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, evil, the purpose and nature of man in God's plan, the universal church, and the end of times all comes from the pages of Scripture. Even what Christians know about the nature of the Bible comes from the Bible. In a very literal sense the whole of Christian doctrine, to include Theology Proper, Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Hamartiology, Anthropology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology and Bibliology, and Angelology comes from Scripture. Christians are called to examine doctrines through the lens of Scripture. Paul taught believers that they were to examine all things<sup>6</sup> and to correctly handle the word of truth.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, a rigorous defense of the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture should be maintained in order to ensure that the doctrines of faith are not subverted by false teaching.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The primary thesis of this paper is that open theism, or openness as the doctrine is sometimes titled, is contrary to Scripture, and therefore has a deleterious effect on the doctrine of inerrancy, and should therefore be rejected as a Christian doctrine. To accomplish this task, this paper seeks to achieve three supporting purposes.

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<sup>5</sup> David Neff, "Closed to Openness: Scholars Vote: God Knows Future," *Christianity Today*, (January 7, 2002), (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/january7/15.21.html>).

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:21, NASB.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15, NASB.

The first supporting purpose is to provide the reader with the understanding of what is meant by the doctrine of inerrancy. This paper will use as a baseline definition of inerrancy the same definition provided in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy from 1978. Along with this definition of inerrancy, this paper will briefly discuss the development of the doctrine of inerrancy throughout church history, with particular emphasis on the developing views from such theologians as B.B. Warfield, Carl Henry, Albert Mohler Jr. and Norman Geisler.

The second supporting purpose is to show how open theism is contradictory to an orthodox view of God's omniscience and sovereignty. To begin, this thesis will provide a baseline definition of open theism from which to contrast it against a traditional view of God's knowledge of future events. The views of such open theologians as Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, and John Sanders will be used to outline the open theism view. Discussion will be provided on what Scripture and other theologians have to say regarding God's perfect knowledge and divine sovereignty, with subsequent treatment on how the open theist's views contradict a Scriptural view of God's omniscience and sovereignty.

The final supporting purpose of this thesis is to show how open theism contradicts the doctrine of inerrancy. This section of the thesis will highlight arguments against open theism, especially those presented by Bruce A. Ware, and expand upon these points to provide a defense that open theism specifically contradicts the doctrine of inerrancy.

### **Statement of Importance of the Problem**

It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of the doctrine of inerrancy. As previously stated, virtually every other Christian doctrine rests on the doctrine of

inerrancy. For evangelical Christians, everything that is known about the triune God, His plan, and the details surrounding its execution are contained within the pages of Scripture. If Scripture is not to be believed, then why should anyone adhere to the doctrines which they profess? Therefore, if a Christian is to maintain faith and hope in their doctrines, they should have assurance that their source is inerrant in presenting them.

If false teachers are allowed to introduce doctrines which contradict what Scripture declares about the nature of God and His attributes, then what is the logical outcome of peoples' faith in the doctrines? How does the practice of their faith change in the light of such doubt?

The issue of open theism creates doubt as to whether God knows the outcome of future events. Given this doubt, what assurance does the believer have that declarations by God regarding future events or future promises will come to fruition? What assurance does the believer have that anything Scripture says regarding the future is true and reliable? As nearly every Christian doctrine is either founded on or affected by a future hope in Christ Jesus, we rely in faith on God's perfect knowledge as our assurance of things hoped for in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

### **Statement of Position on the Problem**

The purpose of this thesis is less about the current debate between open theists and those who hold to a traditional view of God's omniscience and sovereignty; rather, it is to show in context of this debate how the open theism view contradicts Scripture. Therefore, the position of this thesis will be that open theism is not compatible with the doctrine of inerrancy.

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 11:1, NASB

The debate on the inerrancy is hardly a new issue. Theologians as early as Augustine have debated and discussed whether or not the Scriptures are inerrant.<sup>9</sup> While discussions on inerrancy are certainly critical to understanding Christian doctrine and fruitful in the life of both the church and the individual believer, the purpose of this paper is not necessarily to reengage in what is already a longstanding debate between Christian orthodoxy and liberalism.

Open theism, on the other hand, is a relatively recent doctrine, whose history will be outlined in subsequent sections. Proponents of open theism prefer to deemphasize the sovereignty of God in order to elevate the condition of man to meet a libertarian view of man's free will.<sup>10</sup> Because of the high value that the open theists' view places on man's ability to choose, due to the impact that such conditions have on one's view of the problem of evil, man's role in salvation, etc., there is a great deal of effort on their part to portray God as potentially not having perfect knowledge of future events. Despite the presuppositions with which the open theists' view approaches this subject, what matters more is how a proper understanding of Scripture reflects God's omniscience and sovereignty.

Therefore, to reemphasize the position of this thesis, an approach that shows how open theism conflicts with Scripture and challenges a traditional view of Scriptural inerrancy will be provided which defends a traditional view of God's omniscience and sovereignty.

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<sup>9</sup> Norman Geisler, "Philosophical Presuppositions," in *Inerrancy*, ed. by Norman Geisler, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 309.

<sup>10</sup> Clark Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2005),

## **Limitations**

The scope of this thesis will be limited to the discussions on how open theism impacts the doctrine of inerrancy, and why such a view should be rejected as a Christian doctrine. While some discussion will be given on the historical development of both open theism and inerrancy, there is not adequate room to provide a full discussion on how these two doctrines have developed and been debated through the centuries in which the church has grown.

Similarly, there is not ample room within the scope of this thesis to discuss in depth how the doctrine of inerrancy affects the other doctrines of Scripture. However, brief discussion will be given on the fact that how one views the doctrine of inerrancy ultimately affects their view of the other doctrines. Furthermore, there is not ample room to discuss how open theism impacts other primary church doctrines, such as soteriology or eschatology. Instead, it will be simply stated that an impact on inerrancy means an impact on virtually all other Christian doctrines.

## **Method**

### **Research Methods**

The primary method of research that will be utilized in formulating this thesis will be library research of theological sources, scholarly journals, and other sources available via the internet to produce quality information that will present and defend the thesis statement. A good portion of the information will be descriptive from authors that offer a defense of the thesis, along with additional thoughts and analysis in order to develop ideas further.

### Tests or Questionnaires

There will be no tests or questionnaires used in this thesis.

### Data Analysis

The information for this thesis shall be gathered through researching the topic in theological books, scholarly journal articles, available theses and dissertations, various internet articles, blogs, and interviews, as well as theological dictionaries and commentaries. The information will then be categorized and presented in a fashion that will allow this author to identify the thesis statement, develop the arguments in support of the thesis statement, offer the opposing arguments and rebut them, and offer a conclusion that definitively supports the stated thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY EXPLAINED

Inerrancy has been an expressed doctrine of the Christian church since the early fathers into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> However, it is not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the doctrine has been challenged from within the church with the fervor seen today.<sup>12</sup> Given the degree of controversy, agreement on a definition of inerrancy has been hard to obtain.<sup>13</sup> Attempts to codify a definition across Evangelicalism have been made. The Lausanne Covenant amongst Evangelicals declared the Bible to be, “without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”<sup>14</sup> The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, in the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, affirmed that, “Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching...and, in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.”<sup>15</sup> While there are undoubtedly Christians who would debate those definitions, they serve as a starting point from which to understand what inerrancy is and begin to understand its history and implication as part of Christian doctrine.

This thesis will therefore begin with a presentation of the doctrine of inerrancy. It is outside the scope of this thesis to revisit the entire historical debate regarding the

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<sup>11</sup> Norman L Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 92.

<sup>14</sup> Lausanne Movement, “The Lausanne Covenant,” (<http://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>).

<sup>15</sup> International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *Evangelical Theological Society*, 1978. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf)).

doctrine. Instead, this thesis will briefly summarize the salient points of the debate with specific focus on what Scripture says regarding its own inerrancy, a brief discussion of its historical development, and a presentation of the evangelical view of inerrancy, to include discussion surrounding the formulation of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The intent is to present the doctrine in a way that serves as a foundation for a subsequent discussion on how inerrancy is violated by the views of open theism.

### **A Scriptural View of the Doctrine of Inerrancy**

There are two arguments from Scripture which present the doctrine of inerrancy: a deductive argument and an inductive argument.<sup>16</sup> Both arguments offer a defense of the doctrine which has been held by evangelicals as critical to the vitality of the Christian church.<sup>17</sup>

#### **A Deductive Argument from Scripture of Biblical Inerrancy**

While displayed in various forms, the basic deductive argument from Scripture which supports the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy follows as such:<sup>18</sup>

- (1) God cannot err.
- (2) The Bible is the Word of God
- (3) Therefore, the Bible is inerrant.

It has been noted that in analyzing this deductive argument, two questions arise: 1) are the premises true; and 2) do the premises of the argument guarantee its conclusion.<sup>19</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>17</sup> Norman Geisler, *Inerrancy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), ix.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, vol. 1*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002), 220.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas K. Blount, "What Does it Mean to Say that the Bible is True?" from *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. by Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder. (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 56.

response to the later question, Christians should be confident that the truth of all premises together entail the truth of their conclusion.<sup>20</sup> To prove this point, Douglas Blount rightly modifies premise (1) above with the following premise, “The Word of God cannot err,” which he states preserves the truth of the conclusion and, therefore guarantees the conclusion.<sup>21</sup> Blount further states that since premise (1) necessarily entails the premise, “The Word of God cannot err,” then the truth of the conclusion remains guaranteed.<sup>22</sup> This now leaves only the task of proving whether the individual premises are true.

### **God Cannot Err**

The first premise of this deductive argument declares that God cannot error. Part of this notion of God being unable to error comes as a logical extension of His perfection. Scripture clearly declares that God is perfect. Moses declared this point early in Scripture, when in his song declaring the greatness of God he proclaimed, “For I proclaim the name of the Lord; Ascribe greatness to God! The Rock! His work is perfect.”<sup>23</sup> The same point was emphasized by Jesus, as recorded by the Gospel writers, when he declared His Sermon on the Mount, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>24</sup> Against those who would limit this perfection of God, as spoken of by Jesus, to God’s love, many theologians point out that the context of these verses deals directly with God’s spoken law to His prophets, and thus directly reflect on His very

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Deuteronomy 32:3-4, NASB.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 5:48, NASB.

nature. D.A. Carson defends this point, stating, “In light of the previous verses (17-47), Jesus is saying that the true direction in which the law has always pointed is not toward mere judicial restraints, concessions arising out of the hardness of men’s hearts, still less casuistical perversions, nor even to the ‘law of love’...No, it pointed rather to all the perfection of God, exemplified by the authoritative interpretation of the law bound up in the preceding antitheses.”<sup>25</sup> The emphasis that is placed on the sum of these verses and the commentary provided is to say that God is perfect, which means that He is without error.

The concept of God’s perfections and being without error is also described in Scripture referring to God’s actions. Moses recounts in the oracles from Balaam to Balak the prophetic declaration of God’s perfections, “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent.”<sup>26</sup> Far from a mere commentary on the ethical practices of God, this verse points directly to the perfection of God’s nature and His word. According to Bible scholar Ronald B. Allen, “The words, ‘God is not a man, that he should lie’ describe the immutability of the Lord and the integrity of His word...All others may change; God—even with all His power—cannot change, for He cannot deny Himself. God must fulfill His promise for He has bound His character to His word.”<sup>27</sup> This correlation, the binding of the assurance of His word with the perfection of His character continued into the writing of the New Testament. Paul combined the two in the opening to his letter to his young pastor Titus, stating regarding God’s promises in the

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<sup>25</sup> D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol 8, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Numbers 23:19, NASB.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol 2, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 901.

Word and His perfections, “for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, but at the proper time manifested, even His word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our savior.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the author of Hebrews declared, “In the same way God, desiring even more to show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.”<sup>29</sup> Bible scholar Zane Hodges similarly drew the connection between the two, God’s word and His perfections, in this verse, “Not only was it impossible for God to lie, but His ever truthful Word is supported in this case by His oath. These are the two unchangeable things, which encourage those who take hold of the hope.”<sup>30</sup>

Other verses point specifically to God’s Word as the object, while not the sole object, which reflects His perfection. The Scriptural evidence supporting this premise is bountiful. In the Psalms, King David clearly associated the perfection found in God’s nature with the perfection of His Word where he declared, “As for God, his way is perfect; the Lord’s word is flawless.”<sup>31</sup> The Hebrew word used in this verse to describe the Lord’s word as flawless is *צָרִיף*, which is the qal form of the verb *צָרַף*, and is used in

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<sup>28</sup> Titus 1:1-3, NASB.

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 6:17-18, NASB.

<sup>30</sup> Zane Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol 2, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 796.

<sup>31</sup> Psalm 18:30, NIV.

the sense of testing or refining, as in the smelting or purification process of fine metals.<sup>32</sup> The context of this verse is that God's Word is purified, as He is perfect. Other verses equate God's word with truth, which is mutually exclusive from any falsehood or inaccuracy. This sentiment regarding God's Word was taught by Jesus when he declared, "Your word is truth."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the psalms which exalt God's law declares, "The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting,"<sup>34</sup>

In totality, the Scriptures offer clear confession that God cannot error, in deed or in word. As He is perfect and without error, the things God says are perfect and without error. Because of this fact, believers have faith that what God says will come to pass with assurance. It explains why His word is equated with truth. This gives affirmation to the first premise of the deductive argument.

### **The Bible is the Word of God**

With evidence provided affirming the first premise, the only thing remaining to prove the deductive argument is to show that the Bible is in fact the Word of God. There are two verses which clearly affirm that Scripture is inspired. The Apostle Peter declared regarding the origin of Scripture, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."<sup>35</sup> Theologians view this verse from Peter as clear

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<sup>32</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, electronic ed, (Oak Harbor: Logos, 2000), 864

<sup>33</sup> John 17:17, NASB.

<sup>34</sup> Psalm 119:160, NASB.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Peter 1:20-21, NASB.

endorsement of the inspiration of Scripture. In his commentary on 2 Peter, Kenneth Gangel stated, “As the authors of Scripture wrote their prophecies, they were impelled or borne along by God’s Spirit. What they wrote was thus inspired by God.”<sup>36</sup> Adding the concept that such inspiration gives the faithful a sense of assurance of the trustworthiness of Scripture, he states, “No wonder believers have a word of prophecy which is certain. And no wonder a Christian’s nature must depend on the Scriptures. They are the very words of God Himself!”<sup>37</sup>

The Apostle Paul also gives clear affirmation of the inspiration of Scriptures. In his words to his young pastoral protégé, Timothy, Paul states, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”<sup>38</sup> Attributing the inspiration of the writing to God, former Wheaton President A. Duane Litfin makes the subsequent connection to inerrancy by stating, “Paul wanted to reemphasize to Timothy the crucial role of God’s inscripturated revelation in his present ministry. Thus Paul reminded Timothy that all Scripture is God-breathed; that is, God’s words were given through men superintended by the Holy Spirit so that their writings are without error.”<sup>39</sup>

The Scriptures emphatically declare that God spoke His word through the prophets. Moses recounts that it was God who spoke with Him and gave Him the Law.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel, “2 Peter” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol 2, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 869.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16, NASB.

<sup>39</sup> A. Duane Litfin, “2 Timothy,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol 2, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 757.

Similarly, the prophets properly declare that God is the one from whom their words originated.<sup>41</sup> With all the evidence in place, it is clear that the premise that the Bible is the Word of God is indeed affirmed. As such, it is logically coherent to say that since God cannot err and the Scriptures are the Word of God, then the Word of God cannot err.

### **Avoiding Circular Logic**

At this point, it is important to pause and address one potential issue with a purely deductive argument from Scripture. Some theologians look at the deductive arguments from Scripture as being guilty of circular logic, and thereby invalid as an argument in support of Biblical inerrancy.<sup>42</sup> Admittedly, the issue of circular logic or reasoning is not of great concern to all theologians, some of whom choose to answer this criticism directly. According to theologian Cornelius Van Til, it is a consistently Christian method of apologetic argument to begin from a point of presupposition, in this case such a presupposition is that the Scriptures are reliable.<sup>43</sup> However, Van Til also states that the non-Christian argument is no less guilty of this same tactic, declaring, “In spite of this claim to neutrality on the part of the non-Christian the Reformed apologist must point out that every method, the supposedly neutral one no less than any other, presupposes either the truth or the falsity of Christian theism.”<sup>44</sup> The significance of this, according to Van Til, is that because all sides begin with presuppositions of some form or another, and

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<sup>40</sup> Exodus 20:1, NASB.

<sup>41</sup> Ezekiel 2:4, Isaiah 1:24, Jeremiah 2:1, NASB.

<sup>42</sup> R.C. Sproul, “The Case for Inerrancy: A Methodological Analysis,” in *God’s Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery, (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 246.

<sup>43</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1955), 116. (Accessed through SUMMONS)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

thereby mean that “the starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another,” then all reasoning can be considered circular reasoning.<sup>45</sup> For this reason, Van Til does not move from his stance of arguing from Christian presuppositions. Instead, Van Til decries those who offer to put down arguments which begin with the authority of God in favor of appeasing the naturalist argument by meeting him on his own battleground.<sup>46</sup> Van Til states, “In contradistinction from this, the Reformed apologist will point out again and again that the only method that will lead to the truth in any field is that method which recognizes the fact that man is a creature of God, that he must therefore seek to think God’s thoughts after him.”<sup>47</sup> This, according to Van Til, does not mean that the argument should be avoided by Christians; to the contrary, “he should make a critical analysis of it.”<sup>48</sup> He points out that such a challenge to the system of rationalism is necessary because, “If there is no head-on collision with the systems of the natural man there will be no point of contact with the sense of deity in the natural man.”<sup>49</sup>

In recent times, Van Til’s arguments were used by presuppositional apologist John Frame. According to Frame, for Christians, “faith governs reasoning just as it governs all other human activities.”<sup>50</sup> Far from avoiding a critical perspective of scholarship, Frame, much like Van Til before him, says that Scripture should be the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>50</sup> John M. Frame, “Presuppositional Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. by Stanly Gundry and Stephen B. Cowen, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 209.

authority by which all things are tested.<sup>51</sup> Frame simply defends inerrancy with statements like, “If someone asks how a book written by human beings can be inerrant, the answer is...If God wants such a book, he can arrange to provide one. We live in a supernaturalistic world; God’s world.”<sup>52</sup>

Other theistic philosophers find this argument by Van Til and Frame to be insufficient. Apologist heavyweights like William Lane Craig point to such arguments and claim they commit the fallacy of “begging the question,” or *petitio principii*, in that they presuppose the conclusion.<sup>53</sup> While it may be said that the initial premise in the deductive argument above is not the same as the conclusion, thereby not presupposing the conclusion, this may not be sufficient to convince all that the deductive argument is sound. Instead, theologians like R.C. Sproul, an original signatory of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, argued for what is referred to as the classical method of apologetics (of which William Lane Craig is an advocate), which addresses both the deductive and inductive arguments, as well as internal and external evidences.<sup>54</sup> Sproul provided an argument that avoided circular reasoning by beginning with a premise that the Bible is a reliable and trustworthy document, and continues with premises that claimed sufficient evidence of Jesus Christ as God’s Son, Jesus as the infallible authority, and Jesus teaching from and trusting in Scripture as the Word of God logically arrives at a conclusion that because of the infallible authority of Jesus Christ, the Church is right to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> John M. Frame, “Inerrancy: A Place to Live,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 1 (Mar 2014): 31.

<sup>53</sup> William Lane Craig, “A Classical Apologists Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. by Stanly Gundry and Stephen B. Cowen, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 232.

<sup>54</sup> Sproul, 248.

believe in the infallible nature of Scripture.<sup>55</sup> Apologist Gary Habermas uses evidences from history to show the reliability of Scriptures and validate the claims of Jesus Christ, which he refers to as the minimal facts approach.<sup>56</sup> In fact, both Habermas and Craig have used a minimal facts argument to defend the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event.<sup>57</sup> This conclusion, according to Habermas, leads one to the conclusion, “That Jesus’ major or basic teachings were thus verified seems warranted. Jesus’ distinctive claims were ultimately validated by his resurrection from the dead. In short, history’s unique messenger also experienced history’s most unique event.”<sup>58</sup> Undoubtedly, Jesus’ distinctive claims would have to include His own deity and the authority of the Scriptures as God’s Word.

