

# A REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES ON THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

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This book sets to explore the doctrine of God, especially of His knowledge, immutability, and sovereignty from a Christian perspective. There are four positions, which could be sub-categorized as two Calvinist positions and two free will theism positions.

## The classical Calvinist position

This book is a little...bittersweet. I am a Reformed Baptist and thus I agree with the classical position as articulated by Paul Helm, but I must agree with the criticism given by the other contributors that Helm's chapter was more about predestination than about theology proper and God's relation to the world. Helm's claim that his position is the historical (whether true or false) was met with a lot of snarkiness and set an unprofessional tone to the book and responses, which was disappointing. Even as a Calvinist, I acknowledge that divine determinism or unconditional election is not the mainstream or default teaching of Christianity. I believe it is absolutely biblical, but it is something else to say that it is simply the default view. But were Dr. Helm's chapter on classical theism and God's relation to the world, then his statement would have fully been justified. The responses made even moderate statements by Dr. Helm to be absolute and extreme. This was unhelpful. Dr. Helm even spends a lot of pages preemptively responding to various views which he thought would be represented in this book. He even discusses middle knowledge and the views of William Lane Craig on that in his section on Arminianism (Arminians usually reject middle knowledge). This space could have been used to focus more on the subject of the book.

Dr. Helm focused on the A-Team—Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, and provided citations from them on their views on predestination, especially as related to Romans 9 and Ephesians 1. His claims could be perhaps substantiated by his A-team, but it was disappointing for me to think that the book would have been more upon the classical attributes such as simplicity, impassibility, immutability, divine eternity, but to find out that the bulk of his chapter was about predestination. Certainly predestination says something about God, but it seems to me to have been better to not make predestination a major point in his chapter.

## The modified Calvinist position

Dr. Bruce A. Ware presents the modified Calvinist view. Dr. Ware presents a good case for his modified model, which modifies the Reformed understanding of doctrines such as divine eternity and immutability, as well as employing middle knowledge (p. 77). His modified understanding is also related to how God relates to the world. In the classic understanding, God's relation in a sense is one-sided. It is the world that changes its relation to God, but God does not change neither acquires new relation toward the world (to protect His aseity and pure actuality). God relation to the world is a relation of reason (not a relationship, a word which classical theists are not fond of). These three doctrines are not unrelated: "Both God's relationship to time (divine eternity) and God's relation to change (divine immutability) need some reconsideration and reformulation to demonstrate that the God who made us chooses to live in relationship with what he has made" (pp. 85-86).

Concerning divine eternity, the classical tradition has taught that God exists outside of time and "possesses the whole of His being in one indivisible present" (Louis Berkhof). Dr. Ware suggests we understand eternity in the same way we understand omnipresence, namely, that God exists outside of space-limitation as well as everywhere in space. He says, 'we can understand God's relation to time as comprising both his atemporal existence in himself (in se) apart from creation, and his "omnitemporal" existence in relation to the created order he has made (in re)'" (p. 88). As critics have argued, this posits two existences in God whereby He is obviously not simple (without metaphysical parts), but also something other than the eternal God is interacting with us in time. In his words, 'when he [God] created the heavens and the earth, he brought into being their twofold dimensions of spatiality and temporality. Since God chose to become immanent with the creation he had made, he chose, then, to "enter" fully into both the spatial and the temporal dimensions of creation' (p. 89). God in Himself is different than God with us. Dr. Ware then moves to argue for compatibilism (in combination with middle knowledge). This is a fine chapter, well-written and not in a polemical voice. Although I disagree with his modifications, I highly respect Dr. Ware and his attitude.

## The classical Arminian position

Dr. Roger Olson presents the classical Arminian view. This is the first of the free will theist positions in the book. Through his chapters, he gives many definitional and clarifying statements. For example, "Free will theism is, at the very least, a denial that God is the all-determining reality" (p. 148). As to God's omnipotence and sovereignty, "God is in charge (because he is God and therefore the omnipotent Creator of all) but not fully in control (because he chooses to relinquish some control to others)" (pp. 148-149). Obviously, these are statements which naturally trigger Calvinists. God gives His creatures free will which is the same type of freedom which He has/had when He created the world: "Nothing within God or external to God caused him to create the world. Something inclined him to do it, and he chose to do it, which is different from having to do it. God shared something of this liberty of decision and action with his human creatures" (p. 150). Furthermore, free will is only free when the agent could have done otherwise (p. 150) although "Occasionally God suspends free will with dramatic intervention that virtually forces a person to decide or act in some way" (p. 151). Calvinists usually take the compatibilist route to human freedom and divine determinism, while Arminians are non-compatibilists (pp. 151-152).

