

# **BOUND ONLY ONCE**

**THE FAILURE OF OPEN THEISM**

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People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad.

*G. K. Chesterton*



# FOREWORD

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

To the surprise of no thoughtful evangelical Christian attacks upon the classical view of God have come from mainstream liberal theology for well over a century. What is quite surprising is that, in the past ten years or so, these same attacks now come from deep within the evangelical camp. As noted by the evangelical flagship publication, *Christianity Today*, as far back as 1990, a so-called “megashift” has taken place within evangelical Christian schools and ministries. This change not only alters the worldview of classical theism but it eviscerates orthodox evangelical theology of both its power and pastoral appeal. This shift affects a number of related doctrinal truths that have stabilized the witness and prayer life of the Church for centuries. It particularly impacts how we understand divine sovereignty, omniscience, and providence. This shift not only changes how we talk about God, but it goes to the very heart of the doctrine of God, the most basic truth of our Christian faith. One result of this megashift is that the word “evangelical” has begun to lose both meaning and usefulness for many of us. A theological megalovirus, which has a host of serious consequences, has attacked the very immune system of the Christian faith. This deadly virus will wipe out a whole generation of Christian

teachers and ministers if the cure is not disseminated quickly and accurately.

It is important that the reader of this present volume understands at the outset that this present fuss is not about the long-standing debate between Calvinists and Arminians, as some Open Theists insist. Greg Boyd, professor at Bethel College, a respected evangelical institution, insists that he believes in the omniscience of God but defines this as “God knowing all that is possible to know.” The point Boyd and Open Theist allies make is that God simply doesn’t know the future actions of “free” persons. (This is most definitely not Arminianism of any historical type.) The reader of this present volume will quickly discern that the contributors are robustly Augustinian in their perspective. This should not cloud the major issue at stake. To be robustly Augustinian is no vice. It has historically, in almost every serious theological conflict, been a virtue. The approach, in itself, is also sound in the present debate, so long as it is rigorously submitted to the Holy Scriptures afresh. “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn” (Isaiah 8:20, NIV).

The arguments of Open Theists are generally rooted in the notion that the classical view of God presents Him as a despot or a domineering sovereign. They insist that God has knowledge, but not all knowledge. He does not know the future acts of free beings or these acts could not be the actions of truly free creatures. Since God does not know what will happen in your life tomorrow He is not a detached and distant divinity but an involved and personal god. The god of Open Theism is ready to enter into new experiences and to become deeply involved in helping us cope as we, with him, face things we simply did not know would happen. Clark Pinnock, a theologian who favors Open Theism, states that

omnipotence should be understood as the power of God to deal with any new situation. David Basinger, another Open Theist, even suggests that “God voluntarily forfeits control over earthly affairs.”<sup>1</sup> In the most basic sense these theologians deny “simple foreknowledge” in God since they believe human freedom demands such a conclusion.

The reader who comes to this subject for the very first time needs to understand that Open Theists make considerable appeal to Scripture itself. Some, such as exegete Greg Boyd, do this with greater concern than others. This being the case they all ultimately make such appeals in ways that often appear disingenuous. Truth here is truly stranger than fiction. Though these writers consistently appeal to the text of Scripture (e.g., “God repenting” and similar texts), the reader of this present volume will quickly discover that Open Theists make such an appeal with a very selective use of some texts. They also employ a hermeneutic that is bereft of both clarity and consistency.

For all of their denial that Open Theism is not Process Theology, one strains to see any essential difference between the older process thought and this modern “evangelical” heresy, except that the Open Theists insist that God created the world and is, therefore, separate from it. Process theology sought to construct a picture of reality based upon Newtonian physics that saw God as participating in the same categories of reality as human beings. In this older view God, with respect to actuality, is contingent, dependent, temporal, relative, and constantly changing. So much for singing, and meaning, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise . . . .”

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1. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Pinnock (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 114; Basinger, “Practical Implications,” in *Openness*, 159.