While detailing the specific arguments for the minimal facts approach is outside the scope of this thesis, it suffices to say that as a methodology it provides a means of validating Scripture as a reliable document and establishing support for the claims of Jesus Christ, namely His deity and authority. Therefore, all that remains to validate the argument for inerrancy as set up by R.C. Sproul, and avoiding an argument guilty of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 248-249.

<sup>56</sup> Gary Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. by Stanly Gundry and Stephen B. Cowen, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 100. While Habermas refers to his form of apologetics as the “Evidential” method, even classical apologeticists like William Lane Craig claim Habermas’ view as indistinguishable from his own view. (Five Views, p. 122)

<sup>57</sup> Outlines for both arguments are presented in the following sources: Gary Habermas, “The Minimal Fact Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus: The Role of Methodology as a Crucial Component in Establishing Historicity,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 3 no 1. (August 2012). [http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/southeastern\\_theological\\_review/minimal-facts-methodology\\_08-02-2012.htm](http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/southeastern_theological_review/minimal-facts-methodology_08-02-2012.htm), and William Lane Craig, “The Resurrection of Jesus.” Reasonablefaith.org. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-resurrection-of-jesus>. The details of these arguments will not be presented here as they are outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>58</sup> Gary Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 120.

circular reasoning, is to offer the inductive arguments from Scripture of Jesus' claims regarding Scripture's authority, accuracy and inspiration from God.

### An Inductive Argument for Biblical Inerrancy

When the New Testament accounts are examined regarding what Jesus said about Scripture, one finds an inductive argument that supports Biblical inerrancy. As stated in the previous paragraph, this evidence begins with the presuppositions regarding the reliability of Scripture and Jesus' divinity, and therefore His ability to speak with ultimate authority about Scripture.

### **Jesus Appealed to the Written Word as Authority**

The opening statement of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy declares the authority of Scripture to be a key issue for the Church for all time.<sup>59</sup> The statement declares, "Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority."<sup>60</sup> In one of the first verses of the New Testament, Matthew recounts Jesus' words to Satan while He was being tested in the wilderness by Satan, who offered to turn stones into bread, after Jesus had been fasting. Jesus' response was, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"<sup>61</sup> It is clear that Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus uses Scripture to refute Satan's arguments again in Matthew 4:7 and 10. The significance of these verses is profound. The fact that Jesus declares, "It is written," a clear endorsement of the written word, shows that He accepted the plenary

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<sup>59</sup> International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 4:4, NASB.

inspiration of Scripture.<sup>62</sup> Theologian Louis A. Barbieri Jr. goes further, stating that Jesus' quoting of Deuteronomy acknowledges the book's inerrant authority.<sup>63</sup> Also evident in these verses, specifically Matthew 4:10, is that Jesus used Scripture as the authority by which Satan could be rebuked.<sup>64</sup> These verses combine to show that Jesus viewed the Scriptures as being authoritative and trustworthy.

### **Jesus Affirmed the Events and People in Scripture as Historical**

Another way in which Christ clearly endorsed Scripture as accurate and authoritative during His ministry was in His references to Historical incidents and figures of Scripture.<sup>65</sup> Biblical scholars have noted that throughout the New Testament, Jesus is recorded via numerous allusions and quotations that show His treatment of the Old Testament historical narratives as straightforward statements of fact regarding literal historical figures and events.<sup>66</sup> Jesus quoted the Genesis account of God's creation of Adam and Eve as male and female when answering the Pharisees' question regarding divorce.<sup>67</sup> Jesus spoke about the Great Flood and the ark of Noah as if they were literal events.<sup>68</sup> He drew an analogy between the time Jonah was in the belly of the great fish

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<sup>62</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 97.

<sup>63</sup> Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol 2, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 26.

<sup>64</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 267.

<sup>65</sup> Ryrie, 98.

<sup>66</sup> John Wenham, "Christ's View of Scripture," in *Inerrancy*, ed. by Norman Geisler, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 6.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew 19:3-5; Mark 10:6-8, NASB.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 24:38-39; Luke 17:26-27, NASB.

and the amount of time He would be in the grave.<sup>69</sup> Throughout His ministry, Jesus referenced the prophets Isaiah, Elijah, Daniel, Zechariah, and Moses; he referenced historical figures such as Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses; and discussed historical events like the destruction of Sodom and the story of Lot and his wife as if they were literal historical people and events.<sup>70</sup> Ryrie points out that Jesus authenticated many of the more controversial passages of Scripture (Creation, Flood, Jonah and the great fish), which shows that as Jesus was willing to rely on the details of Scripture, and not just allegorize or focus on the “spiritual” aspects of the written word, it means, “we must conclude that He believed it to be inerrant down to its details.”<sup>71</sup>

### **Jesus Affirmed the Bible as Factually Inerrant**

Jesus words in John 17:17 have already been discussed in previous sections, but it is worth restating here that Jesus equated the Scriptures with truth, which would at least imply being without error. Jesus made a similar allusion when He rebuked the Sadducees’ view of the resurrection, pointing out that they were in error because they did not know the Scriptures.<sup>72</sup> The allusion is that the teaching of Scripture was without error. Geisler points to both these verses as evidence that Jesus held Scripture as inerrant.<sup>73</sup>

All of these points offer a summary of Jesus’ view of Scripture. Regarding Jesus’ views John Wenham states, “He consistently treats the historical narratives as straightforward records of fact, and the force of His teaching often depends on their

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<sup>69</sup> Matthew 12:40, NASB.

<sup>70</sup> Ryrie, 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 22:29, NASB.

<sup>73</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 267.

literal truth... This attestation of detailed verbal truth, coupled with historical and doctrinal truth, necessitates a doctrine of inerrancy in historical as well as in doctrinal matters.<sup>74</sup> These views combine with the reliability of Scripture and authority of Christ to form an inductive argument, which further combines with the deductive argument, to support the inerrancy of Scripture. As this argument has been contained within the pages of Scripture itself for nearly two millennia, the question becomes, did the Church recognize and acknowledge it as part of their doctrines of faith.

### **Biblical Inerrancy throughout Church History**

While any historical evidence supporting the doctrine should not carry weight equal to the Biblical evidence in support of inerrancy, it would logically follow that if the doctrine was as clearly derived from Scripture as has been previously claimed, then there would be evidence of such a history of the doctrine of inerrancy in the writings of the church's theologians over time.

Some argue against a substantial history of the Christian Church that held to the doctrine of inerrancy, but claim instead that the doctrine is relatively new and has only received attention in the past century. James Barr, in his ardent criticism of fundamentalism, claimed that fundamentalism and its "rigid insistence on absolute inerrancy" was a product of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>75</sup> Invoking the names of Reformation-era theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin as exemplary of views that did not stress "minor contradictions" in the text, Barr stated, "Indeed, the tradition whereby minor errors, discrepancies between parallel texts, and so on were taken easily, being regarded

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<sup>74</sup> Wenham, 3.

<sup>75</sup> James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 175.

as of no serious moment, as constituting no problem for Christian doctrine and therefore requiring no special harmonization, was still dominant until well on in the nineteenth century.”<sup>76</sup> However, even a cursory look at Christian history shows that this view from Barr is false. If one accepts the arguments from Scripture that have already been offered as true, one should expect that references to inerrancy would be readily found in the writings of church theologians from the beginning. This is exactly what one finds when the writings are examined.

### The Early Church Fathers

Clement of Rome, offering what may be the earliest views from the Church Fathers which offered a commentary on the Divine inspiration and truthfulness of Scriptures, declared, “Look carefully into the Scriptures which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them.”<sup>77</sup>

Justin Martyr is another example from the early Church Fathers who has been credited with writings that endorse the inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>78</sup> Justin Martyr emphasized that the prophets wrote the Divine Word, stating, “But when you hear the utterances of the prophets spoken as it were personally, you must not suppose that they are spoken by the inspired themselves, but by the Divine Word who moves them.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>77</sup> Clement of Rome, “The First Epistle of Clement: Chapter XLV,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325 Vol 1: the Apostolic Fathers - Justin Martyr – Irenaeus*, ed by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 17.

<sup>78</sup> Geisler and Roach, 18.

Martyr's view of Divine inspiration falls in line with the deductive argument from Scripture, giving proper deference to God's inspiration of the writings which subsequently leads to the doctrine of inerrancy.

Irenaeus openly declared the inerrancy of Scripture, stating in his work *Against Heresies*, that, "the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit."<sup>80</sup> Irenaeus, therefore not only endorses the inspiration of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit, but states that this logically leads to a view that holds the very nature of Scripture as being perfect.

Clement of Alexandria appealed to the Divine authority of Scripture in justifying its use in combating heresies, stating, "It will naturally fall after these, after a cursory view of theology, to discuss the opinions handed down respecting prophecy; so that, having demonstrated that the Scriptures which we believe are valid from their omnipotent authority, we shall be able to go over them consecutively, and to show then to all heresies on God and Omnipotent Lord to be truly preached by the law and the prophets, and besides by the blessed Gospel."<sup>81</sup> In this appeal, Clement of Alexandria, like other early theologians, makes the logical connection between the Divine authority of Scripture and their validity in presenting the truth.

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<sup>79</sup> Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325 Vol 1: the Apostolic Fathers - Justin Martyr - Irenaeus*, ed by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 175.

<sup>80</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies: Book II", in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325 Vol 1: the Apostolic Fathers - Justin Martyr - Irenaeus*, ed by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 399.

<sup>81</sup> Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata, or Miscellanies: Book IV," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2: Fathers of the Second Century - Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 409.

## The Medieval Church Fathers

Evidence of a belief in the doctrine of inerrancy can be found in the writing of some of the most important theologians following the early church fathers. Augustine, like the early fathers before him, recognized God's word as truth and equated it as such, asking of the Lord, "And I said, 'Lord, is not this Thy Scripture true, since Thou art true, and being Truth, hast set it forth?'"<sup>82</sup> Besides being truth, Augustine also acknowledged the errorless nature of Scripture, as stated in his epistle to Jerome, "For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error."<sup>83</sup>

The great theologian Thomas Aquinas similarly attributed truth without any falsehood to the inspired prophets, to include those who wrote Scripture. Aquinas stated clearly in his seminal work, *Summa Theologica*, "A true prophet is always inspired by the Spirit of truth, in Whom there is no falsehood, wherefore He never says what is not true."<sup>84</sup> Once again, it is worth pointing out the subtlety by which Aquinas associates the doctrines of inspiration and the doctrine of inerrancy with each other. This continues to validate the same principle derived out of Scripture and held by the church's first theologians.

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<sup>82</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey, (Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2008), 343. (<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007111360>) (Accessed through Summons).

<sup>83</sup> Augustine, "Epistle 82, From Augustine to Jerome," (Accessed at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102082.htm>).

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a2ae. 172, 6 and 2, (Accessed through Summons).

## Theologians of the Reformation

More than a millennium after the Scriptures were first penned, much more recent to modern times, one may begin to expect to see signs of the doctrine of inerrancy fading from works of the theologians. However, this is hardly the case, even during a period as tumultuous as the Reformation. In his article on Martin Luther's views on inerrancy, John Montgomery notes that Luther staunchly affirmed inerrant Biblical authority.<sup>85</sup> Montgomery points to Luther's comments on inerrancy in which he states, "The Word must stand, for God cannot lie; and heaven and earth must go to ruins before the most insignificant letter or tittle of His Word remains unfulfilled," and, "It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites...I am ready to trust them [early church fathers] only when they prove their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred."<sup>86</sup>

John Calvin held the same high regard of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, as it came from God. In his famous work *Institutes*, Calvin stated regarding the Scriptures and their importance in faith, "We now see, therefore, that faith is the knowledge of the divine will in regard to us, as ascertained from his word. And the foundation of it is a previous persuasion of the truth of God. So long as your mind entertains any misgivings as to the certainty of the word, its authority will be weak and dubious, or rather it will have no authority at all. Nor is it sufficient to believe that God

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<sup>85</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, "Lessons from Luther on the Inerrancy of Holy Writ," *Westminster Theological Journal* 36, no. 3 (March 1974): 277.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 279. Montgomery quotes from the influential collection of Luther's writings titled *Kirchenpostille* or *Luther's Works*.

is true, and cannot lie or deceive, unless you feel firmly persuaded that every word which proceeds from him is sacred, inviolable truth.”<sup>87</sup>

Both the views of Luther and Calvin show, much like the church fathers before them, that inerrancy associated with a Scriptural understanding of authority and inspiration was very much a part of the theological beliefs of their time.

#### Recent Views on Inerrancy: B.B. Warfield to Current

Since the Reformation, there have been those scholars who may be considered representative of the classical views of inerrancy held throughout the history of the church. While one may find points of disagreement in their respective views, each has added to the debate on the doctrine of inerrancy and argued from it as an important element in church doctrine.

#### **B.B. Warfield: Inerrancy out of Inspiration**

In 1881, after decades of influence that Common-Sense and Baconian philosophy had on Princeton University and the development of a view of Scripture that it could be easily understood by man through a plain reading of it, young Professor Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield co-authored an article on inerrancy with A.A. Hodge<sup>88</sup> Warfield, whose theology was centered in the inspiration of Scripture, listed the fact that Scripture itself taught its own inerrancy, which later became the foundation for the fundamentalist view of Scripture.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, 1997), S. III, ii, 6.

<sup>88</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, Oxford University, 2006), 111-113.

<sup>89</sup> Ed Dobson, Ed Hindson, and Jerry Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 45.

Warfield is credited by some as the inventor of the term “inerrancy” as a doctrine, and is considered to have been a leading proponent of the doctrine.<sup>90</sup> However, Warfield’s view of inerrancy was clearly derived from his understanding of inspiration, in which he declared that the Scriptures did not merely “contain” the words of God, but in fact are the Words of God, and as such are inerrant.<sup>91</sup> Warfield’s view of inerrancy is evidenced in such statements as, “The Biblical books are called inspired as the Divinely determined products of inspired men; the Biblical writers are called inspired as breathed into by the Holy Spirit, so that the product of their activities transcends human powers and becomes Divinely authoritative.”<sup>92</sup> The Divine authority inherent in Scripture due to inspiration is part of the nature of Scripture, which would logically lead to its inerrancy. This point is evidenced by Warfield’s comments on 2 Timothy 3:16, in which he stated, “Sacred Scriptures are declared to owe their value to their Divine origin,” and in being God-breathed, “their Divine origin is energetically asserted of their entire fabric.”<sup>93</sup>

Like many of the church fathers before him, Warfield recognized the evidences which supported inspiration, and thus inerrancy, of Scripture. For example, in giving deference to Jesus’ allusions to Scripture, Warfield stated, “Thus clear is it that Jesus’ occasional adduction of Scripture as an authoritative document rests on an ascription of it to God as its author. His testimony is that whatever stands written in Scripture is a word

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<sup>90</sup> George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 156.

<sup>91</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 111-113.

<sup>92</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Foundations*, (London: Tyndale, 1958), 43.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

of God.”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, according to Warfield, the evidence from the reliability of Scripture through the fulfillment of prophecy and correlation of historical evidences supports the authority of Scripture, which leads to inerrancy, “The historical vindication of Christianity as a revelation from God, vindicates as the truth of God all the contents of that revelation; and, among these contents, vindicates, as divinely true, the teaching of Christ and his apostles that the Scriptures are the very Word of God, to be trusted as such in all the details of their teaching and promises.”<sup>95</sup> He also emphasized the historical view of the church as being viable support for the doctrine, declaring the Church, “has always recognized that this conception of co-authorship implies that the Spirit’s superintendence extends to the choice of the words by the human authors, and preserves its product from everything inconsistent with a divine authorship—thus securing, among other things, that entire truthfulness which is everywhere presupposed in and asserted for Scripture by the Biblical writers.”<sup>96</sup>

The role of Warfield in advancing the doctrine of inerrancy cannot be overstated. In Warfield’s view authority, inspiration, and inerrancy are all logically connected. He states, “Its authority rests on its divinity and its divinity expresses itself in its trustworthiness.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>96</sup> B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1948), 173.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 62.

## Carl F. H. Henry

An original signatory of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and founding editor of *Christianity Today*, Carl F. H. Henry rose out of the Fundamentalist Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of Billy Graham's evangelical movement, which focused on, among other things, an increased intellectual agenda within a context of conservative Christian theology.<sup>98</sup> Henry, who addressed the issue of inerrancy head-on, believed that any real objection to Biblical inerrancy was philosophical and speculative in nature, rather than based on the text itself.<sup>99</sup> He saw the issue of inerrancy as critical to the health of the Christian faith, and that deviation from it would inevitably allow society to sink deeper into depravity.<sup>100</sup> As such, he did not shy away from giving a clear position, non-speculative, on what inerrancy entails, and encouraged others that the debate belonged in the cultural mainstream as part of the worldwide witness to the Gospel.<sup>101</sup>

Henry, like so many before him, affirmed the linkage between the Bible's inspiration and its inerrancy, and that inerrancy applied to the entirety of God's Word, declaring, "What God inspires is inerrant, and all Scripture—as Paul said—is God-breathed."<sup>102</sup> Henry extended the relationship to Biblical authority and stated plainly that

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<sup>98</sup>Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 233.

<sup>99</sup> Carl F.H. Henry, "The Bible and the Conscience of our Age," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 25 4, (December 1982): 405.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 406

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

the implication of rejecting inerrancy was tantamount to implying that God inspired error and that such error had divine authority.<sup>103</sup>

As such, Henry offered a clear definition of inerrancy which held that inerrancy necessarily implied that truth attached to theological and ethical teachings from Scripture, but also extended to historical and scientific matters, as well.<sup>104</sup> Henry acknowledged what continues to be a criticism of this point, which is that Scripture was not intended to serve as a text on science or history, but notes that inspiration ensures such information is relevant and intelligible.<sup>105</sup> Also, Henry declared that inerrancy implies God's truth is in the very words of Scripture, to include propositions and sentences, and is not limited to the "concepts and thoughts" of the writers.<sup>106</sup> An ardent defender of inerrancy, Carl Henry's views challenged the views of those who rejected a traditional view of inerrancy, to include those of Clark Pinnock, which will be addressed later in this thesis.

### **Norman Geisler and R. Albert Mohler Jr.: Holding the Conservative Line**

Two voices in modern times that have arguably been at the front of the inerrancy battle, carrying the flag for the conservative view, have been Norman Geisler and R. Albert Mohler, Jr. Norman Geisler, Distinguished Professor of Apologetics at Veritas Evangelical Seminary, was an original signatory of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. A prolific author, he has written numerous works that have been seminal in the debate over inerrancy. Geisler, in a fashion similar to the conservative views already

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<sup>103</sup> Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 191. (accessed from Logos Bible Software)

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

mentioned, rightly interrelates the concepts of inspiration, authority and inerrancy.<sup>107</sup> As such, Geisler offers as a definition of inerrancy, in context of inspiration and authority, “the inspiration of Scripture is the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit who...invested the very words of the original books of Holy Scripture...as the very Word of God without error in all they teach...and is thereby the infallible rule and final authority for the faith and practice of all believers.”<sup>108</sup>

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminar, has similarly been recognized as holding to the classical view of Scripture which acknowledges that when the Bible speaks, God speaks.<sup>109</sup> As such, Mohler affirms in its entirety the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as normative for evangelical faith, and encourages all evangelicals to do the same.<sup>110</sup> Mohler points out that the arguments supporting Biblical inerrancy stem from three sources: the Bible itself, the historical tradition of the church, and the function of the Bible within the church (which Mohler identifies as the Bible’s function as the authority for the Church).<sup>111</sup> Mohler adamantly defends inerrancy as he believes that the survival of evangelicalism hangs on the explicit commitment to Biblical inerrancy.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 494.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>109</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “When The Bible Speaks, God Speaks: The Classic Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. by J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 29.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

However, such commitment to defending inerrancy has not been without its controversy for both Geisler and Mohler. In 1984, Geisler led the effort to call for Robert Gundry's resignation from the Evangelical Theological Society over what Geisler claimed was a denial of the doctrine of inerrancy in Gundry's commentary on the Book of Matthew.<sup>113</sup> Geisler criticized Gundry based on what he referred to as the inconsistency of his methodology in analyzing Matthew with his bibliology in stating that he still held to the doctrine of inerrancy; in other words, Gundry's methodology in denying that the wise men following the star to Bethlehem or the resurrection of the Saints in Matthew 27 were literal events similarly denies the doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>114</sup> In 2003, Geisler submitted his own resignation to the Evangelical Theological Society over the organization's failure to successfully remove Clark Pinnock and John Sanders over their views on open theism and the subsequent impact on the doctrine of inerrancy, which will be discussed at length in the subsequent chapter.<sup>115</sup> Despite his resignation from ETS, Geisler's fervor for defending inerrancy has not waned. Similar to the 1984 dispute with Gundry, Geisler in an open letter called on Apologist Mike Licona to repent for his treatment of Matthew 27 in his extensive work on the resurrection, to include among other issues that Licona's belief that the resurrection of the saints was not literal, on the grounds that it undermines an orthodox view of the Scriptures.<sup>116</sup> Albert Mohler

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>114</sup> Norman Geisler, "Methodological Unorthodoxy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 26 1 (Mar 1983): 90.