Dr. Olson includes a section on misconceptions about free will theism (or Arminianism). This is helpful to battle some common unfair caricatures, but in it he also makes some revealing statements which are likewise troubling for the Reformed. In what sense is free will theism (read classical Arminianism) God-centered? Because it concerns itself with the character of God and desires to do justice to His loving-kindness (p. 154). Libertarian free will is needed to protect God and not to make Him the determiner of evil (or as Olson often uses in his response to the Calvinist side, "the author of sin and evil"). But what if humans did not possess libertarian free will? Then "God would be virtually indistinguishable from the devil" (p. 154). Thus, the only way that God can remain good and show His loving-kindness is to give humans libertarian free will. This is problematic in my opinion to subject God to our standards and to

judge Him as if He is a creature. Here, I worry, as does Dr. Ware, “deeply for Olson and others who think the way that they do when it well may be the case that the view of God they find indistinguishable from Satan turns out to be the true and living God of the Bible” (p. 195).

Throughout the chapter, Dr. Olson also uses the fact that God created people Whom He could save but does not and who will spend an eternity in hell as if it is only an argument against Calvinism (e.g., pp. 154, 160-161; on p. 161, he even compares hell to a concentration camp!). This is an object against any self-respecting Christian theist position which does not deny God’s comprehensive foreknowledge. If God doesn’t want them to go to hell, then He could have struck down their parents or not bring them into being better than allowing them to be born, trying to save them and ultimately being eternally disappointed. I’m sure anyone in hell would have preferred to not exist rather than having their free will “violated.” The Calvinist is satisfied in his conviction that nothing happens outside or without God’s will and those who are in hell, God wanted them to be there because of their sin and He will be glorified in their damnation. This is indeed a horrible decree, but it is nonetheless for the glory of the triune God. Either God had a purpose in their destruction and brought them into being or He did not. Dr. Olson’s answer is “People determine themselves for hell by their free choices and especially by their rejection of God’s offer of salvation (whether through the explicit preaching of the gospel or through the light of God present in every culture and in conscience)” (p. 161). There is no offer of salvation in natural revelation, but his theology has ventured off so far based on his conception of goodness and love that he would perhaps be an inclusivist? The gospel comes to us by special divine revelation (e.g., Rom. 10:14-17).

Another point which Dr. Olson mentions is that “God limits his power in relation to creation and especially in relation to human persons” (p. 155). One should not wonder that Calvinists have often accused of Arminians of not being as God-centered as Calvinists when such statements are made. God is adjusting Himself just to make room for His creatures. God does not need to restrict Himself or His power in order for His creatures to be responsible. He also says that “For free will theses, God’s glory is not might but goodness” (p. 155). Why such a dichotomy? As if His power is contrary to His grace and mercy. This is in nowise the case.

According to Olson, libertarian free will is simply presupposed in the Bible (p. 159). It is “the Hebraic view of persons as possessing free will” (p. 159). I’m not sure if we can paint with such a broad brush. There are interesting indications about the Essenes and divine determinism. In the rest of the chapter, he goes on to substantiate more claims about libertarian free will and some tenants of Arminianism like prevenient grace. All in all, a fine but an unconvincing case for classical Arminianism.

## **The open theist position**

The last essay is for the Open Theism view by Dr. John Sanders. Dr. Sanders is a fine and gracious gentleman who better represents the “theological determinist” side than does Dr. Olson! His is the extreme side of the debate concerning the intractability of God and His knowledge. Departing from classical orthodoxy, he claims that God is in a give-and-take relationship with His creatures and that He is changed and affected by them (p. 196). Open Theism is not new. It is found in the Socinianism which was the opponent of the Reformed. They likewise denied exhaustive divine foreknowledge and determinism. While Dr. Sanders is a gracious man, his position is heretical and heterodox in my opinion. It diverges from all conceptions of God from an orthodox Christian tradition. Both classical free will theism as well as theological determinism are represented in the Christian tradition from otherwise orthodox theologians, but not so for the main tenants of open theism.

