

God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

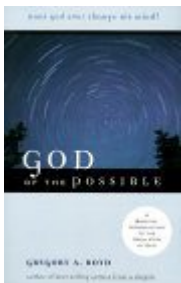
Introducing Open Theism

What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a God who "flexes" with the actions and decisions of people, who even expresses surprise at what people do.



The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.[\[1\]](#)

Boyd asks the question: "Does God ever change His mind?" He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn't foreordain everything; they say He doesn't even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God's mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn't mean God doesn't know *anything* about the future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. "The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it," says Boyd.[\[2\]](#)

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we'll consider Boyd's ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we'll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

The Classical View of God's Foreknowledge

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief

was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God's knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view since the early church.^{3} However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.[{4}](#)

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the 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.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because He planned it.[{5}](#) Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.[{6}](#) Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.[{7}](#) So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.[{8}](#)

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments first hand.

The Open View of God

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets* something He has done. Could God really regret having made man in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."[{9}](#) Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."[{10}](#) If God *did* know everything in advance, then our decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.[{11}](#)

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."[{12}](#)

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds with something real. "But unless you *assume* that the future already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to."[{13}](#) Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can't make a square circle. It's an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

A Brief Critique

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold,

unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God's character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd's open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we're talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of "predestined events with non-predestined players."[{14}](#) If God doesn't know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter's character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that.[{15}](#)

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge *can* go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences

Himself.^{16} Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance.^{17}

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

Notes

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

2. *Ibid.*, 31.

3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. *Emergence*, 52-55.

4. Boyd, 32.

5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.

6. Boyd, 127.

7. *Ibid.*, 35.

8. *Ibid.*, 36.

9. Ibid., 120.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 126.

12. Ibid., 125.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 44.

15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.

16. Erickson, 206-209.

17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency," in Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

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