<sup>115</sup> Norman Geisler, "Why I Resigned from the Evangelical Theological Society," November 20, 2003. (<http://www.normgeisler.com/articles/Bible/Inspiration-Inerrancy/ETS/2003-WhyIResignedFromTheETS.htm>)

similarly invited Licona to recant his view and affirm the full historicity of Matthew 27, as his view was a violation of the inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>117</sup>

Despite the controversy, the works of Geisler and Mohler will undoubtedly continue to be used in generations to come to defend inerrancy in the classical definition of the doctrine.

### **The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy**

Modern challenges to and spreading confusion about Biblical inerrancy resulted in the forming of the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) in 1978.<sup>118</sup> The formulation of the council was based on numerous factors, with perhaps the most well-known reason being the 1960s decision by Fuller Seminary to remove the doctrine of total or unlimited inerrancy from its doctrinal statement.<sup>119</sup> It was the belief of the organizers of the council that the rising confusion about Biblical inerrancy was a result of “inexact scholarship” that could be identified and corrected.<sup>120</sup> The end result of the ICBI and its gathering of nearly 300 scholars was the formulation and codification of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which has served as the standard on Biblical inerrancy for much of evangelicalism over the past decades since its writing.<sup>121</sup> The 1978 ICBI summit, which produced the CSBI focused on defining inerrancy, was followed by a

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<sup>116</sup> Norman Geisler, “An Open Letter to Mike Licona on his View of the Resurrected Saints in Matthew 27:52-53,” Aug 2011. (<http://www.normgeisler.com/articles/Bible/Inspiration-Inerrancy/Licona/default.htm>)

<sup>117</sup> Albert Mohler, “The Devil is in the Details: Biblical Inerrancy and the Licona Controversy,” September 14, 2011. (<http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/09/14/the-devil-is-in-the-details-biblical-inerrancy-and-the-licona-controversy/>)

<sup>118</sup> Geisler and Roach, 10.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

second summit in 1984, focused on interpreting inerrancy, and a third in 1987, focused on applying inerrancy.<sup>122</sup> The role of the CSBI cannot be overstated. Its influence has been credited with turning the tide of the Southern Baptist Convention away from liberalism, as well as being foundational in the doctrinal views of the Evangelical Theological Society and further serving as that organization's guide to its evangelical scholarly membership.<sup>123</sup>

As a guide, what the CSBI has to say to Evangelicals today remains profound. The preface of the CSBI declares that, "To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master," further equating denial of the inerrancy of Scripture with the setting aside of the witness of Jesus Christ.<sup>124</sup> Returning to the inductive argument from Scripture, it would logically follow that as the testimony of Christ Himself held the Word of God as pure and authoritative, rejecting inerrancy is rightly equated to rejecting the testimony of Christ.

The CSBI opens with basic statements regarding the nature of the doctrine of inerrancy. The first opening statement speaks directly to what the doctrine of inerrancy means to one's view of God. The statement declares the point that God, who is Truth and can speak only truth, is the inspiration of the Scriptures for the point of revealing Himself to man.<sup>125</sup> In this regard, according to the CSBI, the Holy Scriptures are God's witness about Himself for the benefit of man.<sup>126</sup> As such, to deny inerrancy is to deny the witness

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>124</sup> International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

about God, and inversely, to deny the witness about God is to reject the doctrine of inerrancy. As a final opening statement, the CSBI reemphasizes the importance of inerrancy to the overall authority of Scripture, declaring, “The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.”<sup>127</sup> If the warning is properly heeded, inerrancy will not be disregarded in deference to the authority that is inherent in Scripture.

The heart of the CSBI is the 19 articles which confirm or deny specific beliefs regarding inerrancy. Among these articles are some which are germane to this thesis. Article 1 affirms that the Holy Scriptures are the authoritative Word of God.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, as the Scriptures testify about God, they are also authoritative in their proclamations about the nature of God. Article 4 denies that human language is limited or inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation.<sup>129</sup> For this reason, man can understand God’s attributes adequately and use the human language to convey their meaning. Article 9 denies that any finitude or fallenness of the Biblical authors introduced a distortion or falsehood into God’s Word.<sup>130</sup> By extension, human agenda or influences should not be able to introduce falsehood or confusion into Scripture. Finally, Article 18 denies the legitimacy of any treatment of the text which leads to discounting its teaching.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

These articles collectively formed a foundation which defend the doctrine of inerrancy. The writers themselves acknowledged that the articles were not intended to carry the same weight as historical Christian creeds.<sup>132</sup> However, given the level of influence that the CSBI had within evangelicalism, as seen within the Southern Baptist Convention and the Evangelical Theological Society itself, it is clear that its importance is profound and transformational within broader evangelicalism.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Doctrine of Inerrancy**

While there is a great deal more that can be said regarding the history and current debate of the doctrine of inerrancy, the preceding information provides a sufficient basis from which to move forward and analyze open theism in context of the doctrine of inerrancy. These points will be referred to later in this thesis when used to critique open theism.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE DOCTRINE OF OPEN THEISM EXPLAINED

With a working understanding of inerrancy in place, this thesis will now focus on providing a working understanding of the doctrine of open theism for the purpose of being able to show how its views are counter to the doctrine of inerrancy and therefore should be rejected as an orthodox Christian doctrine. In order to accomplish this goal, a definition of open theism will be provided, along with explanation of its fundamental tenets. A history of the development of the doctrine will be explored to show how it has formed as a counter to a traditional Christian view of God's omniscience and sovereignty. Since Scripture is always the benchmark by which Christians measure the truth of their doctrine, an explanation of how open theism views their doctrine relative to Scripture will be also be discussed.

#### **A Definition of Open Theism**

As with any theological issue, there is great importance in establishing working definitions as a point of origin. Open theism is no different in this regard. Given the level of discussion on open theism in recent years, there are an abundance of voices offering their views and input on the meaning behind open theism. Therefore, sifting through the various views in order to accurately quantify open theism and provide a working definition is important for subsequent analysis of its compatibility as a Christian doctrine.

As one of the preeminent scholars endorsing open theism, Clark Pinnock defined open theism as, "a version of historic free will theism which posits God as granting to

human beings significant freedom to cooperate with or to resist the will of God for their lives.”<sup>133</sup> Such a definition highlights the open theists’ emphasis on the relationship that God has with mankind, specifically that it is both personal and interactive.<sup>134</sup> That God has a relationship with mankind, and it is interactive, is not a point of debate. What is at the heart of this debate, and will be discussed in subsequent sections, is the degree to which God’s desire for this relationship affects His willingness to amend His own nature, namely his omniscience and sovereignty.

John Sanders offers a similar view of open theism as compared to Pinnock’s. In his view, Sanders equates open theism as a type of what he refers to as “relational theism.”<sup>135</sup> In this view, Sanders declares that the divine-human relationship involves literal “give-take” experiences to the degree that the divine exercises receptivity and contingency in His relationships with mankind.<sup>136</sup> According to Sanders, God decided to create man with the capability to experience His love, and it was His desire to enter into a “reciprocal” relationship with mankind.<sup>137</sup> Like Pinnock, Sanders sees the reciprocal aspect of this relationship as key to understanding the full depth and meaning of this relationship with mankind. Sanders emphasizes the divine intent for man to fully experience this relationship and respond to it, which means the free collaboration with

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<sup>133</sup> Clark Pinnock, “Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 237.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> John Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, ed. by Bruce Ware, (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 197.

God to achieve His goals and purposes.<sup>138</sup> The ramification of this free collaboration, is that some of God's actions are contingent upon man's requests through prayer and actions through free will decisions, which ultimately means that God responds to and is influenced by what man does.<sup>139</sup>

John Sanders offers four core points of relational theism, which he applies to understanding open theism: divine love as a motivation for openness, God's sovereignty exercised in uncertainty, God exercises general versus meticulous providence, and mankind has been granted libertarian freewill.<sup>140</sup> These points are an integral part of the definition of open theism.

#### Divine Love as a Motivation for Openness

Critical to the open theists' view is that God loves His children and desires a reciprocal relationship with His children.<sup>141</sup> This relationship sees expression with humans through the experience of love from the triune God and in turn being able to respond to it.<sup>142</sup> Certainly, God's love for His children is seen through His activities in human history, and seen most clearly in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The open theists place a great deal of importance on God's love in order to understand how it drives His actions and activities.

Expanding on this notion, Richard Rice emphasizes that the open view of God expresses two basic convictions regarding God's love: 1) Love is the most important of

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 282.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 231.

all of God's attributes, and 2) God's love necessarily involves being sensitive and responsive to His creation.<sup>143</sup> According to Rice, the first point may be defended in that the Christian perspective sees love as the first and last word in the Biblical portrait of God.<sup>144</sup> Appealing to 1 John 4:8, Rice states that "God is Love" is as close to reality that the Bible presents as the picture of the Divine nature.<sup>145</sup> This places love as the focal point for understanding the very nature of God. In the mind of the open theist, love is the lens through which man should view God in order to understand who He is and why He does the things He does. Fritz Guy concurs with this position, stating that the heart of the Gospel message lies not in the existence of God, His eternity or omnipotence as attributes of His divine character, but in the ultimate fact that God is love.<sup>146</sup> From this central point, open theism expands God's love as the driver for His other attributes.

Rice states, "Love is not only more important than all of God's other attributes, it is more fundamental as well. Love is the essence of the divine reality, the basic source from which all of God's attributes arise."<sup>147</sup> In this sense, Rice appeals to the views of Fritz Guy, who states that regarding the divine character of God, love is more fundamental than control.<sup>148</sup> Rice extends this notion even further, stating the Bible clearly teaches that, "God is not a center of infinite power who happens to be loving, he

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<sup>143</sup> Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" from *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 15

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>146</sup> Fritz Guy, "The Universality of God's Love," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 34.

<sup>147</sup> Rice, 21.

<sup>148</sup> Guy, 33.

is loving above all else,” and that when one considers all of God’s great qualities, “to be faithful to the Bible we must put love at the head of the list.”<sup>149</sup>

Therefore, the open theist states that the critical importance of divine love requires Christians to revise a great deal of their conventional thoughts about God.<sup>150</sup> In this view, a high Christology, which believes that the love of Jesus is manifested in love as the supreme revelation of God, should inform a Christian’s view of God’s knowledge, power, and sovereignty in a way that expresses His love for His children first, rather than His power over them.<sup>151</sup> Instead, emphasis is given to a loving God who created the world with the goal of bringing to Himself a people who freely participated in a loving relationship with Him.<sup>152</sup> In other words, God’s desire for loving relationships and His zeal for His children form the basis for the reason why God is willing to allow voluntary actions on the part of His children to occur.<sup>153</sup> This concept, according to the open theist, is best seen in how God exercises His authority.

#### God’s Sovereignty Exercised in Uncertainty

The next point that follows in the open theist view is that God has sovereignly decided to make some of His actions contingent on the decisions and actions of His children.<sup>154</sup> God, according to the open theist, has voluntarily limited His own power and

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<sup>149</sup> Rice, 21.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Guy, 33-34.

<sup>152</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), 126.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 282.

allowed his creatures to decide certain things for themselves.<sup>155</sup> In this construct, God still retains His full omnipotence but chooses to allow the world to develop at the hands of His creatures.<sup>156</sup>

According to open theists, far from diminishing God's power and sovereignty, operating in uncertainty is the greatest expression of such qualities. Pinnock declares, "Does this idea (openness) diminish omnipotence or enhance it? What other than omnipotence could create free creatures and still feel confident that its purposes will be realized."<sup>157</sup> Gregory Boyd defends this aspect of open theology by pointing out that the compulsion to meticulously control is generally viewed as a lesser quality, exhibited by those who are insecure in their abilities.<sup>158</sup> In other words, according to open theists, God's self-imposed limitations actually make Him greater due to His willingness to operate in uncertainty.

The consequence of this view is that God does not "know" in a traditional sense what the outcome of that decision will be until the person has made it. This is what is meant by "openness." The future is left open and largely under the control of man's decisions.<sup>159</sup> The open theist holds to a view that the future necessarily consists of both settled and unsettled realities, and that God's perfect knowledge about the future means that He is fully aware that there are both settled certainties, but also unsettled

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<sup>155</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 93.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>158</sup> Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 57.

<sup>159</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 94.

possibilities.<sup>160</sup> The open theist further avoids the claim that such a view rejects God's omniscience by stating that in any sense God's knowledge of the future is not incomplete, because in such contingencies there is nothing definite for Him to know.<sup>161</sup>

As Sanders points out, this does imply "conditionality" to God, which is clearly contradictory to the traditional theist's view.<sup>162</sup> But such conditionality should not, imply that God's grand will can be thwarted. It is an important distinction by open theists that God's purposes are still fulfilled. According to Sanders, God remains faithful in accomplishing His original purposes, but adjusts His plans to accommodate the free-will decisions of His creatures.<sup>163</sup> In other words, Sanders believes that in terms of God's foreknowledge, some things are fixed and other things are contingent on man's response.<sup>164</sup> God's sovereignty and foreknowledge are exercised in the establishment and accomplishment of His general purposes, but decides on specific details in response to human choices as the relationship with man plays out along history.<sup>165</sup>

Pinnock further notes that in order to maximize the experience of the relational aspects between Himself and man, God freely decided to allow Himself to be "affected and conditioned" by His creation in such a way that things may occur without respect to His desires.<sup>166</sup> Again, critical to the open theist on this point is the belief that God allows Himself to be limited. Limitation in this respect, as it is understood by the open theist,

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<sup>160</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 16.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 282.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 5.

does not apply to who God *is* as much as to how God *does* certain things. According to Pinnock, open theism does not claim that God is “ontologically” limited, but rather that God voluntarily self-limits Himself purposefully.<sup>167</sup> The reason for allowing Himself to be “affected and conditioned” is to bring about the type of creaturely freedom that is necessary for a truly meaningful relationship with man. This is why the key to understanding open theism is the heavy emphasis placed on the loving relationship between God and man, and that such a relationship must be freely chosen.<sup>168</sup>

Clark Pinnock decries the very notion of a god that would exhibit such micro-management of his creation, stating, “Only a pathetic god would reign over the world in dictatorial ways. Imagine having to control everything in order to bale to achieve anything! Who admires such dictatorial power?”<sup>169</sup> The open theists’ notion of God’s general sovereignty begs that the discussion return to the critical topic of love, in which Pinnock states that God’s power is seen in His love, which gives life and sustains, vice an “omnicausality” which excludes a self-rule or self-expression of His creation.<sup>170</sup>

#### General versus Meticulous Providence

According to the open theist, a corollary to the notion that God’s sovereignty is exercised in uncertainty is the fact that God’s exercises His sovereignty in general terms vice meticulous ones, which allows man the freedom to make choices.<sup>171</sup> According to Sanders, a distinctive of free will theists, of which open theists can be included, is that

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<sup>167</sup> Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics," 237.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>169</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 95.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 282.

they affirm that God, in exercising His sovereign freedom, purposefully does not control human affairs by “meticulous providence,” which involves knowing and controlling every detail, but instead exercises general providence.<sup>172</sup> Again, centered on the principle of divine love, open theism says that a God who loves is contradictory to the notion of a God who rules in a deterministic way.<sup>173</sup> Instead, a God who loves gives freedom to His creation and empowers them to make their own decisions.

In contrast with a Calvinist view, which holds to an understanding of God’s sovereignty as “meticulous and detailed,” the free will theist’s view of general sovereignty is believed to be aligned with God’s dynamic plans for the people in the world.<sup>174</sup> Some, who go as far as to refer to God’s sovereignty as “limited” sovereignty, state that God permits certain events to occur even when they are against His divine will.<sup>175</sup> However, this alone does not conflict with a traditional Calvinist’s view of God’s sovereignty. The difference lies in the belief on the part of the open theist that such events are a surprise to God, as His exhaustive knowledge of the future does not include the decisions made by creatures possessing true libertarian freedom.<sup>176</sup> In other words, the Calvinist believes that man can make choices to oppose God’s will, but that those choices are foreknown by God; the open theist believes that man makes choices to oppose God’s will, and those choices are a complete surprise to God.

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<sup>172</sup> Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” 200.

<sup>173</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 94.

<sup>174</sup> Pinnock, “Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics,” 238.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

Against those who would say that such a view opposes a Biblical view of God's sovereignty, Pinnock points out that God as the ultimate power in the universe does not mean that He has all the power that is in existence.<sup>177</sup> The open theist's view recognizes that power exists across all creation, albeit not in equal amounts, and delineates self-governing power to His creation.<sup>178</sup> So, that God allows His creation to exercise power, or in a sense share in the power, does not impugn God's omnipotence from an open theist's standpoint.

#### Man Granted Libertarian Freedom

Finally, John Sanders declares that a critical aspect of open theism is that God has granted His creation libertarian freedom, which he defines as the real ability to do otherwise in a given circumstances.<sup>179</sup> Libertarian freedom or free will is described as a type of freedom in which there is no contingently sufficient, non-subsequent conditions of an action, or in other words, actions are in no way causally determined, even by God.<sup>180</sup>

According to Sanders, if loving relationships are to be considered genuine, if thought is to be rational, and if man is to be held responsible for good and evil, then libertarian free will must be assumed.<sup>181</sup> Once again showing the emphasis the open theist places on God's divine love, Sanders states that God has allowed His decisions to

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<sup>177</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 94.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," 200.

<sup>180</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defense," in *The Many Faces of Evil*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 74.

<sup>181</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 221.

be contingent upon the actions of man out of love, because true love does not force its way within the relationship.<sup>182</sup> This sentiment underlies the view of many free will theists who point to the notion that a world in which creatures are truly free to make their own decisions is better than a world in which creatures are not free (i.e. do not have a libertarian free will to act either morally good or morally evil.)<sup>183</sup> The open theists, however, have expanded this concept to present God as having limited (albeit self-limited in their assessment) omniscience and foreknowledge in order to explain their version of the theodicy.

### **The Historical Development of Open Theism**

Unlike other theological views or systems, open theism does not share a lengthy history of development within the larger context of Christian doctrine. This has led many to acknowledge that the debate over open theism is a relatively new discussion.<sup>184</sup> Therefore, it is fair to say that to analyze the history of development of open theism throughout in context of broader Christian history is somewhat of a misnomer, as open theism's development is arguably born out of the development of traditional theism. However, open theists seem to ascribe their particular view as a corrective to centuries of misinterpretation at the hands traditional theists who were biased by the influences of Greek philosophy.<sup>185</sup> None the less, obtaining at least a rudimentary understanding of how open theism developed is important, as this history claims to highlight critical errors

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<sup>182</sup> Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," 198.

<sup>183</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 30.