But what does Open Theism owe to this earlier liberal thought? Greg Boyd, one of the more biblically nuanced proponents of Open Theism, freely admits that “the fundamental vision of the process world view, especially as espoused by Charles Hartshorne, is correct.” What this means is simple: Open Theism shares with Process Theology a “dipolar theism.” Theologian Millard Erickson is correct when he notes that “it conceives of God as both absolute and relative, necessary and contingent, eternal and temporal, changeless and changing.”<sup>2</sup>

Classical conceptions of God are not always perfectly stated. They do need to be fine-tuned by continual exegetical work in the text of Holy Scripture. We are indebted to both the fathers and the reformers of the Church in this regard. But we must admit that at times philosophical and cultural ideas have too frequently influenced the work of serious biblical theology and our understanding of God. I personally believe Open Theists object to several wrong conceptions of God that have surfaced in the history of Christian theology. For this we should be grateful. The great tragedy is that in the process of rejecting the idea of God as “unrestrained power . . . they too readily divorce the biblical concept of power from coercion.”<sup>3</sup> This is not a minor shift. It really is a megashift of immense proportions.

Recently, a number of useful articles and books have been published that deal directly with the rise of Open Theism. *Bound Only Once* is such a book. It is a useful, original, and helpful entry into this growing debate. It reflects a healthy variety of approaches to the issue, since it is a multiple author work. It includes philosophical, biblical, and theological

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2. *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 156.

3. Donald Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, and Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 258.

critique. One does not have to agree with every word here to profit by the workout and the general approach taken by the writers. It will make some readers a bit squeamish to wrestle with this book, since many evangelicals are not used to dealing with theology seriously in our time. But this is a needed critique. It is also one that I hope will have a wide readership. I commend it to those who are taking their first look at Open Theism as well as those who are already deeply immersed in this profoundly important debate. Sadly, I have to agree with Douglas Wilson's concluding observation that "if this 'new model' theology is not heresy, then there is no such thing as heresy."

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**BEAUTY**



# THE LOVELINESS OF ORTHODOXY

DOUGLAS J. WILSON

## INTRODUCTION

Bishop Warburton once said that orthodoxy “is my doxy; heterodoxy is another man’s doxy.” The quip tends to delight us because it appeals to our very modern notion that, at bottom, all questions of truth or error are subjective and matters of personal taste. Two ministers from different denominations talk, and one says to the other, “Of course, we both serve the same God—you in your way, and I in His.” And so, modernity, with a wave of the hand, and a knowing, urbane chuckle, seeks to dismiss the very idea of orthodoxy.

But, of course, it is not as easy as all that. The concept of orthodoxy is actually inescapable, and so no man can operate outside its constraints. The Greek word *orthos* means straight, or correct, and the *doxy* is descended from the verb *dokein* which means to think. The word *doxa*, the immediate ancestor of *doxy*, means opinion. And thus, orthodoxy means straight belief or correct opinion. Who could be against this, one wonders. As it turns out, no one is against it—every man affirms that what *he* maintains is the truth. Every person in the world, all day long, every day, thinks he’s right. Even those hapless relativists and nihilists think they *understand*

that there is no truth. And good for them, as far as they go, which isn't very far. They don't get out much.

No one has ever rebuked an orthodoxy except in the name of another orthodoxy. Those many who avow allegiance to "no orthodoxy" are evidence, not that this foregoing observation is incorrect, but rather that woolly thinking is well on the way to becoming a national virtue. In actual fact, we have only established orthodoxies and aspiring orthodoxies acting (for the time being) like heresies. So every position is an orthodoxy. The only question is, whose? The issue for Christians concerns how the straight line is to be drawn. Do we define that which is true and right according to the words of men? Or not? Do we appeal to the Word of God? Or not?

The antithesis of straight is crooked or twisted. So on the question of orthodoxy, we have only two options. Either men will say that God's Word is crooked, or God will say that the word of man is crooked. One will pronounce judgment on the other, and necessarily, in that judgment, the judge assumes himself to be the arbiter of all that is true, good, and lovely. And so the question comes down to an unavoidable point—whose claim, God's or man's, is correct?

The apostle Peter speaks, and not very highly, of those who mangle the truth of God.

