



# **Open Theism**

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In a postmodern culture, anything labeled *open* sounds good to most people. Yet, what lies behind the veil of Open Theism is both dangerous and destructive.

Open Theism fundamentally changes the very nature of God. Consider the following summary of the very essence of this system of belief:

Open theists infer that God is a temporal being (not “above time,” as in much traditional theology, but within time), that He changes His mind, that His plans are influenced by creatures, that He sometimes regrets actions that He has performed (as Gen. 6:6), and that He does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future. In their view, God’s regretting and relenting come about because free human decisions are utterly undetermined and unpredictable. Therefore, God must adjust His plans to the free choices of human beings (Cabal 2007, 138).

Accordingly, God is thought to be open to changing His mind in the future.

One of the basic beliefs under this system of theology is the idea that the Bible demonstrates that God regrets how certain situations have turned out. This is said to prove that God did not in fact know the future. Genesis 6:5-6 and 1 Samuel 15:11 are usually cited for support of this position. In reality, they are examples of anthropopathism, which is the ascribing of human emotions to God. The intention of these passages was to demonstrate the passion of the Lord.

It is also said by open theists that God demonstrates His own ignorance about the future within the Bible. This is because in the Word of God we witness God asking questions. Numbers 14:11 records, “Then the LORD said to Moses: ‘How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?’” Instead of understanding these as simple rhetorical questions (anthropomorphisms), they are considered to be actual questions by God. This interpretation leaves the impression of a God who is helpless to know the future. It should be recognized that, “An anthropomorphism is the ascribing of human characteristics or actions to God” (Zuck 1991, 151-152). This is what is taking place in Numbers 14:11.

Open theists see a God in the Bible who is stunned by the unexpected. A classic example of this can be witnessed in Isaiah 5:3-7:

“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briers and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.” For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.

If we look closer at this passage we see that it was part of a song from Isaiah about Yahweh.

Again, this comes down to the issue of hermeneutics. How should this song be interpreted? Is it a parable or an allegory? Roy Zuck instructs us, “To hunt for meanings in every detail in the parables is to turn them into allegories. An allegory ... is a story in which every element or almost every element has some meaning” (Zuck 1991, 216). This means, “since all the images of the vineyard in the song do not have parallel allegorical interpretations, the paragraph should be treated as an extended parable, not an allegory” (Clendenen 2007, 165). Not every detail of this parable should be pressed beyond the intended meaning.

A similar approach is taken to passages of the Bible where open theists see God as getting frustrated. Consider the words found in Ezekiel:

The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads, says the Lord GOD (Ezek. 22:29-31).

On this occasion the words are a hyperbole, which is a deliberate exaggeration to add effect.

There were prophets in Judah at this time, including Jeremiah. The Lord was instructing that even His men were unable to stop the wickedness of the people in the land.

Another common tenet of Open Theism is that there are passages in the Bible where God tests people in order to know their character. Passages that are cited to support this include Genesis 22:12 and Exodus 16:4. With this position there is a failure to recognize that God tests individuals not to learn the character of His people, but for their own benefit.

The Scriptures repeatedly bear testimony of what God will do when we act in a certain way. If we repent, God forgives us of our sins (1 John 1:9). Believers in Christ are chastened by the Lord when we go astray (Heb. 12:6-7). However, this does not mean that God is incapable of knowing the future. To say otherwise would be to attack the omniscience of God.

Occasionally, the Bible does teach that God changed His mind (Exod. 32:14; Isa. 38:1-5). Open Theism explains that on these occasions God was actually changing His mind as a result of the actions of men. Notice how the NASB translates Exodus 32:14, “So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” Again, this is another clear example of an anthropomorphism. God certainly does not change His mind like humans. The intended meaning is that God took another course of action.

As demonstrated throughout this article, one of the fundamental problems with Open Theism is the lack of a consistent hermeneutic. The Bible actually contains hundreds of figures of speech, and learning to accurately interpret them is an essential part of understanding God’s Word.

Open Theism directly contradicts the sovereignty of God. Psalm 115:3 informs us, “But our God *is* in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.” The God of Scripture is able to act without having to wait and see what a man does. Nebuchadnezzar realized this truth about God when he proclaimed, “All the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing; He does according to His

will in the army of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Dan. 4:35).

The doctrine of Open Theism is also an attack on the omniscience of God. The idea that God does not completely know the future is an affront to who He is. God is outside of time (2 Tim. 1:9) and nothing takes Him by surprise. David declared:

O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For *there is* not a word on my tongue, *but* behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. *Such* knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot *attain* it (Ps. 139:1-6).

Finally, Open Theism can easily be disproven by the revelation from God’s Word that He does not change. We read in Malachi, “For I *am* the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob” (Mal. 3:6).

Our faith in Christ need not be shaken by the winds of Open Theism. Not only does God know all things, but His sovereignty means He is actively working out His plans. Paul assured, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Great confidence should come from knowing the sovereign Creator!

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