<sup>184</sup> James Rissler, "Open Theism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/o-theism> (accessed July 31, 2014).

<sup>185</sup> John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 59.

in the development classical theism and corrects those views in the development of their own doctrine.

### Classical Theism's Reliance on Hellenic Philosophy

According to John Sanders, the classical traditions and thoughts about God were framed by the intellectual atmosphere of Greek philosophy, especially middle Platonism.<sup>186</sup> This atmosphere developed a notion of the divine that emphasized perfection, and that any deviation from perfection was not an appropriate view of God.<sup>187</sup> For example, Anaximander, who amplified Thales' view of the divine as being purely water, emphasized the divine through the title "the unlimited," whose reality is beyond the limits of human language and ability to fully comprehend.<sup>188</sup> Heraclitus utilized the title "logos" to describe the one thing that remains constant and unchanging, while Parmenides' understanding of a godlike being as being "eternally full and complete," and thereby unchangeable.<sup>189</sup>

Sanders notes that while several of these philosophers influenced Plato's thinking, it was Plato's natural philosophy that developed the concept that God must be the best of all possible things, of which must include notions of immutability, impassibility, and timelessness.<sup>190</sup> Pinnock echoes this view, declaring that God is not the god of philosophy (especially Hellenic philosophy), which attempts to portray the conception of

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 63.

god as necessarily being immutable, timeless and apathetic.<sup>191</sup> To the open theist, the concept of God must involve love and relationship.

Likewise, Stoic philosophers presented the notion of a god as the order in the world; the providence by which all events in history are caused and determined.<sup>192</sup> Sanders notes that the Stoic view sees God as, “the eternal and uncreated One who begets out of himself the whole of being by distributing the rational sperms (logoi spermaktikoi) and then resumes them all back into himself in never-ending cycles.”<sup>193</sup> In an apparent attempt to show that even the Stoics wrestled with issues of what the divine may possibly know, Sanders does offer a significant dissent to this view from the distinguished Stoic philosopher Cicero. According to Sanders, Cicero dissented from the determinism of his peers and viewed God’s foreknowledge of future events as being incompatible with human freewill.<sup>194</sup>

#### Influence on the Early Christian Church

It is arguable that of all open theists, John Sanders has put forth the greatest effort to show the historical influence that Hellenic philosophy has had on the development of classical theism. He claims that even among those church fathers who repudiated the pagan philosophy of their time, Greek philosophical notions about God permeated and influenced their views of the divine to give Christians a view of God that combined both schools of thought.<sup>195</sup> If the argument of the open theist is that Hellenic philosophy

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<sup>191</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 27.

<sup>192</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 67.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>195</sup> Sanders, *The God who Risks*, 141.

influenced the development of Jewish and Christian theology to see God as eternal, immutable, and all-knowing, then the fusion of these views, according to Sanders, is seen most clearly in Philo of Alexandria.<sup>196</sup> The effect of the Jewish Diaspora, which resulted in the intermingling of Hebrew culture with the Greek and Roman Empires prior to the day of Christ, identified the need to show the compatibility of faith in the God of the Bible with Hellenistic beliefs.<sup>197</sup> The highest accolades in meeting this endeavor are given to Philo, who attempted to show the best of Hellenic philosophy actually agreed with Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>198</sup> According to Sanders, beyond the traditional views of Hellenic philosophy, which saw the concept of god as expressing perfection and omnipotence, Philo emphasized God's immutability and impassibility as demonstrative of God's nature to act, but not be acted upon by external entities.<sup>199</sup> In contrast, Sanders emphasizes that Philo did reject the deterministic view of Hellenic philosophy in favor of a libertarian view of freewill.<sup>200</sup> In doing so, it is clear that Sanders is trying to simultaneously impugn the portions of Philo's view of God as being overly influenced by Hellenic philosophy, yet set the stage for supporting the libertarian view which sees God's providence as being limited by man's free will choices. However, it is worth noting that this libertarian view of freewill does not necessarily mean a rejection of a traditional view of God's providence and omniscience.

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<sup>196</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 70.

<sup>197</sup> Justo. L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1*, (Peabody: Prince, 1984), 12.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>199</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 70.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

Open theists believe that following the teachings of Philo the seeds of Hellenic thought rapidly grew into the theologies held by the early church fathers during the first centuries of Christian growth. Sanders emphasizes the views of early theologians, such as Justin Martyr, Ignatius, and Tertullian, as being influenced by Hellenic philosophy towards a belief that God was timeless, immutable and impassible.<sup>201</sup> The implication is clear that the philosophical views of the Greeks is the shaping force behind the Christian understanding of God's perfections and unchanging nature. Furthermore, he also emphasizes the views of these early theologians which expressed God's responsiveness to humans' free will decisions, implying the importance of this view in a proper understanding of God.<sup>202</sup>

#### Augustine to Calvin

The path taken by Sanders and other open theists to explain the development of classical theism logically moves from the early church fathers down a path that begins with Augustine and moves towards the views of the Reformation, intentionally focused on those of John Calvin. Sanders, noting the profound degree to which Augustine shaped western theology, credits the neo-Platonic views of Plotinus as being a leading influence of Augustine's own views of Scripture.<sup>203</sup> He emphasizes the role that Augustine had in directing Christian thought towards a notion that God is "immune to time, change, and responsiveness to His creatures."<sup>204</sup> However, Sanders appears to approach these views as a subtext to the objection that Augustine began a departure from what Arminians view

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 72-74.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>204</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 147

as the early Christian view of the “divine-human relationship,” which allowed for divine responsiveness to man’s actions, as the Arminian view defines it.<sup>205</sup>

As Augustine greatly influenced the theology of the Reformation, open theists apply the same theory of development to Martin Luther and John Calvin. Sanders notes that in his work *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther follows Augustine’s teachings on God’s will and that God’s foreknowledge is not contingent on anything, but rather He does everything in accordance with His own immutable and infallible will.<sup>206</sup> Likewise, John Calvin’s views are categorized as being influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy in defining God as impassible and immutable.<sup>207</sup>

In a thinly veiled attempt to diverge the timeline of the development of classical theism back to a “correct” view that is offered by open theists, open theists turn their focus to the teachings of Jacob Arminius and John Wesley. Sanders describes the view of Arminius as a return to the theology of the “pre-Augustinian fathers.”<sup>208</sup> In this view, God’s foreknowledge is seen as being conditioned by His creatures’ free actions, and that His sovereignty is in context of the libertarian freedoms of man.<sup>209</sup> Described as an independent view that reaches the same Arminian conclusion, Wesley affirmed an understanding of the divine-human relationship that saw God as a “loving parent” whose

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 88

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 157.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

justice and mercy, as described in Scripture, are at odds with the Calvinist view of God's foreknowledge and predestination.<sup>210</sup>

Therefore, while perhaps an oversimplification, open theists see their view as a natural extension of Arminian belief that corrects the Hellenic influence placed on the early church fathers, traced through Augustine, and systematized in the view of Reformed theologians exemplified in Luther and Calvin. The purpose of this history from the open theists' perspective is to emphasize the development of the relational view of God, which is now emphasized by open theism, as normative throughout history until its divergence in classical theism, thereby giving greater validity to open theism and contradicting any criticism that such a view is a modern deviation from the views held by Christians throughout history.

#### Historical Antecedents to Open Theism

As could be expected, classical theists have a different view of the development of open theism. Acknowledging that theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin would have vindicated the open theists' belief that mankind's destiny and eternity do depend on their own autonomous decisions, classical theists argue that the normative view throughout Christian history was against a view that God voluntarily renders himself vulnerable to His creations actions to the degree that He can be affected by those actions; a view which is at the crux of the open theists' argument.<sup>211</sup> If the issue for classical theists is the affect that the open theists' view has on a traditional understanding

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Dennis W. Jowers, "Open Theism: Its Nature, History, and Limitations," *Western Reformed Seminary Journal* 12 1 (Feb 2005): 3. ([http://wrs.edu/Materials\\_for\\_Web\\_Site/Journals/12-1%20Feb-2005/Jowers%20-%20Open%20Theism.pdf](http://wrs.edu/Materials_for_Web_Site/Journals/12-1%20Feb-2005/Jowers%20-%20Open%20Theism.pdf)).

of God's immutability and sovereignty, then it is where those deviations have occurred in history on which their focus will begin to explain the development of open theism.

Theologian Dennis Jowers offers three groups within the history of Christendom that were antecedent to open theism to offer a denial of God's divine immutability.<sup>212</sup> This is not to say that these groups are part of the direct lineage of open theists, as such a comparison could accurately be argued as grossly unfair, but the groups do represent instances within the historical development of Christian doctrine where similar views were introduced and sometimes rejected as heretical.

The first of these groups is the Audians, a sect named after the fourth-century Syrian monk who founded the group.<sup>213</sup> The Audians were associated with a group known as the Anthropomorphites, who interpreted God's physical actions (walking, learning, forgetting, changing, etc) in a literal fashion and denied God's complete knowledge of the future.<sup>214</sup>

A second group that is sometimes pointed to as a predecessor of open theists is the Socinians, a sect who are so named after the teachings of philosopher and theologian Faustus Socinus.<sup>215</sup> The comparison of Socinians to open theism is precarious given the obvious heresies held by Socinians that are not associated with open theism, such as antitrinitarianism, Christ having a human nature only during His ministry, and the belief that His death on the cross did not lead to salvation<sup>216</sup> However, some look to the view

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

of Socinians, which denied God's immutability and comprehensive foreknowledge of the future, as being antecedent to the views of open theists.<sup>217</sup>

A final group to which open theists may be compared, arguably without objection, is the Arminians.<sup>218</sup> According to Jowers, Arminians have long held to a view that election unto salvation is contingent upon the foreseen faith and obedience exercised by man.<sup>219</sup> Jowers distinguishes the open theists' view of God's foreknowledge, which believes God does not have perfect foreknowledge of man's free will choices, from that of the traditional Arminian view, which believes that God still knows every future event without exception.<sup>220</sup>

#### Counterpoints to the Open Theists' Claims on the Development of Traditional Theism

The view of open theists that theirs is a corrective to the view of classical theists, which has been influenced by Hellenic philosophy, deserves a response. As has already been stated, open theists like Sanders place a great deal of weight on the notion that classical theism suffers from a dual-origin: the Bible and Hellenic philosophy.<sup>221</sup> On this point, there are three points that counter the open theists' view.

First, open theism wrongly assumes that the views of classical theism follow Hellenic philosophy. To the contrary, the Biblical evidence would suggest otherwise. If conservative scholars are correct and the book of Genesis, which contains many of the

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<sup>216</sup> Paul Kubricht, "Faustus Socinus," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Vol 2, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 1122.

<sup>217</sup> Jowers, 4.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Sanders, *The God who Risks*, 141.

verses which point to an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-sovereign God, was written by Moses during his life around 1300 B.C., then these principles certainly predated any influences of Hellenic philosophy.<sup>222</sup> Even liberal scholarship that attempts to identify a J-source as the author of much of the Pentateuch places the date of the writing in the tenth or ninth century B.C.<sup>223</sup> Similarly, some of the Psalms which are used to declare God's greatness in the traditional sense are said to have been written by David, and Psalm 90 potentially having been written during the time of Moses.<sup>224</sup> As this argument can be made of other books in the Old Testament, which are the basis for the traditional view of God's attributes, there is reason to doubt the claims of the open theist that such notions are intrinsically biased by Hellenic philosophy.

Second, not every scholar agrees with the level of influence placed on the classical view by the advent of Hellenic philosophy. Church historian Justo Gonzalez noted that Philo's use of Hellenic philosophy was to show that the best of pagan philosophy agreed with the Scripture, but since the prophets antedated the philosophers, it is the former that influenced the later.<sup>225</sup> This is in direct contradiction to the previously stated claim of open theists that Philo was influenced by the philosophers. Michael Horton similarly argues against such influence, stating, "While the classical theological tradition of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communions may be influenced in its formulations by alien philosophical perspectives, the distinctions so central to its

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<sup>222</sup> D. A. Carson, "Genesis," in *New Bible Commentary 4th ed.*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994). (viewed through Logos Bible Software).

<sup>223</sup> Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 41.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>225</sup> Gonzalez, 13.

method are ultimately due to the biblical emphasis on the Creator-creature distinction and not to a capitulation to pagan thought.”<sup>226</sup>

The final point is associated with the previous. Not only do some scholars doubt the weight given by open theists to the influence of Hellenic philosophy, but the open theists do not offer definitive evidence to support their claim in the first place. While Philo, for example, may have written in response to Hellenic philosophers, this does not equate to being influenced by them to the point that his doctrine was modified by their thinking. It is just as likely that early church fathers could have reached the same conclusions regarding God because, as Paul stated, what is observed in nature reveals the attributes of God.<sup>227</sup> Therefore, the historical evidence makes any notion that Hellenic philosophy influenced classical theism in such a way that required a corrective through open theism much less compelling.

#### Modern Development and Controversy within ETS

While church history may not be replete with instances of growth and advancement for open theism as the doctrine developed parallel to, but separate from, classical theism, the argument has been made that from the open theists’ perspective the development of traditional theism called for an eventual corrective, analogous to Luther’s 95-Theses at the dawn of the reformation, and perhaps with the same type of reception.

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<sup>226</sup> Michael S. Horton, “Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 2 (June 2002): 341. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP317-341\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP317-341_JETS.pdf))

<sup>227</sup> Romans 1:19-20. Paul lays the foundation for general or natural revelation of God through the wonder and greatness of the created universe. Paul states that the eternal power and divine nature of God is revealed to all men. The fact that Christian theologians and pagan philosophers come to the same conclusion regarding the attributes and nature divine should be logically predictable since God holds both unbelievers and believers accountable to Him.

However, there has been a great deal of writing and discussion on open theism in recent years.

One of the first notable works dealing directly with open theism, although predating the term, was Richard Rice's book, *The Openness of God*.<sup>228</sup> Rice's work opened the door for other well-known theistic philosophers, such as Richard Swinburne, to discuss alternative views of God's omniscience. Swinburne, in his work *The Coherence of Theism*, gave extensive treatment to the understanding of God's foreknowledge, emphasizing that things do not come to pass because God knows it, but rather that God knows it because they will come to pass, sustaining what he defines as man's truly free actions.<sup>229</sup> Rice would later contribute to a book of the same title, *The Openness of God*, written in conjunction with Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Bassinger, which would become what many consider to be the beginning of a heated debate between open and classical theists.<sup>230</sup> By the late 1990's, many of these same authors expanded their views on open theism with works of their own. In 1998, John Sanders published *The God Who Risks*, which sought to offer both philosophical/theological and Scriptural support to the view of open theism.<sup>231</sup> In 2001, Clark Pinnock also published his own work dedicated to open theism titled *Most Moved Mover*. Gregory A. Boyd produced a book titled *God of the Possible*, which sought to address those issues that rapidly earned charges of heresy, and do so in a format that diverged from technical and philosophical approach of his contemporaries and simplified

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<sup>228</sup> James Rissler, "Open Theism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/o-theism> (accessed July 31, 2014).

<sup>229</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1986), 168.

<sup>230</sup> Rissler, "Open Theism."

<sup>231</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 13.

the subject for the average reader.<sup>232</sup> While many other works have been produced since these writings, it can be argued that the leading edge of open theism is comprised of the works of Pinnock, Sanders and Boyd.

Beginning in 2000, the controversy caused by open theism took center stage in the forum of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Christian Society. At the Tuesday evening ETS executive committee meeting, held November 14, 2000, the committee secretary read a motion, subsequently approved by unanimous vote, which stated, “The Executive Committee, in response to requests from a group of charter members and others, to address the compatibility of the view commonly referred to a[s] (sic) ‘Open Theism’ with biblical inerrancy, wishes to state the following: We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future including all future decision and actions of free moral agents. However, in order to insure fairness to members of the society who differ with this view, we propose the issue of such incompatibility be taken up as part of our discussion in next year’s conference ‘Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries.’”<sup>233</sup>

In the following year, the 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of ETS picked the issue up where the previous meeting left off. On November 15, 2001, John Sanders presented his answer to the question, “Is Open Theism Evangelical?” in the affirmative, while Bruce Ware argued based on the point that “divine exhaustive foreknowledge is an essential part of God’s character and the inerrancy of Scripture, open theism is therefore outside of the

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<sup>232</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 12-13.

<sup>233</sup> “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Second Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44 1, (March 2001): 182. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/44/44-1/44-1-PP179-190\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/44/44-1/44-1-PP179-190_JETS.pdf))

boundaries of evangelicalism.<sup>234</sup> On the Friday morning of the convention, the ETS Executive Committee met and proposed a motion by the society, which read, “Whereas several charter members and others have asked the Evangelical Theological Society to address the compatibility of the view commonly referred to as ‘Open Theism’ with biblical inerrancy, Be it resolved that: 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>235</sup> The motion passed an overwhelming majority vote, and on the subsequent day, then President Darrell Bock introduced the motion in the business meeting with the suggested amendment that the words, “Whereas...inerrancy,” be deleted in order to separate the vote on God’s omniscience from any connection with the conception of inerrancy.<sup>236</sup> His recommendation was implemented, and the final statement presented to the main body was passed by a ballot vote by 253 to 66, with 41 abstentions.<sup>237</sup>

The results of this initial volley were the immediate and pointed responses from all of the key persons. The next edition of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* saw responses and counter-responses as well as works which dealt with the issues on the periphery of open theism. Bruce Ware opened with an article titled, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?” which after presenting numerous implications from open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine

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<sup>234</sup> “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 1, (March 2002): 183. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-1/45-1-PP183-188\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-1/45-1-PP183-188_JETS.pdf))

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

foreknowledge, he concluded that, “the cost to doctrine and faith by open theism’s denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge is too great to be accepted within evangelicalism.”<sup>238</sup>

Responses were offered by Pinnock, Boyd and Sanders, ranging from an appeal to come to common ground to outright counter-attack. Pinnock’s article titled, “There is Room for Us: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” sought to show that Ware’s assessment of open theism was void of discussion regarding the positive aspects of open theism.<sup>239</sup> He appealed to the history of dissention that has occurred in the development of Christian doctrine, stating, “There is room for us. Evangelicalism is a big tent. It is a family of denominations and theologies. No simple list of doctrines can define it. The boundaries keep changing.”<sup>240</sup> Gregory Boyd’s responded to Ware’s article using sharp rhetoric with his own work, deceptively titled, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware.” In his work, Boyd redirected the accusation of denying God’s true nature back on to Ware, through a haphazard explanation that given God’s infinite intelligence there is no difference between His knowing a certainty and knowing a possibility, and therefore Ware’s line of reasoning is tantamount to a “denial of God’s infinite intelligence.”<sup>241</sup> Boyd heightened the attack on Ware, accusing his article of using “alarmist and inflammatory language,” and being politically motivated to drive a wedge

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<sup>238</sup> Bruce A. Ware, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 2, (June 2002): 212. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP193-212\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP193-212_JETS.pdf))

<sup>239</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, “There is Room for Us,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 2, (June 2002): 214. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP213-219\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP213-219_JETS.pdf))

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>241</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 2, (June 2002): 235. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP233-243\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP233-243_JETS.pdf))

into the ETS.<sup>242</sup> But it was Sanders, who could not refrain from showing his disdain even in the title of his article, “Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” similarly diverted criticism back onto Ware, stating that his was not merely a criticism against open theism, but with traditional Arminianism.<sup>243</sup> Sanders notes, “though Ware attacks neo-Arminianism (open theism), his real assault is against all forms of Arminianism. So Arminians should be very wary of Ware’s criticisms.”<sup>244</sup> In total, these articles removed any pretenses and drew clear lines between those who held a traditional view and those who supported open theism. But they were not the last words spoken from the ETS.