And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (2 Pet. 3:15–16).

The word translated as *wrest* here is *streblao*, which refers to putting something on the rack and twisting it out of all

recognition. Of course, those who are occupied in this activity do not *themselves* describe it this way. They do not advertise their seminars as being taught by ignorant and unstable people. Peter's statement here is perhaps a little biased and hidebound. Their impression on their most helpful activity is that they are actually making things straight. But are they right?

But when we turn to God's Word as the standard, as we must do, we discover that more is expected than simple propositional assent. When we are operating within biblical categories, we see that orthodoxy involves far more than mere head-nodding, mere intellectual going-along. Orthodoxy requires all our faculties, our reason, our imagination, our bodily habits, our *affections*. Straight thinking is inconsistent with crooked lives. Faith without works is dead; stories without dragons are boring; worship is a matter of sound doctrine *and* well-cooked meat on the grill; and a god chained to earth, however noble the portrayal, is some kind of Prometheus, and not the God of Abraham. The fact that to many the foregoing seems to be a chain of *non sequiturs* helps to demonstrate our problem. We fail to see that orthodoxy is actually a bodily habit that, naturally, has to include the mind. And this is why true orthodoxy is lovely, and involves the whole man.

And so we should expand our earlier observation. Either men will claim that the Word of God is ugly, or God will say that the word of man is. Either men will claim that the sweet is bitter, like so many dwarves in a stable, or God will claim that men have forsaken Him, the fountain of living water. So the way of salvation cannot be found in affirming the truths of orthodoxy with a long face, but rather is coming to see and know that the words of God are life itself. They are refined gold, they are honey to the lips, they are aged

wine, they summon us to a banquet in the kingdom which beggars description.

Our Lord Himself has set the table with crisp, white linens, and the silverware is lined up perfectly straight, in the orthodox manner. The crystal is glorious, and every glass is filled with red wine, the deep red wine of the everlasting covenant. Next to every place setting is a white stone serving for a name card, with a name written on it, written out by hand, before time began. The mystery is glorious—if there is no *time*, then how can we have temporal referents like *before?*—and the food is even better.

But as we look forward to this feast, and as we long for it, there are some unstable men who want to distract us. They have another alternative conception for the feast, one more in keeping with our contemporary, on-the-go, 24-7 lifestyle. Life is open, dinner is not prepared because we have to help prepare it, and we were busy, life is a process they say, and so truth can be found at a convenience store near you. They want some help in getting the shrink wrap off a package of Ho-Ho's, and if we collect enough of the coupons, we might eventually solve the problem of evil.

### THE OPENNESS OF GOD

C.S. Lewis once commented that whatever is not eternal is eternally out of date. But this is an unacceptable sentiment to contemporary Americans. We believe in irresistible progress, and we want “new and improved” emblazoned on everything, including our theology. One cover blurb on a recent openness book says, “This book is an important act of courage that invites readers to *new*, courageous thinking.”<sup>1</sup> But in order to have this kind of improvement, everything

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1. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), (back cover), emphasis mine.

we hold has to be “improvable” in principle, which keeps us from any kind of settled dogmatism. Consider this example: “The trinitarian model seems superior to process theism in this matter of the divine openness,”<sup>2</sup> he thundered.

Of course, a number of things should make us suspicious from the outset. I think it was Charles Hodge who said that if it is true it is not new, and if it is new it is not true. When folks, even learned folks, actually, especially learned folks, start discovering that what the Bible has been saying all along is really what we here in our own day have only just recently discovered, they are just half a step away from saying that it does not matter what the Bible has been saying all along. This is because the whole project is rationalistic from the start, and wants the locus of authority to reside *within man*, and not with God.

One of my children once asked me what God was standing on when He made the world. This kind of mistake is understandable in a child, and even endearing, but when Openness theologians make the same mistake, over and over, it ceases to be quite as cute. The mistake works this way: one biblical statement about God is taken at face value, all the other statements are ignored, the *direction* of all statements is also ignored, the one selected statement is interpreted in human terms, and the question is asked. God made the world, and when I make things I am standing on the world. And since God must stand on something as I do, and the world wasn't made yet, what was He standing on?