He begins by describing the way that he came to his conclusions. He was taught that his prayers could affect God and while going to college he started reading in books that God was impassible, and he could not square these two beliefs. His theology of prayer therefore gave rise to his open theism. His conclusion ultimately was “we can actually affect God” (p. 196). Furthermore, while God is omnipotent “God restrains the full use of his power” (p. 197). In this way, God makes room to be influenced by His creatures and enter “into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us” (p. 197). This then implies that

God is temporal because He changes and experiences duration (p. 197). Furthermore, as almighty, “God has chosen to exercise general rather than meticulous providence” which basically means that “God has flexible strategies” (p. 198). Obviously, this is far from the conception of classical orthodoxy. In the lay-world, open theism has been criticized as making God a glorified and mega Zeus and one could understand why. This conception of God is so human. God must so adjust Himself just to make room for His creatures rather than remaining as He is. Sovereignty is a gauge which God can turn all the way to the top or all the way down. This is obviously antithetical to the Reformed conception which maintains that God is a necessary Being and it is necessary that He be as He is in every possible world. God does not have attributes in addition to His nature, but He is a most simple and pure Being. Obviously open theism rejects this.

While most non-open theists would claim that open theism denies omniscience, yet open theists, in fact, do say that God is omniscience, but this is not unqualified. They define omniscience as God knowing “all that is logically possible to know” (p. 199). Okay... What is then logically possible to know? The past and the present because the future has no existence. In other words, their omniscience is a *dynamic* omniscience and does not mean that God knows everything that will happen. God is in time and thus cannot know what will happen in the future because the future does not yet exist. According to Dr. Sanders, “God’s knowledge of the future contains knowledge of what God has decided to bring about unilaterally (that which is definite), knowledge of possibilities (that which is indefinite) and those events that are determined to occur (e. g., an asteroid hitting a planet)” (p. 199). Notice that God knows *possibilities* of what will happen, but not what will *actually* happen (as proponents of even simple foreknowledge maintain). If He did actually know what *will* happen, then humans don’t have libertarian free will (see pp. 183-188 for his response to Dr. Olson’s simple foreknowledge and libertarian free will). This means that ‘the story of God and humanity is more like a “create your own adventure book” than a completed novel’ (p. 203). This has devastating pastoral implications as is demonstrated by examples which Dr. Sanders cites, although he does not see them as devastating (pp. 208-209). “But no free will theist believes God can guarantee that our lives will turn out for the best” (p. 208). As if to deny Job 42:2, he claims, “Since God enacts general rather than exhaustive control, the possibility exists that what God wants to happen in any particular situation may not happen. God’s intentions can be thwarted by our actions” (p. 211).

In the rest of his chapter, Dr. Sanders moves to defend open theism from the Bible. As anyone knowledgeable of these discussions, they base their evidences on the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic descriptions of God in the Bible and read these univocally. Traditionally, the classical tradition has seen these as anthropomorphic and anthropopathic descriptions and they should not be taken univocally, but analogically. Open theists elevate the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic descriptions of God and come to a god who is unlike the God of classical Christianity.

He also tackles the simple divine foreknowledge view, claiming that is incompatible with libertarian free will which is built upon the notion of contrary choice at the moment of choice. In my opinion, his criticisms are valid that divine “foreknowledge entails determinism” (p. 230). It is also absurd to claim that God even foreknows His actions. He reasons, “If God possesses foreknowledge of his own actions, then the problem is to explain how the foreknowledge can be the *basis* for the actions when it already *includes* the actions” (p. 230). He quotes William Hasker who says, “It is impossible that God should use a foreknowledge derived from the actual occurrence of future events to determine his own prior actions in the providential governance of the world.”

I like the fact that Dr. Sanders often does not misrepresent Calvinists neither does he use the typical emotional arguments. I found Dr. Olson’s chapter more plagued with arguments from emotion and eternal hell, than Dr. Sanders’ which seems to be the more appropriate position to make such arguments. Furthermore, he doesn’t pull any punches. He says it as it is and knows that he is diverging from the classical position. This makes his essay a very valuable contribution for those wanting to know what open theism is.

## Conclusion

All in all, there are both positives as well as negatives. I found Dr. Helm's chapter (the position I agree with) to be unhelpful and not focused on the topic. Dr. Olson's chapter was plagued with uncharitable views on Calvinism. He hates it so much that he criticizes it at every turn. Furthermore, his chapter has also a major focus on libertarian free will and minors on Scriptural support for his position. If about Dr. Helm's chapter one would have wondered whether he was reading a book on predestination, in Dr. Olson's case it would be whether the book is about free will.

Helpful were Dr. Ware's as well as Dr. Sanders' chapters even though I disagree with both. They displayed a charitable attitude toward others and focused on the topic of the book without misrepresentation. For those interested in knowing what modified Calvinism and what open theism teaches, they will receive honest and direct answers in this book.