At the 54<sup>th</sup> annual meeting, in November 2002, Roger Nicole levied a challenge to the works of Clark Pinnock and John Sanders as being incompatible with the society’s doctrinal beliefs.<sup>245</sup> Based on his claim, Nicole offered a motion to bring the issue to the executive committee for determination and evaluation of whether their works were incompatible with the doctrine of the ETS Constitution.<sup>246</sup> After lengthy discussion, the members voted to refer both Pinnock and Sanders, after which the executive committee agreed to convene, hear challenges from all sides, and present their findings at the next-year’s annual meeting.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>243</sup> John Sanders, “Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 2, (June 2002): 221. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP221-231\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-2/45-2-PP221-231_JETS.pdf))

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>245</sup> “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 46 1, (March 2003): 174. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/46/46-1/46-1-pp171-177\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/46/46-1/46-1-pp171-177_JETS.pdf)).

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

In 2004, at the 55<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the ETS in Atlanta, GA, then president David Howard Jr. called a special business meeting to vote on the membership charges brought against Pinnock and Sanders.<sup>248</sup> Statements were provided by Pinnock, Sanders and Ware, as well as various comments from the membership.<sup>249</sup> It is worth noting that in his statement, Pinnock expressed appreciation to the committee for pointing out what he referred to as a “degree of ambiguity” in his book *Most Moved Mover*.<sup>250</sup> The final result of the meeting was a vote to sustain the charges which fell in favor of Pinnock (32.9% for and 67.1% opposed), but against Sanders (62.7% for and 37.3% opposed); however, as a two-thirds majority was required for dismissal, neither were removed from ETS membership.<sup>251</sup>

While the end result was that both Pinnock and Sanders retained their membership, there were repercussions over the issue. Both Sanders and the Board of Trustees at Huntington College, where Sanders held a position as a Professor of Theology, agreed that his personal views of open theism were not an issue, but both acknowledge that his public debate with ETS was an issue which led to his eventual removal from the tenure track and subsequent departure.<sup>252</sup> The controversy over the issue is has not

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<sup>248</sup> “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 47 1, (March 2004): 170. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/47/47-1/47-1-pp167-173\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/47/47-1/47-1-pp167-173_JETS.pdf)).

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>252</sup> Stan Guthrie, “Open or Closed Case?” *Christianity Today*, (December 2004): (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/decemberweb-only/12-20-32.0.html>)

abated, and open theism remains a view that is presented in contrast to traditional views: both Calvinist and Arminian.<sup>253</sup>

### Summarizing the Historical Development of Open Theism

Based on the previous points, the history of open theism places it on the fringe of the classical views at best, and as heresy at worst. Historically, it is best viewed as a counter to classical theism, rather than a view that has existed in strength throughout the history of Christian doctrinal development. Its current proponents, as evidenced by the debate at ETS, are viewed as outside of the classical views of God. The point of looking at the development is to place its historic credibility in proper context, as the historical views and opinions of the early church do matter. However, the primary purpose for this analysis is really to address the issue and clear the way for the more important analysis, which is whether Scripture supports the open view. In order to accomplish this point, this thesis will first present the open theism's stance regarding Scriptural support for their view.

### Scriptural Support for the Open Theism View

Prior to looking at the evidence from Scripture that open theists present to support their case, there are two important points of open theism to remember for context. The first point in the open theists' view is that love is the most important quality that can be attributed to God.<sup>254</sup> The second point is that God wishes to be responsive to His creation.<sup>255</sup> For this reason, He is willing to be affected by His creation's actions.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> John Sanders' open theist views were contrasted in the 4-Views series book titled *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God* along not only the Calvinist views of Paul Helm and Bruce Ware, but also against the classical Arminian views of Roger E. Olson.

<sup>254</sup> Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," 15.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

This is at the heart of the open theists' view. Clark Pinnock, in rejecting the findings of the resolution of the ETS during their 2001 Annual Meeting that the Bible clearly declares God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge, states that, to the contrary, Scripture clearly indicates a future that is partly settled and partly not settled.<sup>257</sup>

While there are many verses which open theists present as evidence of their view in Scripture, it is the intent of this thesis to present only a few in order to capture the essence of their arguments.

#### Open Theist Evidence that God is Surprised by Free Actions of Mankind

As has already been stated, key to the open theists' understanding of God is the notion that He has granted the ability to make free will decisions to His creation, and that as such, if those actions are to be truly free, then God cannot have foreknown of them before man decided to do them.<sup>258</sup> If this notion is true, then one could expect to find examples in Scripture where God seems to have been surprised by man's decisions and needed to respond to them. This, according to the open theist, is exactly what one finds when they look into Scripture. The following verses are representative of those used by open theists to claim through Scripture that God's omniscience and foreknowledge does not include all of man's future free will decisions, as some of them seem to catch God "off-guard."

### **Genesis 3**

One of the first examples of God seemingly caught unaware by one of man's free will decisions is in Genesis 3. Genesis 3 gives the account of the fall of mankind due to

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Pinnock, "There is Room for Us," 217.

<sup>258</sup> Pinnock, "Open Theism: An Answer to my Critics," 240.

their disobedience to God's clearly stated will. The verses which followed man's first sin depict God as being unaware of the situation and unaware of what had been done. In verse 8, Adam and Eve, after hearing the sound of God walking the garden, hid themselves from Him in shame. This supposedly caused God to call out inquiring of the man, "Where are you?"<sup>259</sup> After explaining to God that they hid in shame because of their nakedness, God again inquired, "Who told you that you were naked," and finally, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"<sup>260</sup> All of these verses seem to depict both a broad situation in which God was unable to foresee man's early disobedience and the specific instances in which God seems unaware of the details around him.

As such, this section of verses emphasizes a very important point to the open theist regarding God's sovereignty. It has already been declared as fundamental to the open theist belief that God exercises a general form of sovereignty vice a meticulous sovereignty. As Sanders points out, the entire scene demonstrates the notion that God made the world with the possibility to question the divine wisdom.<sup>261</sup> The insinuation being that if God were to exercise meticulous sovereignty, then questioning the divine wisdom would be impossible.

### **Numbers 14:11 and Hosea 8:5**

In Numbers 14, Moses hears the complaints from the people of Israel, who after hearing the report from all but two of the spies who were sent into the Promised Land

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<sup>259</sup> Genesis 3:9.

<sup>260</sup> Genesis 3:11.

<sup>261</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 47.

that it was occupied by the giant Nephilim, and that taking the land would mean their doom. The people cried out to Moses, “Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?”<sup>262</sup> Moses then conveyed God’s surprise and dismay at the lack of faith shown by the people of Israel as He inquired to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?”<sup>263</sup> At first glance, this verse appears to portray God as asking a literal question to which He doesn’t know the answer, which is when will Israel stop rejecting God and not living in faith?

A similar depiction is found in the book of Hosea. The prophet declares from God regarding the nation of Israel the inquiry, “How long will they be incapable of innocence?”<sup>264</sup> Again, this appears to be a question to which God is sincerely seeking an answer. Gregory Boyd points to these verses as proof that as God asks genuine questions regarding the future, this therefore demonstrates that the future is at least partially open.<sup>265</sup> Furthermore, Boyd rejects the implication that these questions are rhetorical in nature, stating that nothing in the text requires the reader to see their meaning as anything other than God’s frustration over the Israelites stubbornness.<sup>266</sup> There are other examples in Scripture, but these two are sufficient for the open theist to serve as proof that are questions regarding man’s actions, to which God apparently does not have answers.

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<sup>262</sup> Numbers 14:2-3.

<sup>263</sup> Numbers 14:11.

<sup>264</sup> Hosea 8:5.

<sup>265</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 58.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

## Isaiah 5:2-5

Other verses give the appearance that God is genuinely surprised when His plans go awry. The prophet Isaiah prophesied a parable from God regarding a vineyard in which the “beloved” works and toils over the garden around it, providing the best possible ground for which the vineyard can grow.<sup>267</sup> Clearly, the parable declares the expectation that the vineyard would produce good grapes, but yet it only produced worthless ones.<sup>268</sup> The parable then turns to a proclamation from God, in which He asks what more He could have done for His “vineyard”, which seems to have disappointed Him in its fruit produced, resulting in His wrath.<sup>269</sup>

Richard Rice notes in this verse the apparent point that God’s plans can be thwarted by man’s free decisions as demonstrative that God’s foreknowledge does not include the free will decisions of man, otherwise it would not be a surprise when those plans don’t work out.<sup>270</sup> Boyd also believes that these verses from Isaiah affirm the open theists’ position on God’s foreknowledge, stating, “If everything is eternally certain to God, as the classical view of foreknowledge holds, how could the Lord twice say that he “expected” one thing to occur, only to have something different occur?”<sup>271</sup> Boyd emphasizes through these verses the open view that despite God’s sovereignty, some things are not settled until man makes a free will decision.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Isaiah 5:2.

<sup>268</sup> Isaiah 5:2.

<sup>269</sup> Isaiah 5:4.

<sup>270</sup> Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 54-55.

<sup>271</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 59-60.

## **Jeremiah 19:5**

Finally, Jeremiah 19 is also used by open theists to show that things happen as a result of man's free will decisions of which God is unaware. The prophet declares from the Lord His impending judgment on Israel due to their worship of other Gods, stating regarding their specific worship of Baal, "(The Israelites) have built the high places of Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind."<sup>273</sup> The open theist says God's statement that the practices of Israelites in worshiping Baal did not enter His mind is indicative of the fact that He did not know about such practice until man decided freely to do it against His will. Boyd sees this statement as clearly precluding any notion that the behavior of the Israelites was "eternally certain" in God's mind.<sup>274</sup>

### God Relents His Decisions

Open theists also point to verses that give the appearance that God has relented on certain decisions and changed His mind, or has regretted certain decisions leading to alternate actions. The implication in these verses is that it is the free will actions of mankind had caused God to change His mind, meaning that the action on the part of man was a surprise to God.

## **Genesis 6:6**

One of the most commonly cited verses by open theists is Genesis 6:6. This verse precedes the account of the global flood which God used to destroy mankind with the

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>273</sup> Jeremiah 19:5.

<sup>274</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 62.

exception of Noah and his family. In this verse, Moses recounts God's thoughts as, "The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."<sup>275</sup>

Jason Nicholls states that Genesis 6:6 is an example of how even depraved people can cause God to adjust His plans, and that based on their free actions God may scrap His plans while maintaining His original and primary purposes.<sup>276</sup> Furthermore, Sanders claims that verses like Genesis 6:6 make no sense in the traditional framework because specific sovereignty would not see God's plans and desires thwarted by the decisions of mankind.<sup>277</sup> Therefore, from an open theists' perspective, Genesis 6:6 exemplifies the Scriptural proof that God's sovereignty is general vice specific, and God does not foresee the free decisions of man.

#### **Exodus 32:14**

Moses recounted another example when God was angry with the people of Egypt for making the golden calf, and purposed to destroy them. After Moses intervened and pleaded with the Lord to not destroy Israel, so that He will not be impugned by the Egyptians for being a malicious God who led them out to the desert to murder them.<sup>278</sup> Moses states that this led the Lord to change His mind about what He planned to do to the Israelites.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Genesis 6:6.

<sup>276</sup> Jason Nicholls, "Openness and Inerrancy: Can they be Compatible?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45 4, (December 2002): 642. ([http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-4/45-4-PP629-649\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/45/45-4/45-4-PP629-649_JETS.pdf))

<sup>277</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 213.

<sup>278</sup> Exodus 32:11-12.

<sup>279</sup> Exodus 32:14.

Richard Rice adamantly affirms an open theist's view of this verse, stating, "The fact is that God relents in direct response to Moses' plea, not as a consequence of the people's repentance of their apostasy."<sup>280</sup> Boyd affirms this view as well, noting that it was specifically because of Moses' intercessory prayer that God changed his mind about what He planned to do to the people of Israel.<sup>281</sup>

### **1 Samuel 15:11, 35**

Another portion of Scripture that is used by the open theists to demonstrate regret that God has over His decisions as a result of man's free will decisions involves the kingship of Saul. In 1 Samuel 15 is found statements from God which demonstrates this. Seemingly frustrated with Saul's disobedience, God declares in verse 11, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands;" a point which was reemphasized in verse 35.<sup>282</sup> Similar to the accounts from Moses in Genesis about God's regret in creating man and in Exodus about God relenting from punishing the nation of Israel, this verse gives the impression that due to the free will actions of man, in this case the decisions and behaviors of Saul, God is disappointed in the outcome and regrets His decisions. This implies that the disappointment is a result of God being surprised by the outcome, meaning He did not know what that outcome would be.

Boyd highlights this point by asking the question, and then answering, "We must wonder how the Lord could truly experience regret for making Saul king if he was

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<sup>280</sup> Rice, 28.

<sup>281</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 83.

<sup>282</sup> 1 Samuel 15:11, 35

absolutely certain that Saul would act the way he did... Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than we expected or hoped for when the decision was made.”<sup>283</sup> Classical theists will point to this verse as anthropomorphic, meaning it only represents change on the part of God. In response to this, Sanders states, “Asserting that it is a nonliteral expression does not solve the problem because it has to mean something. Just what is the anthropomorphic expression an expression of? Thus classical theists are left with the problem of misleading biblical texts, or, at best, meaningless metaphors regarding the nature of God.”<sup>284</sup>

There are other verses used by open theists to support their views, but they fall under the same themes which find God responding to man’s free will actions. It is of no surprise that classical theists have responded to the open theists’ interpretation of these verses, which will be discussed in subsequent sections.

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<sup>283</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 56.

<sup>284</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 68.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE IMPACT OF OPEN THEISM ON THE DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY

Armed with a thorough understanding of both the doctrine of inerrancy and the views of open theism, it is time to return the focus of this thesis towards how open theism impacts the doctrine of inerrancy. As has already been stated, for classical theists, the heart of the issue of the debate at the Evangelical Theological Society was that open theism violated the stance on inerrancy required of the members of the ETS.<sup>285</sup> Since ETS seeks to serve as a scholarly body dedicated to upholding the principles of inerrancy, it may be argued that the debate which occurred within the context of the annual meetings between members of the organization may serve as an example in the broader context of Evangelical Christianity.<sup>286</sup> As the details of the debate at ETS have already been discussed in the previous chapter, they will not be repeated here. Instead, this thesis will affirm the claim that a belief in open theism necessarily means that an adherent to such a view no longer holds to a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, as defined in chapter one.

This thesis has already shown that open theists take issue with several traditional views of God, such as the doctrine of immutability. However, in order to prove the central thesis, focus will be given to how the open theists' view affects the view of God's omniscience and His sovereignty. The reason for choosing these two attributes on which

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<sup>285</sup> Ware, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?" 202. This was impetus behind Roger Nicole's specific charge against Pinnock and Sanders at the 54<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of ETS. The charge was substantiated even though reference to inerrancy was later taken out, for the purpose of focusing on the charge on the issue of open theism, and not inerrancy.

<sup>286</sup> The Evangelical Theological Society, "About the ETS," (<http://www.etsjets.org/about>).

to focus this thesis towards demonstrating its deleterious effects on the doctrine of inerrancy is that the open theists' view most clearly concerns itself with what God knows (His omniscience), to include when He knows it (His divine foreknowledge), as well as what God does with that knowledge (in particular, the exercise of His sovereignty over man's decisions and actions). The subsequent effects of modifying the Christian understanding of these two doctrines spreads into virtually every other doctrine, to include How God knows of and deals with sin (hamartiology and soteriology), His dealings with man in a personal and corporate sense (anthropology and ecclesiology), and seeing His plans ultimately to fruition (eschatology). This is not to say that the doubt cast by open theism on the classical understanding of other attributes of God is not important. It is merely to say that omniscience and sovereignty are sufficient in demonstrating this deleterious effect.

### **Impact on a Traditional View of God's Omniscience**

As has already been discussed, at the heart of the open theist view is what it really means for God to be omniscient, specifically as it relates to God's foreknowledge.<sup>287</sup> In highlighting the open theists' view of omniscience and divine foreknowledge as the critical point of their departure from orthodoxy, Bruce Ware states, "Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge provides the basis for the major lines of difference between the openness view and all versions of classical theism, including any other version of Arminianism."<sup>288</sup> Therefore, in establishing that God's omniscience, and by extension His exhaustive divine foreknowledge, is a critical point of separation

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<sup>287</sup> That God's foreknowledge is considered a subset of and foundational to a traditional theists' definition of omniscience will be discussed in a subsequent section.

<sup>288</sup> Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 65.

between classical and open theists, an analysis of those differences will produce conclusions that will be offered as to the validity of the view of open theism.

#### Traditional Theism's Understanding of God's Omniscience

With little variation amongst traditional theists, a definition of God's omniscience can be simplified as God knows everything. This includes everything in the past, present and future; it includes both those things realized and those things possible. There is literally nothing that God does not know or of which He is unaware. Such definitions are not hard to find in even a cursory look at traditional theologians.

One such definition is offered by Arthur Pink in His preeminent work on God's attributes, in which he states, "God is omniscient. He knows everything: everything possible, everything actual; all events and all creatures, of the past, the present, and the future. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven, in earth, and in hell."<sup>289</sup> Pink's definition of God leaves little room for the possibility that there is anything that God does not know. In context of such an understanding of God's full and perfect omniscience, this attribute is of great benefit to the believer. Pink notes that even the prayers of the believer are made more perfect, as God's omniscience ensures that any human inability or incompleteness during prayer is nullified to his own benefit.<sup>290</sup> In terms whether God's knowledge is limited to events past or present, or events big or small, Pink definitively endorses a view of God's omniscience as including all things possible, stating, "God not only knows whatsoever has happened in the past and in every part of his vast domains, and he is not only thoroughly acquainted with

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<sup>289</sup> Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 21.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

everything that is now transpiring throughout the entire universe, but he is also perfectly cognizant of every event from the least to the greatest, that ever will happen in the ages to come.”<sup>291</sup> Again, this view offers virtually no limits to God’s knowledge, to include conditions placed on man’s involvement in his own actions. The reason, according to Pink, that God’s knowledge is complete is because the future is dependent only on God, as opposed to the actions of mankind.<sup>292</sup>

The great theologian and former President of Dallas Theological Seminary, Lewis Sperry Chafer, defines God’s omniscience as being the all-inclusive and infinite ability of God to know all things concerning Himself and all of His works.<sup>293</sup> According to Chafer, God is able to comprehend all things in the past, present and future, as well as those that are possible or actual.<sup>294</sup> Such a definition inherently rules out the chance that man’s free choices, even future ones, could somehow be outside of God’s knowledge. Chafer realizes that God’s attributes of omnipresence and eternity coincide with a proper understanding of His omniscience so that, “to God, the things of the past are as real as though now present, and the things of the future are as real as though past.”<sup>295</sup> Again, the implication of this view is that there is nothing of which God is or could be unaware. Nothing escapes His knowledge or understanding. But Chafer also ties God’s foreknowledge, which he restricts to the things that are foreordained by God, to His

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>293</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, vol 1*, (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 192.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

omniscience and considers both as “patent measurements of the divine knowledge.”<sup>296</sup> In other words, in no way are the concepts of God’s omniscience and foreknowledge separate. Chafer emphasizes God’s complete knowledge is a unified whole, stating, “From the beginning He knows the end, and from the end He knows the beginning. Omniscience brings everything—past, present, and future—with equal reality before the mind of God. Strictly speaking the distinction of foreknowledge in God is a human conception; for divine knowledge is simultaneous as opposed to succession.”<sup>297</sup> Chafer’s definition emphasizes that as part of His very nature, God’s knowledge is outside of time as we understand it, and therefore is not limited to the decision points of man, which exist in time.

One of the preeminent theologians today, Norman Geisler offers a similar definition of God’s omniscience that can be categorized as representative of traditional theism. With a nod to the historicity behind the traditional theist’s view, Geisler defines God’s omniscience as His divine knowledge of everything that is past, present, and future, as well as those things that are actual and possible.<sup>298</sup> Geisler does acknowledge one limitation to God’s knowledge, which he qualifies as being the impossible or contradictory.<sup>299</sup> According to Geisler, God’s omniscience is actually derived from a few of His other attributes.<sup>300</sup> One of these attributes is God’s infinity, which presents the idea that as God is infinite in character, without limits whatsoever, this would entail that

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 180.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 181.