Note the method. “God repeatedly sent Elijah to call King Ahab to repent, but the king refused to do so. Was God playing a cat-and-mouse game with Ahab? If God fore-knows from the moment he gives the invitation that it will be

2. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Pinnock (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 108.

pointless, then God is being deceitful in holding out a false hope.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, if *I* did something like that, then I would be guilty of deception. When I make things, *I* have to be standing on the world. And of course if I destroyed cities with earthquakes, I would be guilty of genocide.

All this is not to say that every classical theist is innocent of this same problem. It does happen, and too often. But when it occurs, it happens because the exegete or theologian inconsistently allows creaturely and rationalistic concerns to dictate to the text what it should be saying. But this is exactly the same problem we find with openness writers. An example of a classical theist stumbling in this way can be found in Albert Barnes’s commentary on the second Psalm. His comments are on the phrase, “in his sore displeasure.” “Of course, all such words are to be interpreted in accordance with what we know to be the nature of God, and not in accordance with the same passions in men. God is opposed to sin, and will express his opposition *as if* he felt angry, but it will be in the most calm manner, and not as the result of passion.”<sup>4</sup> Of course this is appalling, but it is an example of an orthodox exegete adopting the methods we are objecting to in the openness writers.

The Bible tells us that God’s displeasure will be great. The literal expression refers to *heat* or *burning*, as when one is inflamed with anger. The openness theologian would say that this is an expression of God’s anger, and then haul it down to interpret it in terms of human anger. But Barnes also hauls it down to the creaturely level in order to interpret it in terms of a pond on a summer day—*calm*. One says that God’s anger is like human anger while the other says that God’s anger is like human calm. But both ignore the purpose of figures of

3. Sanders, 74.

4. Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes/Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 17.

speech. The expressions in the Bible about God, all of them together, invite us further up and further in. Symbols and figures of speech are *less* than what they represent, not greater. They point to something beyond themselves, and, in the case of God, to someone transcendent. Of course God does not fly off the handle like a sinful human being. His anger is far more *terrible* than that. It *transcends* anger. Of course God is not patient the way a man is patient—His serenity is everlasting and has no bounds. It transcends serenity.

John Sanders speaks more wisely than he knows when he says, “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?”<sup>5</sup> It is an expression of something *like* the figure used, and points to something *beyond* the figure used. And when we look beyond a particular figure, we must remember all the Bible teaches us about God, and look, by faith, beyond every word He has given to reveal His character and nature.

God reveals Himself in the historical narrative, poetry, and didactic portions of Scripture. It is not the case that we find anthropomorphic expressions in the poetry, and a few more in the histories. Even the didactic portions tell us in a straightforward way that we had better look in faith past the words.

God “hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Tim. 1:9; *cf.* Tit. 1:1–3). The phrase rendered here as “before the world began” is literally “before eternal times.” How is this possible? How can we have a temporal reference before temporality itself? We need to take this together with everything the Bible teaches elsewhere, and

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5. Sanders, 69.

just deal with it. We deal with it rightly when we humble ourselves in worship. This worship does *not* mean that we don't know that we are using finite words to glory in the infinite God. "If I said God is 'outside' or 'beyond' space-time, I should mean 'as Shakespeare is outside *The Tempest*'; i.e. its scenes and persons do not exhaust his being"<sup>6</sup> To say that Shakespeare is outside one of his plays is to use a figure of speech. We could just as easily say that he was above it, before it, inside it, or beneath it. And if we are comparing this to God's relationship with the creation, we would soon be forced to use every preposition we could think of.

But using the illustration of a play is offensive to us. We say that Hamlet is a fictional character, whereas *we* are real. It is not a good comparison, we mutter. But notice where and why we take offense. *We* are much greater than Hamlet, and zeal for the glory of mankind fills the room. No one is concerned to say that God is much greater than Shakespeare. Of course the analogy is limited—just like the scriptural analogy of the potter and the pots—and it does not completely cover every aspect of our discussion. But the illustration still *works* because it is pointing by means of a metaphor to something far grander and more mysterious than a mere play. "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18).