His knowledge would therefore be without limits as well.<sup>301</sup> Geisler also seeks to make a logical argument for God's omniscience out of the nature of reality, since reality, according to Geisler, must necessarily include both actual and possible while excluding only the impossible.<sup>302</sup> Geisler argues if God's knowledge extends to all that is real (actual and possible), because if it did not He would not be omniscient, then God must know the future completely, to include the future free actions of people, since the future is possible and not impossible.<sup>303</sup> Also, by nature of God's perfection, His knowledge must also be perfect.<sup>304</sup> Since God's knowledge of Himself is perfect, His knowledge of how others will interact with Him and participate in His perfections must necessarily be perfect as well.<sup>305</sup> Again, by definition, this would exclude the possibility that free will decisions of mankind would or could prevent God from knowing perfectly how they would interact with His being and nature. Therefore, according to Geisler's view of God, He must have omniscience that means perfect and complete knowledge of all past, present, future, actual and possible events with no exception for man's free will decisions.

Therefore, given the views of the previous theologians as a representative sample of classical theists' understanding of God's omniscience, this thesis will use as a working definition that God's omniscience means that He fully, completely, simultaneously and perfectly knows all things, both actual and possible, regarding the past, present and future

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

events without qualification to man's free decisions. This definition will be contrasted against the open theist's view.

### Open Theism's Understanding of God's Omniscience

Open Theism's view of God's omniscience and divine foreknowledge have already been discussed in this thesis, but additional comments are warranted for the purpose of comparing their view with traditional theism. Again, the definition that is representative of the open theists' view of God's omniscience can be stated as, "knowing all there is to know such that God's knowledge is coextensive with reality."<sup>306</sup> On the surface, this view may seem to coincide with the classical theists' view of God's omniscience. However, in contrast to the classical theists' view of God's omniscience, which declares that God's knowledge is unlimited in any possible way, open theists' declare that God's omniscience is actually limited. The approach the open theists take in qualifying the limitation of God's omniscience is contorted and precarious to the very definition of the word "omniscience." One can focus on two points from open theists to explain how an omnipotent, omniscient God could somehow be "limited."

First, in context of what has already been declared to be open theism's belief that God's sovereignty is exercised in uncertainty, it logically follows that the exercise of sovereignty under such conditions would be voluntary on the part of God; otherwise this would in turn affect the understanding of God's omnipotence. In other words, it is God who set the limitations on His own divine knowledge, and not part of His divine nature. This is exactly the claim of open theists, such as Clark Pinnock, who states regarding God's omniscience being limited, "It is a self-limitation that God himself established for

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<sup>306</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 194

the sake of a measured independence of the world and the possibility of genuine freedom in the world.”<sup>307</sup> Admittedly, this may appear to be a logically coherent argument in that if God offers a libertarian free will, as defined by the open theists, to His creation and allows for free decisions, he must not know of these decisions prior to them being made. However, it is not logically coherent as a definition of omniscience. In other words, it violates the law of non-contradiction to say that omniscience, or all-knowing as could somehow include any limitation, voluntary or otherwise, that leaves the all-knowing being unable to know all things. The open theists answer that claim with a second point regarding God’s omniscience.

The second point levied by open theists is that traditional theists improperly define those things that are “knowable.” This claim starts with the open theist’s explanation of how God comes to know things. Pinnock offers on behalf of open theists a view that God’s thinking follows a “temporal succession” in which God remembers the past, interacts with the present, and anticipates the future.<sup>308</sup> The implication in Pinnock’s statement is that if God anticipates the future, it must follow that He does not know of it with certainty. As has already been stated, this contrasts against a traditional view of God’s omniscience that God knows all-things about all-times, all the time.<sup>309</sup> God’s thinking should not be considered temporal because His is not temporal. The same way in which He does not exist solely in one point of time, but rather in all of them simultaneously, God knows all matters of all time simultaneously. But more important to

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<sup>307</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 93.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>309</sup> Chafer, 192.

the open theist than the mechanics of how God knows things is the nature of the things God is able to know. According to John Sanders, “there is considerable debate regarding the nature of “reality” (specifically, whether the future is real) and whether there may be propositions that God knows at one time but not another.”<sup>310</sup>

On this point lies the key to the open theists’ argument for a form of omniscience that is complete by their definition, but limited by the definition of the classical theists. In other words, open theists defend their view by changing the definition of what omniscience means, but argue that their view is merely clarifying the definition. Sanders openly declares that the struggle is a matter of semantics, stating, “It is important to note that the debate is about the nature of God’s omniscience, not whether God is omniscient.”<sup>311</sup> Gregory Boyd points to the nature of this debate as being analogous to the debate within the church as to whether God’s knowledge should include His knowledge of counterfactuals, and that the church’s willingness to entertain this debate should extend to open theism as well.<sup>312</sup>

Clark Pinnock, while acknowledging the degree to which this point attracts a large amount of attention and controversy, states that the open theist model affirms God’s omniscience, but denies exhaustive definite foreknowledge.<sup>313</sup> Focusing on the point in the open theist’s definition of omniscience that God’s knowledge is coextensive with reality, open theists’ point on this issue is that exhaustive definite foreknowledge includes all things that can be known, but future free actions constitute actions that cannot be

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<sup>310</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 194.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 116.

<sup>313</sup> Pinnock, “Open Theism: An Answer to my Critics”, 240.

known because future actions are not actual or real, and therefore cannot be known.<sup>314</sup> Therefore, in defense of the open theist view that God is omniscient, Pinnock declares, “We do not see this as ‘limited’ foreknowledge because it views God as knowing everything that can be known.”<sup>315</sup> Attempting to quantify God’s omniscience in this manner as being “dynamic,” open theists claim that, “God knows the past and the present with exhaustive definite knowledge and knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open).”<sup>316</sup>

However, for the open theist this argument is not just logical, but it is pragmatic as well. Their understanding God’s omniscience by this definition, as a self-limitation for the purpose of expressing greater love facilitates an interpretation of the Scripture passages regarding the divine foreknowledge as God bringing about His ultimate goal of loving His creation. Again, it is important to emphasize that in the open theists’ view the most important attribute of God is His love.<sup>317</sup> The impact of such a view, elevating His love above His holiness or His omniscience, has implications which are clear. Primarily, as Richard Rice states, a consequence to understanding God’s love as His greatest attribute is that His knowledge must therefore be seen as dynamic instead of as being static.<sup>318</sup> This is due to God’s love for and desire to be interactive with His creation, which means that his knowledge cannot logically include the free will decisions of the

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> John Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, by Bruce A. Ware, Paul Helm, Roger E. Olson, and John Sanders, (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 199.

<sup>317</sup> Rice, 15.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 16.

created. Rice qualifies God's "dynamic" knowledge by stating, "Instead of perceiving the entire course of human existence in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires."<sup>319</sup> Rice places this point at the center of the open theists' position in that, "it regards God as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world."<sup>320</sup>

Therefore, the open theists' view provides a clear contrast to the traditional theists' view, to the degree that the very definition of omniscience is changed for the open theist. While this offers an interesting contrast to the traditional theists' view, it matters more what Scripture has to say regarding God's omniscience. Scripture will be the final arbiter as to which view gives the most accurate depiction of God's omniscience.

#### A Scriptural Understanding of God's Omniscience

Despite the dialogue on either side of this theological issue, for Christians the final determination of truth should lay in what is said through the inerrant, inspired, authoritative words of Scripture. Scripture, in the Christian view, should be the ultimate source of understanding on doctrines. As the ultimate standard, Scriptures clearly declare God's omniscience as being complete, perfect, and not contingent on anything. From Genesis to the Revelation, the Spirit-inspired authors present a view of God as one who knows all things and accomplishes all that His will declares. As Ware points out regarding what Scripture says about God's divine foreknowledge, "Open theism collapses as a comprehensive model of divine providence if it can be demonstrated that God does in fact know all the future, including all future contingencies and all future free

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

choices and actions of his moral creatures.”<sup>321</sup> Therefore, it is to Scripture where one should look to understand the nature of God’s divine omniscience and foreknowledge, and use these verses to bring a final conclusion as to the validity of the open theist’s view. As such, evidence will now be provided from Scripture that shows that God’s knowledge is exhaustive, is prior to the free actions and decisions of His creation, and is certain in bringing about His ultimate purposes.

### **God’s Knowledge is Exhaustive**

Against what the open theist claims regarding God’s foreknowledge, Scripture is clear that God knows all things without qualification. One of the Scriptures that most clearly declares God’s omniscience is found within the psalms of David, Psalm 139:1-4:

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, You have searched me and known me.  
<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
You understand my thought from afar.  
<sup>3</sup> You scrutinize my path and my lying down,  
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.  
<sup>4</sup> Even before there is a word on my tongue,  
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.

This psalm clearly pays homage to God’s infinite knowledge. Even a cursory look at it shows David’s regard for God’s knowledge and qualifies it as infinite with the phrase, “you know it all,” a clear contrast to the open theists’ view that God merely knows all that is possible to know. Casting aside any argument that would claim that the words “You know it all” do not apply to the notion of omniscience, the first part of verse four clearly declares otherwise. For God to know words even before they were spoken would contradict what the open theist believes, giving clear indication that God’s knowledge precedes man’s actions and choices.

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<sup>321</sup> Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 99.

Interpretation of these verses as supporting the traditional theists' view abounds as many commentators have looked to this verse as the Biblical declaration of God's omniscience. Alan Ross points to this verse as demonstration of the depth to which God's knowledge can penetrate through an individual; and the result is that His knowledge penetrates completely.<sup>322</sup> Other commentators also arrive at the conclusion that this psalm from David emphasizes God's perfect omniscience. According to Matthew Henry's commentary on the Psalms, "David here lays down this great doctrine, that the God with whom we have to do has a perfect knowledge of us, and that all the motions and actions both of our inward and of our outward man are naked and open before him."<sup>323</sup>

Other verses offer similar endorsement of the infinite, complete and perfect nature of God's omniscience. As Elihu reproves Job regarding his thoughts on God, he inquires, "Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who has perfect knowledge?"<sup>324</sup> This, according to Roy Zuck, is the contrast between man and God, in which man suffers from ignorance and God beholds perfect knowledge.<sup>325</sup>

Again, according to the Psalmist, "He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit."<sup>326</sup> Focusing on the limitless nature of God's omniscience, commentators like

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<sup>322</sup> Alan P. Ross, "Psalms", in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, vol 1*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 891.

<sup>323</sup> Matthew Henry, "*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), Ps 139:1.

<sup>324</sup> Job 37:16, NASB.

<sup>325</sup> Roy Zuck, "Job," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol 1*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 765.

Matthew Henry look to this verse and observe that God’s knowledge is reflected by the Psalmist as, “a depth that can never be fathomed;” far from any notion that God’s omniscience is somehow qualified or restricted.<sup>327</sup>

God declares His full omniscience to and through His prophets, as He did with Jeremiah. God spoke to Jeremiah, “Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” declares the Lord. Do not I fill Heaven and earth?”<sup>328</sup> In context of this verse, God exists in every aspect, heaven and earth, so that nothing escapes His knowledge and justice. Of this, Charles Dyer affirms such a notion, stating, “His omniscience fills heaven and earth so that no place is outside His realm.”<sup>329</sup>

Therefore, Scripture clearly declares the complete and limitless nature of God’s omniscience. There is no reason to accept that God willingly self-limited His own omniscience. There is no place in Scripture that validates such claims.

### **God’s Knowledge is Prior to Free Will Decisions**

Next, and perhaps more specific in addressing the claims of the free will theists, one must look to Scripture to determine whether God lacks the ability to foreknow man’s free will decisions. Again, it is the claim of the free will theist that such foreknowledge is impossible. Certainly, Scripture is replete with examples that God knows His creatures deeply and intimately. In Job 24:23, Job reminds readers that God’s eyes are, “on their ways,” and that their activities are not out of His sight. This sentiment is repeated in Job 31:4, when Job asks rhetorically, “Does he not see my ways and count my every step?”

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<sup>326</sup> Psalm 147:4-5, NASB.

<sup>327</sup> Matthew Henry, “Psalm 147:5.”

<sup>328</sup> Jeremiah 23:24, NASB.

<sup>329</sup> Charles Dyer, “Jeremiah,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol I*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 1159.

Certainly these two verses alone are sufficient in highlighting the fact that God knows man intimately and understands him. However, there are verses that speak specifically to the issue raised by open theists, which is whether or not God knows man's decisions and actions before he makes them.

Again, returning to Psalms 139, one can see in verse four the clear declaration that God knows the words a man says even before he says them. This clearly refutes the open theists' claim that such knowledge is outside of the category of "knowable" information, and therefore out of the realm of God's omniscience. According to Alan P. Ross' commentary on Psalms, verse four is, "the one sample that epitomizes God's omniscience," declaring that the verse highlights God's ability to know the words that an individual will say before they say them, and therefore offering the better understanding of God's omniscience.<sup>330</sup> Such an action would obviously run counter to the open theists' view that man should have the freedom to choose their words in the moment and that God is without the ability of knowing those free choices in advance. God, according to the open theist, responds and reacts to our actions, which would include the spoken word. But this psalm from David shows that God knows what they are before one even speaks them. It declares that His omniscience and foreknowledge necessarily precede man's decisions.

David understood this principle well, and passed its wisdom to Solomon, stating, "And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and

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<sup>330</sup> Ross, 891.

understands every desire and every thought.”<sup>331</sup> Certainly, God’s understanding of desires and thoughts, which precede action, show that His knowledge is not limited by man’s free will decisions. It is on the basis of these desires that man is judged. This sentiment is found in other verses. For example, in contradiction to the open theists’ view that God learns from man, as a necessary part of the notion of “divine responsiveness,” Job asks the rhetorical question, “Can anyone teach knowledge to God,” the implication being that since He, “judges even the highest,” His knowledge must therefore be complete and not dependent on man’s actions for Him to “learn” facts to facilitate His judgment.<sup>332</sup>

In another example, Moses relayed God’s words to him in his final days when God gave Moses the prophecy that the nation of Israel would one day turn away from Him, and they would turn away to other gods.<sup>333</sup> God declared to Moses that He knew this was going to happen because He knew the intent of their hearts.<sup>334</sup> As the results of this disobedience are seen centuries later in the exile of the nation of Israel, this example shows clearly that God knows the thoughts of mankind even before they commit to such actions. Again, this is counter to what the open theist describes as God’s omniscience in Scripture.

### **God’s Knowledge is Certain**

One final aspect of God’s omniscience that is found in Scripture is that His knowledge is certain in carrying out His will and bringing about His commands. As

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<sup>331</sup> 1 Chronicles 28:9, NASB.

<sup>332</sup> Job 21:22, NASB.

<sup>333</sup> Deuteronomy 31:16-18, NASB.

<sup>334</sup> Deuteronomy 31:21, NASB.

spoken through the prophet Isaiah, God declared from the beginning that which He would accomplish in the end.<sup>335</sup> For God to have declared such things from the beginning, He logically would have to know about them as well. While this does not explicitly conflict with the view of the open theist, it does highlight a fallacy in the open theists' view, namely that God responds and reacts to the actions of man in bringing about His own will. In contradistinction to this notion, commentators like Matthew Henry point to this verse, and state regarding God's providence, "though God has many things in his purposes which are not in his prophecies, he has nothing in his prophecies but what are in his purposes. And he will do it, for he will never change his mind; he will bring it to pass, for it is not in the power of any creature to control him."<sup>336</sup> The implication of Henry's statement is that even the free will decisions of man are of insignificant in affecting God's ordinances, which He established in the beginning.

Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream is another example of God's knowledge of advanced events which facilitate His will and purposes. Daniel interprets the King's dream of the statue as the many kingdoms that would come and overtake the Babylonian kingdom.<sup>337</sup> As Daniel gives credit for interpretation of the dream to God, it is again at least implied that God knows all things, and isn't reliant on the decisions of men for His knowledge. He knows of their activities before they even commit to them.

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<sup>335</sup> Isaiah 46:10, NASB.

<sup>336</sup> Matthew Henry, Isaiah, 46:10.

<sup>337</sup> Daniel 2:28, NASB.

Perhaps the best example of God foreknowing and executing His plans, despite the free will decisions of mankind, is seen in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Luke records Peter's words that Jesus was given over to death according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.<sup>338</sup> This would once again contradict the view of the open theist. Peter is clearly saying that God foreknew the actions of those who gave Christ over to death, even before they had determined to do so. It is difficult to reconcile the open theist belief that God does not know the free actions of man with the words declared by Peter that God foreknew the actions of those who would give Christ over to death. In the open theists' view, those men would have the free will decisions to commit the acts or not. But the Scripture clearly say that God foreknew their decisions in order to fulfill His ultimate plan.

This concept is at the heart of prophecy. According to Arthur Pink, noting the degree to which Old Testament prophecy is presented and later fulfilled, "The perfect knowledge of God is exemplified and illustrated in every prophecy recorded in his word...Such prophecies could only have been given by one who knew the end from the beginning, and whose knowledge rested upon the unconditional certainty of the accomplishment of everything foretold."<sup>339</sup>

In summary, the Scriptural view of God's omniscience clearly aligns with the traditional theists against the views of the open theists. God's knowledge is perfect and unlimited in every sense. His knowledge includes the free will decisions of mankind

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<sup>338</sup> Acts 2:23, NASB.

<sup>339</sup> Pink, 25.

prior to their making those decisions. Finally, His perfect and complete knowledge can most readily be seen in the fulfillment of His will.

#### A Proper Understanding of God's Omniscience

Given the abundance of Scriptural evidence, it must be clearly stated that God's omniscience, against the definition provided by the open theist, is perfect and complete, to include those free will thoughts and actions of mankind. Unlimited means exactly that, no limitations whatsoever. As God is amply described in Scripture as having unlimited infinite knowledge, it must be acknowledged that God knows everything. As such, the definition provided by the open theists falls outside of Scripture and may be declared to violate the doctrine of inerrancy.

The future is fully knowable by God not because traditional theists say it is, but because traditional theists properly recognize that Scripture says it is. Norman Geisler affirms exhaustive divine foreknowledge from Scripture, stating that the term "infinite" used in Scripture testifies to the limitless nature of God's omniscience.<sup>340</sup> This includes the free will actions of His creation, as all of the future is certain to Him and He will bring everything to pass.<sup>341</sup> Chafer declares that there is no incongruity between "divine prescience and free moral action as being both Biblical and rational."<sup>342</sup> In countering the objections of those who are in favor of a view of God's omniscience as being contingent on man's free moral actions, Chafer states, "Aside from the implication which these objections present, namely, that God fears to know the result of free moral action, they

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<sup>340</sup> Geisler and House, 21.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>342</sup> Chafer, 195.

introduce a fallacy which is untenable.”<sup>343</sup> In other words, a belief that God’s omniscience is self-limited to be contingent on man’s free will decision necessarily implies that God is somehow afraid of knowing man’s free will decisions, which obviously contradicts much of what Scripture says about several of God’s attributes.

Attempting to divert attention away from the abundance of Scriptural support which slams the door shut against their arguments, open theists attempt to oversimplify the disagreement between themselves and traditional theists as surrounding the definition of omniscience. Geisler acknowledges that the current debate between classical theists and open theists involves debate over the very nature of God’s omniscience.<sup>344</sup> According to Geisler, under what he refers to as the “oxymoronic view of limited omniscience” held by the open theist, “God’s unlimited knowledge is now allegedly limited; His all-knowing is no longer the knowing of all.”<sup>345</sup> Arthur Pink identifies a proper understanding of God’s omniscience as being full and complete, to include all events past, present and future, as being critical to a proper understanding of the very nature of God.<sup>346</sup> In defense of the notion that man’s decisions cannot surprise an all-Supreme God, he offers, “Were it in anywise possible for something to occur apart from either the direct agency or permission of God, then that something would be independent of him, and he would at once cease to be Supreme.”<sup>347</sup> Changing the definition of omniscience away from both a plain understanding of the word and the Scriptural usage

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 180.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Pink, 24.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

of it only highlights the desperation of using such a fallacy as claiming “all-knowing” doesn’t really mean all-knowing.

Another effort by the open theists is to move the locus of the debate to lie elsewhere, rather than what is stated in Scriptures. One such attempt seems to divert the debate so that it becomes lost within the greater debate between Calvinists and Arminians, seemingly with the attempt to gain sympathies from the larger Arminian audience. John Sanders does not hide his attempts to deflect criticism from Ware against the open theist view as an attack against Arminianism, stating, “Ware rejects as absolutely unbiblical the Arminian views of human freedom, enabling grace, conditional election, and unlimited atonement. It is important to get these points on the table, because many readers will fail to see that these beliefs are behind his criticisms of open theism.”<sup>348</sup> This same accusation is echoed against Ware by Gregory Boyd.<sup>349</sup>

However, as open theism is seemingly untenable to classical Arminians and free will theists, support from Arminians has not been offered in abundance. For example, arguing from a classical Arminian position, Roger Olson makes a compelling argument against open theism, stating that simple foreknowledge is congruent with noncompatibilist free will.<sup>350</sup> According to Olson, who affirms that God’s omniscience is both in the Biblical and traditional sense, “God simply knows the future because it will happen; his knowing future free decisions and actions of creatures does not determine

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<sup>348</sup> Sanders, “Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” 221.

<sup>349</sup> Boyd, “Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware”, 239.

<sup>350</sup> Roger E. Olson, “Responses to John Sanders: Response by Roger E. Olson,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, by Bruce A. Ware, Paul Helm, Roger E. Olson, and John Sanders, (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 249

them.”<sup>351</sup> Alvin Plantinga expanded on this point, stating that claims that divine omniscience is incompatible with free will are based on confusion.<sup>352</sup> Plantinga argues that of the following two statements:

a) Necessarily, if God knows in advance that X will do A, then indeed X will do A.  
or

b) If God knows in advance that X will do A, then it is necessary that X will do A.  
only statement a) offers defense of the statement, “If God knows in advance the X will do A, then it must be the case that X will do A.”<sup>353</sup> Plantinga’s point in this defense is to say that God’s omniscience does not remove free will of the decision maker, it only emphasizes the certainty of the decision.

Similarly, William Lane Craig affirms the traditional understanding of God’s omniscience and shows the fallacy of the open theists’ view of God’s foreknowledge, stating that it makes God, “ignorant of vast stretches of forthcoming history, since even a single significant human choice could turn history in a different direction, and subsequent events would, as time goes on, be increasingly different from his expectations.”<sup>354</sup> Noting the extremely deleterious effect that this has on God’s omniscience, Lane declares,

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<sup>351</sup> Roger E. Olson, “The Classical Free Will Theist Model of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, by Bruce A. Ware, Paul Helm, Roger E. Olson, and John Sanders, (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 156.

<sup>352</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 67.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 39.

“At best God can be said to have a good idea of what will happen only in the very near future.”<sup>355</sup>

Perhaps one of the most damaging charges comes from Arminian theologian Thomas Oden. Declaring the view of God’s omniscience held by open theists to be heresy, Oden states, “The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds, as it has been in the history of exegesis of relevant passages.”<sup>356</sup> This statement simultaneously emphasizes that Scriptures declare God’s omniscience in the sense that it is affirmed by traditional theists and minimizes the claim by open theists that the struggle over this issue is congruent with the struggle between Calvinists and Arminians.

In fairness, Clark Pinnock understood this difference. While noting that open theism grew out of ideological and ecclesiastical traditions of Wesleyan-Arminianism, he acknowledged that both Wesley and Arminius held to traditional views of God’s omniscience.<sup>357</sup> This led Pinnock to declare that the open view was outside of the Arminian view at least due to their position on exhaustive foreknowledge, and even going as far to question the wisdom of Arminius in emphasizing exhaustive divine foreknowledge.<sup>358</sup> This should give traditional theists assurance that their struggle is against open theism, which some Arminians themselves accuse of being heretical, and not with Arminianism writ large.

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Thomas Oden, "The Real Reformers are the Traditionalists," *Christianity Today* 42, no. 2 (February 9, 1998): 46.

<sup>357</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 106.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 107.

Therefore, a proper understanding of God's omniscience, as seen throughout Scripture, aligns with the traditional theists' view that God has complete knowledge of all events past, present and future, to include the free will decisions of his creation. His omniscience is truly "all-knowing," commensurate with the clear meaning of the word.

### **Impact on a Traditional View of God's Sovereignty**

Similar to God's omniscience, the open theists' view has a profound impact on a Scriptural understanding of God's sovereignty. That God is sovereign and fully in control of all aspects of His creation is a foundational part of God's nature and understanding how He brings about His purposes. A weakened view of God's sovereignty has a deleterious effect on the believer's hope for the future, as God may not be in control enough to affect His will on human events and ultimately His divine purpose. Therefore, understanding how the open theists' view of God's sovereignty runs counter to Scripture, and therefore its inerrancy, is an important endeavor.

### **Traditional Theism's Understanding of God's Sovereignty**

God's sovereignty is fundamental to who He is. Along with His holiness, essential to God's being is His role as creator and ruler of all. It defines His very essence. Given this high degree of importance, defining His sovereignty has seen extensive treatment in the history of theological development and Biblical study. Similar to God's omniscience, one should not be surprised that there is strong unity among traditional theists as to the definition of God's sovereignty.

Norman Geisler defines God's sovereignty as His dominion over all things.<sup>359</sup> Distinguishing God's sovereignty from activities like creation and preservation, which he states are the conditions of God's control over all things, Geisler says that sovereignty

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<sup>359</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 2, 536.

specifically refers to God’s control over all.<sup>360</sup> He also notes that God’s sovereignty is based in several of His attributes; omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence to name a few.<sup>361</sup> As is the case with all God’s attributes, His sovereignty cannot supersede or be superseded by any other attribute. The two are intrinsically tied. According to Geisler, “Granted that there are free creatures (with the power of contrary choice), God’s omniscience is a necessary condition for complete sovereignty, for if God does not know for sure everything that will happen in advance, then He cannot be sure how free creatures will use their free will.”<sup>362</sup> God’s sovereignty covers every aspect of creation; He is in control over all things, and must therefore know all things. In contrast to the open theists’ view, Geisler identifies that this sovereignty includes human decisions.<sup>363</sup> Geisler points out, “So God can do whatever is possible to do—there are no limits on His power except that it be consistent with His own unlimited nature. He can do anything that does not involve a contradiction.”<sup>364</sup> As has already been discussed, full knowledge of man’s free decisions, even prior to man making those decisions, is not a contradiction, despite the claims of the open theist. Therefore, it should logically follow that God being able to do any and all things, despite the free will decisions of mankind, is also not a contradiction.

In Bible scholar D.A Carson’s article on God’s love and sovereignty, he notes two specific aspects of God’s sovereignty. First, he describes God as utterly sovereign,

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 539.

further qualifying that He is both omnipotent and omniscient.<sup>365</sup> Like the many scholars who see God's sovereignty as intrinsically tied to His omniscience and omnipotence, Carson notes that God's sovereignty extends over things as large as the millions of stars contained in the universe, or as meticulous as the hairs on a person's head.<sup>366</sup> Furthermore, against the general view of God's sovereignty held by the open theist, Carson states regarding the level of detail which God's sovereignty covers, "If you throw a pair of dice, the numbers that come up lie in the determination of God."<sup>367</sup> Second, Carson notes that God's sovereignty certainly includes election; whether this refers to God's election of the nation of Israel, His election of all the people of God, or His election of individuals.<sup>368</sup> This notion of election, which has been highly debated since the reformation, is important because it speaks to the primacy sovereignty of God over the free will choices of man in that it is God that chooses man, and not the other way around.

Theologian Charles Ryrie offers a similar definition of God's sovereignty. He sees a bipartite meaning of God's sovereignty: one part that refers to His position as the principle or Supreme Being in the universe, and a second part that refers to His supreme power in the universe.<sup>369</sup> According to Ryrie, God's complete control is manifested in

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<sup>365</sup> D. A. Carson, "God's Love and God's Sovereignty," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156, no. 623 (1999): 261.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>369</sup> Ryrie, 48.

the natural laws ordained by Him.<sup>370</sup> Ryrie notes the apparent contradiction between God's sovereignty and the free will of man.<sup>371</sup> As such, and similar to J.I. Packer before him, Ryrie identifies the God sovereignty/man freedom relationship as an apparent antimony in Scripture.<sup>372</sup> However, as Ryrie points out, an antimony is the mere appearance of a contradiction, and Scripture, replete with teachings of the perfections of God's sovereignty and man's depravity, should not be denied because of human inability to reconcile the two.<sup>373</sup> Ryrie establishes the balance by stating that in a proper view of sovereignty, "Sovereignty must not obliterate free will, and free will must never dilute sovereignty."<sup>374</sup> Ryrie's view provides emphasis from the traditional theists which shows that there is still an acceptance of the free will of man, but never to the degree that it diminishes God's sovereignty in order to sustain it.

Lewis Sperry Chafer states that God's sovereignty is more accurately described as a "prerogative" of God, rather than an attribute, as it is derived as a reality, and perhaps as a summation, of all His divine perfections.<sup>375</sup> As such, Chafer presents God's sovereignty as being absolute.<sup>376</sup> Lacking any type of qualification found in the open

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. J.I. Packer, in his work *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (1961, p. 27) identified the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility as an antimony contained in the Bible. His use of the term drew the objection of John Piper in the article titled "A Response to J.I. Packer on the So-Called Antinomy Between the Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility" (1976, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-response-to-ji-packer-on-the-so-called-antinomy-between-the-sovereignty-of-god-and-human-responsibility>), where Piper stated that moral necessity and human accountability are not an antimony.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Chafer, 223.

theists' view, Chafer describes God's sovereignty as, "He is Creator and His dominion is final. He is free to dispose of His creation as He will...All majesty and glory belong to God. All material things are His by the most absolute ownership."<sup>377</sup> In this context, it is virtually impossible to find exceptions that would find agreement with the open theists' description of God's sovereignty.

With these definitions of God's sovereignty from various traditional theists in mind, there are some basic points that can be drawn to form a single definition of God's sovereignty that is representative of the traditional theists' view. The first point is that God's sovereignty is intrinsically tied to the perfection of His other divine attributes. In other words, it is foundational to the very nature of who God is and what He does. It can also be said that God's sovereignty is absolute. As His attributes are unlimited and infinite, then so is His sovereignty. It logically follows that God's sovereignty includes both the general sense, such as His providence over the created universe, and the meticulous sense, in which He tends to the smallest of details. Finally, God's sovereignty is perfectly effective in insuring that His ultimate purposes are realized.

#### Open Theism's Understanding of God's Sovereignty

This thesis has already discussed the open theists' view of God's sovereignty in the previous chapter. However, it is appropriate to briefly revisit the two primary tenets of this view as they relate to God's sovereignty.

First, according to the open theist, God's sovereignty is exercised in uncertainty. This formulates into a "risk model of providence," in which God is willing to react to the

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

free will decisions of His creation.<sup>378</sup> Such uncertainty is a product of free will agents, in which even divine decisions are subject to the uncertainty caused by this paradigm.<sup>379</sup> According to the open theist, the type of sovereignty which is exercised solely through control is a lesser form, and it is a “diminished” deity who cannot manage His creation unless exhaustive divine foreknowledge is held.<sup>380</sup> Therefore, the open theists see God’s grandness as better expressed in the exercise of sovereignty that accepts risk in uncertainty at the hands of His creation.

Second, it is the open theists’ contention that God exercises general vice specific sovereignty. Broadly speaking, general sovereignty maintains that God, “sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out.”<sup>381</sup> This view is in obvious contradiction to the traditional theists’ view that God exercises meticulous providence over every detail. Pinnock states that this view comes directly from Scripture, in which a view that God exercises full control is contrary to the Biblical description of God responding to changing circumstances and resorting to alternate plans.<sup>382</sup> As such, Pinnock forcefully declares, “All-controlling sovereignty is not taught in Scripture,” but rather that a proper view from Scripture is one in which divine sovereignty and human freedom are compatible because such sovereignty is not “all-controlling.”<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 215.

<sup>379</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 58.

<sup>380</sup> Pinnock, “There is Room for Us: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” 218.

<sup>381</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 213.

<sup>382</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 53.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

Prior to his work *Most Moved Mover*, Pinnock penned an article in which he presented an open view of God's sovereignty, which he described as "open and flexible."<sup>384</sup> In this context of God's sovereignty, Pinnock states, "Many outcomes are conditional upon human decisions, and the relationship between God and the creature is personal and interactive."<sup>385</sup> With great deference to the relational aspect of the relationship between God and man, Rice amplifies on Pinnock's point, stating, "The course of history is not the product of divine action alone. God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too."<sup>386</sup> This obviously runs completely counter to what the traditional view presents as God's sovereignty. However, Pinnock offers as a point of agreement with traditional theists that, "Open sovereignty, in distinction from process thinking, agrees with the traditional view that God is the superior power who depends on nothing outside of God's self in order to exist and who is (therefore) free in a most fundamental way."<sup>387</sup>

With this understanding of the open theists' view firmly established, the only thing remaining is determining which view better fits the Scriptural evidence. As is the case with God's omniscience, if there is evidence in Scripture to support God's meticulous sovereignty, then open theism may be found to be false.

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<sup>384</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," *Theology Today* 53, no. 1 (April 1, 1996): 17.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup> Rice, 16.

<sup>387</sup> Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," 17.

## A Scriptural Understanding of God's Sovereignty

It bears repeating that Scripture is the final arbiter as to what is true and what is false. If the open theist view is true, then not only will Scripture match their interpretation of verses that were presented in the previous chapter, but as already quoted from Pinnock, no evidence will be found in Scripture which shows that God controls all things.<sup>388</sup> Yet, once again, even a cursory glance at Scripture reveals the evidence that supports the traditional theists' view of God's sovereignty, namely that His sovereignty is meticulous, as well as general. The following verses are utilized to show that God's sovereignty is meticulous. There are numerous verses that show how God's sovereignty is tied with His omnipotence. Genesis 1:1, the first verse of the Scriptures, names the Lord as the creator of all things, thereby making Him sovereign over all. However, these verses are ineffective as an argument against open theism, as an open theist will only say that their view does not declare God's sovereignty to be inherently limited, but rather self-limited in order to facilitate man's free will. For this reason, this thesis will focus only on those verses that spell out the meticulous nature of God's sovereignty and verses which show that His meticulous sovereignty brings about His will.

### **Verses which Show God's Meticulous Sovereignty**

There are numerous verses in the Proverbs which declare that God's sovereignty clearly gives little regard to man's free will. In Proverbs 16:9, it is declared, "The mind of a man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps."<sup>389</sup> The contrast in this verse is clearly between man, who believes that he is able to make plans in accordance with his

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<sup>388</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 53.

<sup>389</sup> Proverbs 16:9, NASB.

own will, and God, who is credited as the one who brings these plans to fruition. Clearly, this runs in opposition to the open theists' view that man is able to make His own plans, and God is thereby left to react to those plans. Alan Ross affirms in this verse the priority of God's sovereignty, stating, "The Lord sovereignly determines the outworking of our plans. The Bible in general teaches that only those plans that are approved by him will succeed."<sup>390</sup>

Proverbs 19:21 seems to echo this sentiment, in which Solomon declares, "Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the Lord will stand."<sup>391</sup> Again, this verse places God's sovereignty over the plans and desires of man. Open theism declares that man is able to make his own decisions outside of God's knowledge, and God will react to them if needed. But this verse clearly contradicts that notion, as God is sovereign. According to Sid S. Buzzell's commentary on Proverbs, "A person may and should make plans but God can sovereignly overrule and accomplish His purpose through what one seemingly plans on his own."<sup>392</sup> Alan Ross emphasizes this point, stating, "The success of our plans depends on the will of God. In the form of a contrast, the proverb teaches that only those plans that God approves will succeed."<sup>393</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah, asks in his Lamentations, "Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?"<sup>394</sup> This type of verse is of great

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<sup>390</sup> Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol 5*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 1005.

<sup>391</sup> Proverbs 19:21, NASB.

<sup>392</sup> Sid S. Buzzell, "Proverbs," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol 1*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 947.

<sup>393</sup> Ross, "Proverbs," 1036.

<sup>394</sup> Lamentations 3:37, NASB.

concern to the open theist, who uses his view of God’s sovereignty to explain such verses in a manner that lessens the problem of evil. But a clear rendering of this verse yields a view that believes, “nothing can happen, good or evil” unless God has commanded or permitted it.<sup>395</sup>

A similar sentiment is found in Proverbs 21:1, which states, “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.”<sup>396</sup> Commentators have said that the channels of water should be thought of as the systems of irrigation used by farmers, which complete the analogy, “as these are altogether under the gardener’s control, so the heart of the king, who might seem to have no superior, is directed by God.”<sup>397</sup> This statement is perhaps even more significant when one considers that it was relayed by Solomon, arguably one of the greatest Kings in the history of the Nation of Israel. Yet, he compares the will of his own heart with water, which flows at the hand and the will of the Lord. The open theist should expect this to be the other way around, in which God has to respond to the torrent of the unwieldy water, as He would then be unsure of the direction it will take.

The New Testament speaks of God’s meticulous sovereignty as well. Luke relays a time when Jesus was exhorting the people to not fear those things which have power over the body, but has the authority to cast one into hell.<sup>398</sup> In this moment, Jesus said, “Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God.

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<sup>395</sup> F. B. Huey, Jr., “Jeremiah & Lamentations” in *The New American Commentary, Vol 16*, ed. by E. Ray Clendenen, (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 475.

<sup>396</sup> Proverbs 21:1, NASB.

<sup>397</sup> H.D.M Spence-Jones, *The Pulpit Commentary: Proverbs*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 404.

<sup>398</sup> Luke 12:1-7, NASB.

Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.”<sup>399</sup> It is not feasible that any sense of general sovereignty would include care to the degree that even five sparrows are remembered by the Sovereign, let alone the clear statement that even the number of hairs on the head of each individual are considered by God.

### **Verses which Show God’s Sovereignty Carrying out His Will**

Many verses in Scripture show that God’s sovereignty cannot be thwarted by the hand of mankind. Admittedly, this is not a point with which open theists disagree. Pinnock stated regarding God’s sovereignty in context of man’s free will actions, “God cannot be taken off guard by what happens, but can accomplish his goals in more ways than one.”<sup>400</sup> But this does not fully explain the open theists’ view as they also quantify God’s sovereignty in the context of, “Future free acts, by definition, cannot be known in every detail and for certain even by God...The future is still being formed—everything has not been decided.”<sup>401</sup> However, Scripture paints a very different picture of God’s sovereignty, in which He has already decided all things, despite man’s free will decisions.

Job declared the omnipotence of God and ultimate sovereignty, stating, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”<sup>402</sup> Clearly, this statement removes any qualification of what God can accomplish. However, as already stated, the open theist would not disagree with this interpretation that God’s plans are not thwarted. However, this verse certainly does not leave a great deal of room for

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<sup>399</sup> Luke 12:6-7, NASB.

<sup>400</sup> Pinnock, “There is Room for Us: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” 216.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Job 42:2, NASB.

the open theist notion that man's free will decisions even alter God's plans or decisions. According to Elmer Smick's commentary on Job, "God's purpose is all that counts, and since he is God he is able to bring it to pass."<sup>403</sup> Similarly, other verses draw this out even more explicitly.

The prophet Daniel recounted the praise to God from King Nebuchadnezzar, "For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"<sup>404</sup> Far from depicting the relationship between God and man as being one in which both are partners, to any degree, in writing the course to human events into History, this verse declares that in context of God's sovereignty in executing His plans the inhabitants of the earth are "accounted as nothing." This is supported by commentators who declare regarding this verse that Nebuchadnezzar's confession affirm, "that man is answerable to God, not God to man, for no one can stop God and no one has a right to question Him."<sup>405</sup> For this reason, man cannot affect God's hand in dealing with man and is left without reason to question God.

We know from the prophet Isaiah that God's plan was written from the beginning. He recorded God's declaration, "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the

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<sup>403</sup> Elmer Smick, "Job," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol 4*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 1055.