In addition, the openness view must also be rejected because its advocates do not really hold to their own methods and assumptions. Because they want to continue (for the time being) to be considered evangelicals, they want to place some things off limits. For example, Pinnock says that God's omniscience of things present is clearly a necessary item. "Obviously, God must know all things that can be known

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6. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 184.

and know them truly.”<sup>7</sup> But how is this? Does this not fly in the teeth of Bible verses, when handled in the wooden fashion of Openness proponents?

“And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gommorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know” (Gen. 18:20–21). I will go down, the Lord says, and check things out. Not only does He not know what will happen in the future, He doesn’t appear to know what is going on *at that moment* in Sodom. Connected to this is the fact that He doesn’t know the past—He is going down to investigate what they “have done.”

Openness proponents themselves shrink back from the ugliness of their own story-telling methods. This is either because they themselves are hesitant to walk so far toward the abyss, or, less charitably, because they have seared consciences, they know that the evangelicals whom they are trying to seduce will not be willing to go so far so fast. But give it time. Within a generation, evangelicals have started to worship a god who resembles Thor more than he resembles the God of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul. Thor, as we know, has been known to experience trouble. And this new god “expresses frustration.”<sup>8</sup> Where will it all be after one more generation?

“God is not cool and collected but is deeply involved and can be wounded.”<sup>9</sup> A god who can be “wounded” is a god who can eventually be killed. The death of god is perennially the hope of sinful man—because it opens up a vacancy to which man aspires—and it is the destination of all forms of theological liberalism. And all forms of Openness theology

7. Pinnock, 121.

8. *Ibid.*, 122.

9. *Ibid.*, 118.

most certainly are a new strain of theological liberalism. When we finally come to the death of this god, some might pretend to weep at the funeral, but by that time there will be no tears in the heart. This will not be a noble twilight of the gods surrounded by pagan despair, but rather the final removal of a tiresome god who still, despite our best efforts at idolatrous truncation, still reminded us too much of the God of Scripture.

### **THE FAILURE OF IMAGINATION**

When a biblical vision of the living God is given to us, human imagination staggers, and human reason lies prostrate on the floor. Isaiah is undone, a man of unclean lips, and Moses is hidden in the cleft of the rock so that he will not be dissolved. In the revelation of Himself to us, God describes Himself in *countless* creaturely ways so that we would never make the mistake of confusing Him with a creature. He is above, beneath, behind, and before, so that we might know that He is all of these, and yet, strictly speaking, none of them. He is a warrior, shepherd, king, builder, husband, and in these images the sanctified imagination is invited to gather them all together, then to transcend them all, in order to worship and adore.

Human language is necessarily inadequate whenever men speak about God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth. But there is creaturely inadequacy, a holy limitation, revealed in virtually every word of Scripture, and then there is an impudent inadequacy. The thing which differentiates the two is not the element of anthropomorphic images (which are ubiquitous and unavoidable), but rather an ethical and aesthetic difference. Certain creaturely images of God are worthy of Him, and others are not. His grace in forgiving our sins can readily be compared to the healing of leprosy,

and cannot be compared to a really good decongestant. His salvation is like living water, and not at all like zippy Diet Dr. Pepper. The inability of those in the Openness of God camp to see how their portrayal of God *clanks*, is, at bottom, a failure of the imagination.

The majesty of biblical poetry always lifts our thoughts *up*. Biblical poetic expression is incarnational, which means that there is a body of “flesh,” *but it is a body which reveals the Father*. Idolatrous poetic expression reveals nothing from above, and spends its energy in rearranging matter down here below. Idolatrous images of the divine are consistently bad metaphor because they are so truncated, and they drag our thoughts down to the level of man, giving us ludicrous and twisted images of God. Consider just a few grossly inadequate statements about God, and reflect on how they make one feel that our Open god is soon to appear as a guest on Oprah. “God is the best learner of all.”<sup>10</sup> We expect to read in the next line that He plays well with others, and does not run with scissors. “Obviously God feels the pain of broken relationships.”<sup>11</sup> Oh? Is He seeing His therapist?