<sup>404</sup> Daniel 4:34-35, NASB.

<sup>405</sup> J Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol 1*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 1343.

beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’<sup>406</sup> If God declared in the beginning what would happen in the end, then this would seem to preclude man’s decisions. Man can still make free will decisions, but only in context of a paradigm in which God’s decisions are prior. Isaiah proclamation from God shows that man’s decisions have no impact on what God has already decreed.

These themes are similarly found in the New Testament as well. Paul clearly declares the doctrine of the elect, which carries the implication that God chooses those who would come to Him, without prior consideration of the individual’s choice. Paul notes the priority of God’s choice to elect some to salvation, stating, “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.”<sup>407</sup> Paul reiterates the prior nature of God’s specific decisions for man, stating, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”<sup>408</sup> In both these verses, Paul clearly states that God made decisions regarding men, the first involving whom would be chosen for adoption into His family and the second being the good works the man would do, without input from the individuals involved. Again, the open theist view says the man makes such decisions and that God responds to them. These verses clearly refute this notion of the open theist. Furthermore, Paul emphasizes

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<sup>406</sup> Isaiah 46:9-10. NASB.

<sup>407</sup> Ephesians 1:4-5. NASB.

<sup>408</sup> Ephesians 2:10. NASB.

in Ephesians 1:5 that this decision is based on the “kind intention” of God’s will with no regard to man’s decision, although this does not relieve man of his responsibility.

According to Harold Hoehner, “Election is God’s sovereign work of choosing some to believe. Salvation is God’s doing, not man’s. Though it is an act of grace based on His will, a person is responsible to believe.”<sup>409</sup>

This aspect of salvation, that it is less about man’s decision and more about God’s sovereign choice, is distressing to some people who wish to emphasize the choice of man in the decision making process. Man is responsible, but it is clear in Scripture that God has the heavier hand in the process. Perhaps no verse bears this point more clearly than these words from Jesus recorded by John, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”<sup>410</sup> Commentator Edwin Blum offers an interesting analogy to this verse, declaring, “No one can come to Jesus or believe on Him without divine help. People are so ensnared in the quicksand of sin and unbelief that unless God draws them, they are hopeless.”<sup>411</sup> One who is stuck in quicksand hardly paints a picture of a person who is in a position to make a decision for himself to the degree that they are capable of effectively responding to the Gospel message of their own free will without a divine call. Therefore, once again, the Scriptural picture painted is that God acts first, man responds second. Not the other way around, in accordance with the open theists’ view. This ensures that God’s plan is brought to fruition, and not reliant on man’s decisions first.

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<sup>409</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, “Ephesians,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol 2*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 616

<sup>410</sup> John 6:44, NASB.

<sup>411</sup> Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol 2*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 296.

Finally, one last verse is provided to emphasize this notion that God's sovereignty is effective and prior. Paul recounts God's words to Moses about His mercy, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."<sup>412</sup> Again, it is clear in this verse that God dispensing mercy, much like many other activities, does not depend on man's activity. It is God, in the exercise of His divine sovereignty, who determines who receives mercy. According to Commentator , "The issue in such matters (God's mercy, in this case) is not justice but sovereign decision...As the sovereign God, He has the right to show mercy to whomever He chooses...Therefore experiencing His mercy does not depend on man's desire or effort."<sup>413</sup>

As these verses are but a few of those which clearly declare God's sovereignty, they demonstrate undeniably that God's sovereignty is presented in Scripture in a manner which coincides with the definition used by traditional theists. God's sovereignty is clearly meticulous, as much as it is general. Also, God's sovereignty is effective in realizing His will and bringing His ultimate purposes to fruition. In this context, His sovereignty is not affected by man's desires or actions in any way. As has been declared throughout the analysis of these verses, the open theists' view of God's sovereignty does not match what is found in Scripture.

#### A Proper Understanding of God's Sovereignty

Similar to the analysis already given regarding God's omniscience, the Scriptural evidence provided regarding God's sovereignty supports a traditional view that God

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<sup>412</sup> Romans 9:16, NASB.

<sup>413</sup>John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol 2*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 477.

exercises control over even the details regarding man's decisions and actions, and conversely, man is not able to affect God's sovereignty or act in a manner which is a surprise to God.

God's sovereignty coincides with His all-perfect nature, which should be considered as infinite, all-sufficient, and unlimited in every respect. As His attributes are intertwined, Geisler notes the close relationship between God's omniscience and His sovereignty, stating, "God's knowledge, then, closely relates to His sovereignty. He has created all things, He sustains them, and He upholds them moment by moment."<sup>414</sup>

As such, if one were to set aside the Scriptural evidence for the open view, logic alone should dismiss the view of the open theist as being inadequate in describing the true nature of God. Quoting J.I. Packer, Geisler declares that the concept that God could somehow know and foreknow without controlling everything goes beyond unscriptural to nonsensical.<sup>415</sup> For example, Pinnock claims that God's power and freedom, which he defines as critical aspects of God's sovereignty, entail that God could create a world in which He does not determine every detail or occurrence.<sup>416</sup> Pinnock further states, "If God could not do so, a certain freedom would be lacking in the deity," with the added implication that those who claim that God's sovereignty is not in the sense of the open view is somehow limiting God.<sup>417</sup> In other words, if God's sovereignty were truly unlimited, according to the open theist, He would then be limited. Such a statement fails the law of non-contradiction. Open theists, such as Pinnock, try to present this

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<sup>414</sup> Geisler and House, 25.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," 17.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

diminished view of God's sovereignty as a benevolent decision on the part of God to graciously share in a genuine relationship with His children.<sup>418</sup> In reality, this view amounts to a convenience for the open theist, who believes that the traditional view aggravates the problem of evil and places the blame for such evil on God.<sup>419</sup> In fact, it is the open view of God's sovereignty that lacks the bravery to see God's sovereignty as absolute, yet still hold those creatures who bare His image incorrectly as responsible for their actions.

Finally, as offered by D.A. Carson, there are two additional key points regarding God's sovereignty that speak directly to issues raised by open theism which should be addressed. First, against the accusation of the open theist, Carson declares that Christians are not fatalists.<sup>420</sup> Fatalism, which inherently brings God's omniscience alongside in a discussion about His sovereignty, claims in basic terms that God's sovereignty and omniscience, as defined in the traditional sense, are incompatible with the notion of free will.<sup>421</sup> The implication of this is that if God knows all things, man is powerless to do anything on his own, and is thereby not responsible for the evils that he commits. Carson directly addresses how a proper view of God's sovereignty refutes fatalism, stating, "The central line of Christian tradition neither sacrifices the utter sovereignty of God nor reduces the responsibility of His image-bearers."<sup>422</sup> Instead, Carson affirms

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 17-19.

<sup>420</sup> Carson, "God's Love and God's Sovereignty," 263.

<sup>421</sup> Hugh Rice, "Fatalism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010: (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fatalism/#6>).

<sup>422</sup> Carson, "God's Love and God's Sovereignty," 263.

compatibilism, the view that God's sovereignty and man's free will are not incompatible, as a necessary aspect of an orthodox view of God.<sup>423</sup>

Second, regarding the understanding from open theists that the Scriptures appear to demonstrate God "relenting" over certain decisions, Carson offers, "This is compatibilism; the same components recur. God remains sovereign over everything, and His purposes are good; He interacts with human beings; human beings sometimes do things well, impelled by God's grace, and He gets the credit; they frequently do things that are wicked, and although they never escape the outermost bounds of God's sovereignty, they alone are responsible and must take the blame."<sup>424</sup> In other words, God's sovereignty does not negate man's free will, but rather man's free will exists within the context of God's sovereignty. This is completely counter to the open theists' notion that God's sovereignty is reactive to man's free will, as if man's will were prior to God's.

### **Subsequent Impact on the Doctrine of Inerrancy**

With the previous analysis as a foundation, it can be determined that the open view's interpretation of Scripture, even as it relates to God's omniscience and His sovereignty, is a violation of the doctrine of inerrancy. The reason for this determination is threefold.

#### **Open Theism Contradicts the Scriptural Evidence**

First, as has been shown, the open view clearly contradicts what is plainly stated in Scripture regarding God's attributes of omniscience and sovereignty. On the issue of

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 266.

omniscience, open theism's explanation of this attribute of God is counter to the clear declaration of Scripture, which is God knows fully and completely. Geisler makes this claim plainly in that given the numerous examples in Scripture regarding God's full and complete knowledge of future events, to include the free decisions and actions of man, "to deny that God's omniscience includes infallible knowledge of future free events is a denial of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible."<sup>425</sup> The Scriptures, as God's inspired revelation to man about His works in history, become minimized if they are understood to be only God's best-guesses come true. If Scriptures are truly God-breathed, and, as theologian Stephen J. Wellum points out, the Scriptures contains predictions and prophecies about the future, then in the open view Scripture cannot offer any guarantee as to whether or not the events will come to pass as predicted.<sup>426</sup>

Amplifying this point, Wellum states, "God might be able to give us a Scripture that includes His guesses, expert conjectures, or even adept hypotheses of how he expects his plan for the world to unfold. But this is certainly a far cry from God being able to give us *infallible* and *inerrant* (emphasis in the original) knowledge of these matters."<sup>427</sup> As already stated, open theism attempts to explain away this issue by stating that God's omniscience means that He knows those things that are knowable, of which the future free decisions of man are not included. This seems to be counter to the denial in Article 4 of the CSBI, in that it insinuates it is the language, in this case the definition and understanding of what it means to be omniscient, which is to blame for the traditional

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<sup>425</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 184-185.

<sup>426</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, "Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience Inerrancy, and Open Theism: An Evaluation." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (Jun 2002): 271.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

theists' "misunderstanding" of God's omniscience. The evidence provided in Scripture is abundant and clear that God's omniscience includes knowing the free decisions and actions of man before he even makes them. Thus, the error lies with the open theists' claim. William Lane Craig echoes this point regarding the open theists' denial that God has knowledge of the free will decisions of man, stating, "such a view seems so obviously unbiblical that the reader might well be surprised that anyone could believe that it represents the biblical teaching."<sup>428</sup>

Similarly, the open theists' view of God's sovereignty clearly is not in accordance with what is presented in Scripture. The evidence that God's sovereignty extends to the free decisions and actions of man is also shown to be in abundance throughout Scripture. According to Geisler, "The Bible declares that God is in complete control of everything that happens across history. This includes even free choices, both good and evil, which He ordained from all eternity."<sup>429</sup> Despite the Scriptural evidence that supports this traditional view of God's sovereignty, open theism clearly claims that God's control is limited, albeit a self-imposed limitation. Conversely, at no point does the open theist offer explicit claims from Scripture that God has willingly self-limited His sovereignty. As such, this point runs counter to the doctrine of inerrancy.

There are some theologians who argue that the open theists' view of sovereignty not only conflicts with what Scripture says regarding God's sovereignty, it also makes the probability of inerrancy highly unlikely. Wellum, in summarizing a similar argument by

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<sup>428</sup> Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 39.

<sup>429</sup> Geisler, *The Battle for God*, 228.

David and Randall Basinger, concludes that if God could not guarantee the free actions of the Scriptural writers, it is highly improbable that the Scriptural writers would have produced a text that was inerrant.<sup>430</sup> Abandoning the view of God’s sovereignty as portrayed in Scripture leaves Christianity with a god that is not capable of accomplishing the demands and fulfilling the promises made by Scripture. As stated by Geisler, “It is simply impossible to rest the heavy weight of these truths of Scripture on the weak frame of the neotheistic God. Only a sovereign, omniscient God can support infallible Scriptures.”<sup>431</sup>

#### Open Theism Modifies the Scriptural Presentation of God

Open theism does not merely reject the Scriptural evidence of God’s ultimate omniscience and sovereignty, but it may also be said to violate the doctrine of inerrancy by teaching other than the Biblical account of God’s perfect nature. Such teaching modifies the very nature of the God of the Bible. It should be no surprise to find such a claim from ardent critics of open theism like Norman Geisler, in which he states, “Such a view (open theism) undermines confidence in the One we need to trust the most.”<sup>432</sup> However, this view is presented by other theologians as well. Even theologian Robert Picirilli, who despite also being an Arminian still affirms that God knows all future events, refers to Pinnock’s views as revisionist theism.<sup>433</sup> He levies a similar claim against Sanders, declaring that his “risk model of providence,” involves, “a serious

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<sup>430</sup> Wellum, 268.

<sup>431</sup> Geisler, *The Battle for God*, 279.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>433</sup> Robert E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 43 2, (June 2000): 259.

redefinition of the God of theism.”<sup>434</sup> With a similar condemnation of open theism attempting to change the Biblical presentation of God, Boyd Luter and Emily Hunter McGowin echo with the declaration, “Open theism significantly redefines God’s nature, taking it quite far from the traditional bounds of evangelical (and orthodox) theology proper.”<sup>435</sup>

The obvious reason behind these objections is based on the evidence previously provided that the open theism’s view of God’s attributes of omniscience and sovereignty are contrary to those provided in Scripture. Geisler decries open theism for presenting a God who is not absolutely perfect in nature.<sup>436</sup> In objecting to the open theists’ redefinition of the God of Scripture, Picirilli notes that their attempt to prioritize God’s love over His other attributes comes into conflict, as “the attributes of God do not fare well when played off against one another.”<sup>437</sup> He rejects what he refers to as the “neo-Arminian” view, which may be associated as the open theist view, on the grounds that it is clearly falsified in the evidence from Scripture, and that God has clearly demonstrated His “perfect foreknowledge of future, free choices—both good and evil ones.”<sup>438</sup> Instead of presenting a clearer view of God’s attributes, the open theists have created a false one, which clearly violates the doctrine of inerrancy. Their teachings reject the clear teaching

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<sup>434</sup> Robert E. Picirilli, “An Arminian Response to John Sanders’s *The God who Risks: A Theology of Providence*,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44 3 (Sept 2001): 490, 483.

<sup>435</sup> Boyd Luter and Emily Hunter McGowin, “From Bad to Worse: A Portrait of Open Theism as a Theological System,” *Criswell Theological Review* 1 2 (Mar 2004): 150.

<sup>436</sup> Geisler, *The Battle for God*, 277.

<sup>437</sup> Picirilli, “An Arminian Response to John Sanders’s *The God who Risks: A Theology of Providence*,” 490.

<sup>438</sup> Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” 268.

of Scripture to shape God in a way that better fits their understanding of man's free choices, without the need for such modification.

Besides the clear modification of the God of the Bible for the god of open theism as being the sole reason for the violation of the doctrine of inerrancy, one could argue from a different approach and show that the arguments of open theism are counter to the declaration of the CSBI as evidence that the doctrine of inerrancy has been violated. As has already been pointed out, the open theists' view of God stems from a rejection of what they believe is a misunderstanding of God's attributes that have been heavily influenced by Hellenistic philosophy.<sup>439</sup> As such a view has already been shown to be questionable given the evidence from Scripture, to include verses which were written prior to the influences of Greek philosophers, the claim from open theists would appear to run counter to the denial contained in Article 18 of the CSBI, which denies the legitimacy of any treatment of the text which discounts Scripture's teachings.<sup>440</sup>

All of these points combine to form an objection against the view of open theism that claims that open theism drastically and negatively changes the view of God as presented by Scripture. As Geisler states, "Our confidence in God can be no higher than our concept of God. And by any realistic biblical assessment, the God of neotheism falls seriously short of being worthy of our utmost for His highest."<sup>441</sup>

#### Open Theists Modify the Definition of Inerrancy

Another means by which open theism violates the doctrine of inerrancy is in the clear attempt by some to attempt to change the very definition of inerrancy in order to fit

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<sup>439</sup>Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 59.

<sup>440</sup> International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.

<sup>441</sup> Geisler, *The Battle for God*, 278.

their view of how Scripture presents God. While still claiming to affirm a traditional view of inerrancy, many of the proponents of open theism espouse views of Scripture that would seem otherwise. This is perhaps most evident in the views of Clark Pinnock. Contrary to the evidence provided in this thesis, Pinnock stated regarding inerrancy, “Looking at the actual biblical evidence today, I have to conclude the case for total inerrancy just isn’t there...the inerrancy theory is a logical deduction not well supported exegetically.”<sup>442</sup> Instead, Pinnock argued that the locus and meaning of inerrancy lay in its intent, declaring, “Inerrancy simply means that the Bible can be trusted in what it teaches,” and that its teaching is dependent on the context and genre, “inerrancy is relative to the intention of the text.”<sup>443</sup> Repeating this view, Pinnock concludes, “Inerrancy is relative to the intent of the Scriptures, and this has to be hermeneutically determined.”<sup>444</sup>

Criticism of this view of Pinnock’s has a history. Carl Henry, in summarizing Pinnock’s view of inerrancy as being located only in what the Bible intended to teach, but with errors in the “unintended” teachings, pointed to the deep error in this view because it is indiscernible where the Biblical authors were inerrantly teaching factual truth or merely transmitting an errant content.”<sup>445</sup> An ardent critic, Geisler stated Pinnock’s view of inerrancy was, “a significantly different sense than that meant by church fathers, the Reformers, the Old Princetonians, and the framers of the ETS and ICBI statements.”<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 58.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>445</sup> Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4, 180.

<sup>446</sup> Geisler and Roach, 49.

While Pinnock's view may not be the authoritative view of all open theists; there are seemingly no open theists attempting to correct this stance. As Luter and McGowin state, "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 [critical of open theism]."<sup>447</sup> Evidence of this is seen in Boyd's reply to Ware's criticism of the open theists' stance on inerrancy, yet he responds by repeating the claims of open theism and offers virtually no defense against the claims that open theism rejects an orthodox view of inerrancy.<sup>448</sup>

Therefore, open theism violates inerrancy either by the attempts of its individual proponents to redefine inerrancy so that it is in accordance with their own view but no longer the orthodox doctrine of inerrancy, or tacitly by refusing to show how their view fits with all the Biblical evidence. According to Luter and McGowin, "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."<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Luter and McGowin, 158.

<sup>448</sup> Boyd, "Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware", 241.

<sup>449</sup> Luter and McGowin, 158.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Given the weight of the evidence provided, the thesis that open theism is contrary to the doctrine of inerrancy must be confirmed. Inerrancy, despite the continued controversy since the Enlightenment and through Modernity, has been a historical doctrine held throughout the history of the church. But this doctrine does not derive its legitimacy from this history; rather, it is deduced from the logic that the Scripture is the inspired Word of God, and logically induced from the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ appealed to its literal propositions while conveying God's truth to His audience. As such, the doctrine of inerrancy remains an important part of traditional Christianity.

The teachings of open theism run counter to a view that Scriptures are inerrant. Open theism approaches the text in a way that greatly modifies God's attributes. While this accusation can be levied against the open theists' view of several of God's attributes, this thesis focused on their view of God's omniscience and sovereignty. In terms of God's omniscience, the open theist modifies the traditional view, which is that God knows all things, and claim that Scriptural references to God's omniscience really means to say that God knows all things that are knowable, which exclude man's free will actions. This view has been shown to play "fast and loose" with the language of Scripture in order to fit their own theological agenda, namely to retain man's free will as a theological priority. Their efforts to do so deny the abundance of Scriptural evidence which show that God's omniscience is perfect and complete, and that there is nothing that falls outside of His divine knowledge. Likewise, open theists drastically change the Biblical

account of God's sovereignty. The open theists' claim that God willingly self-limited His own sovereignty in order to allow for the free will decisions of man is without Biblical support, and conversely ignores the weighty Biblical evidence which clearly claims that God's decisions are in no way altered by or reliant on the free will decisions of mankind.

For this reason, the views of open theism may be declared to be outside the bounds of Scripture. Against the notion that their view is merely an alternate interpretation of the Biblical text, their view fundamentally changes the attributes of God. Open theism has been inadequate in addressing the criticisms levied against it. This is because its view is clearly counter to the Scriptural evidence. As such, open theism remains in violation of the doctrine of inerrancy. For this reason, open theism should be rejected as a Christian doctrine and dismissed into the realm of false teaching.

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