Then compare these (and many more like them) with some of the exultation found in Isaiah’s glory, his fortieth chapter.

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them

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10. Pinnock, 124.

11. *Ibid.*, 119.

in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. (Is. 40:9–11)

The images are homely, creaturely, limited, and yet glorious. When Isaiah cries out that we are to behold our God, he does so in a way that does not encourage us to start looking under the furniture. This is not altered in the slightest by his use of an image taken from the created order. Yet even here, each single image, however wonderful, if absolutized in isolation from the others, could lead us away from profound and orthodox oceans and into the backwater shallows of heresy. The Lord certainly is our shepherd, but He is not nothing but a shepherd. And so the prophet shifts to another image.

Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? (40:12)

We have here a series of rhetorical questions, and the assumed answer in all of them is that anyone who has a hollow in his hand, or a hand, or a tape measure, or a set of scales, did not have anything to do with the apportionment of all creation. We have hands, spans, and scales mentioned in order to teach us that this thing had nothing to do with hands, spans, and scales. Only God holds the oceans in the palm of His hand, and He is able to do this because He doesn't have any hands.

Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very

little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. (40:13–17)

Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord? Why, do ye not know? Have ye not heard? It's Clark Pinnock! Who has been His counselor in order to teach Him in the path of judgment? Why, ye slow of heart, and lunk-headed of soul—it's Greg Boyd! Who has taught Him knowledge, and who showed to Him the way of understanding? Well, you know, there is always John Sanders, whose book has lots of footnotes and academic respectability.

Unfair? They don't claim this for themselves. Well, actually, they do, and not for themselves only, but also for all the rest of us puny, little godmakers, whose breath is in our nostrils. In Open Theism, the future is currently uncreated, and comes into being as the result of a cooperative effort between god and man, in which process god learns lots of keen stuff. He is surprised every day, and he *learns* from what we do. In short, he is not the God of Isaiah.

To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. He that is so impoverished that he hath no oblation chooseth a tree that will not rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved. Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. Yea, they shall

not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and he shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble. (40:18–24)

Only the most profound kind of spiritual blindness can keep a man from seeing what Isaiah is doing here. “To whom then will ye liken God?” Isaiah has been comparing God to all kinds of things throughout this chapter, and therefore the point of every comparison must be to show that *all* of them collapse under the weight of eternal glory. They are holy metaphors that make us look *up* to that which transcends them all. And, as we are glorying in this scriptural language, along come some very pedestrian exegetes, with a poetic ear comparable to about three feet of tin foil, who want us to acknowledge that the text compares God here to a *shepherd*, and every shepherd *they* have ever met didn’t know the future.

To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth. (40:25–26)

To what may we liken God? The answer, friends, is nothing. And we show that we may compare Him to nothing by comparing Him to everything that is worthy of Him, and, of course, nothing completely is. In Him we live, and move, and have our being. This is not zen Christianity; it is the recognition that the Bible does not give us a tiny schematic version of the attributes of God, carefully drawn to scale. Rather, the Bible points, sings, shouts, eats, alliterates,

teaches, glories, compares, and exults. Do you not *see*? Lift up your eyes on *high*, Isaiah says.

Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (vv. 27–31)

Isaiah's conclusion of this wonderful passage is noteworthy. He comes at the end of this glorious exhortation to a statement of God's knowledge. Given what we have just read, why do Jacob and Israel say *that God does not know something*? Don't you know, silly little theologians—sorry, very important cutting-edge theologians—that there is no searching out the understanding of God? He knows the end from the beginning, and it is precisely this, in Isaiah's mind, that distinguishes Him from those blind idols who cannot in fact tell us what is to come. He points to this expressly in the next chapter. *They* do not know the future, not because it does not exist to be known, but because they are no gods at all (Is. 41:23–24). Gods who do not know the future do not inhabit the highest Heaven, as our God does, but rather are all face down in the ruins of Babylon, presided over by owls and jackals.

When passages like this are read, and preferably aloud, there is a temptation to conclude the problem with Open