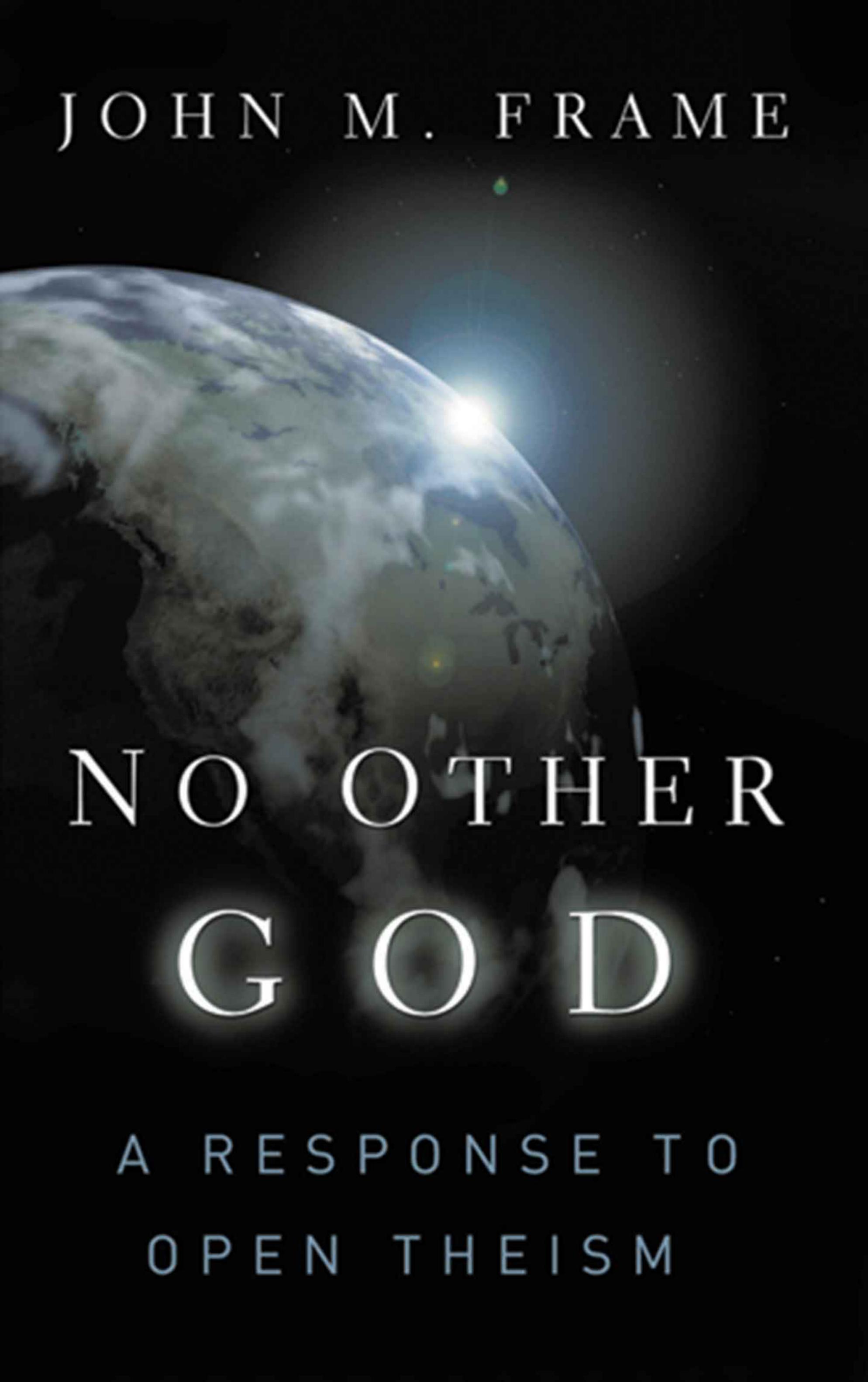


JOHN M. FRAME



NO OTHER
GOD

A RESPONSE TO
OPEN THEISM

“It is with a sense of relief that I turn from the amateurish and even wrong-headed writings of the ‘openness’ theologians to this work by John Frame. He is as much at home in the historical dimensions of the debate as in the theological; he is as much in command of the interpretation of the relevant biblical texts as he is of the philosophical issues. With its wholly admirable freshness and a crisp incisiveness, this book is something both to read and to give away to friends. A sad mark of the theological ignorance of our times is that Socinianism can dress itself up in new terminology and pass itself off as evangelical theology instead of a pernicious error frequently and roundly condemned. Frame’s antidote is both needed and effective.” —D. A. CARSON

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P U B L I S H I N G

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*To the board, faculty,
administration, students, and staff of
Reformed Theological Seminary*

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to describe and evaluate biblically the theological movement known as open theism. Open theists teach that God is not above time, that he does not control all of nature and history, that he does not know the future exhaustively, that he sometimes makes mistakes and changes his plans, and therefore that he is in some ways dependent on the world. Open theists present their views winsomely and have attracted many disciples. But, in my judgment, their position is deeply unbiblical, and their movement has caused division and confusion in churches, seminaries, colleges, publishing houses, and other Christian organizations.¹

In my much larger book, *The Doctrine of God* (forthcoming), I deal in various places with these issues and, to a lesser extent, with open theism itself. But my critique there is scattered over many chapters that also deal with other subjects, which may make it difficult for readers to gather it all together. Since the subject of open theism is so very important in our time, I have brought my thoughts together on that theological movement

1. Bruce A. Ware documents at length the controversy within the Baptist General Conference, in *God's Lesser Glory* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), 21–27, and there cites other examples of the inroads of open theism.

in this smaller book. This book contains some material from *The Doctrine of God*, but also quite a bit of new material that responds specifically to the writings of the open theists and looks more deeply into relevant biblical texts.

Although my general evaluation of open theism is negative, I have benefited from my interaction with open theists. They have challenged me to better understand the “give-and-take” between God and the world described in the Bible. I agree with the open theists that we cannot simply write off this give-and-take as anthropomorphism. Or, if we choose to call these descriptions anthropomorphic, we need to give closer attention to the meaning of *anthropomorphic* in this connection. So I try, in this book, not only to criticize open theism, but also to formulate the relationship between God’s eternal plan and the events of creation more precisely than traditional theists have sometimes done.

In this book, therefore, there is some give-and-take between the open theists and myself. I have tried to be fair in my interpretation of their writings, to avoid caricature, to give credit where credit is due, and to acknowledge weaknesses where they exist in the traditional position. I trust that my negative criticism will be all the stronger for that.

I’m thankful to all who have encouraged me in this project (and in my writing of the parent volume, *The Doctrine of God*) and who have shared their thoughts with me on these subjects. My esteemed senior colleague, Roger Nicole, has been especially helpful in sharing material both from his own writings and from those of others. I should say, too, that after I completed the first draft of this book, Bruce Ware’s excellent *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* became available.² After I read it, I had second thoughts about my own work: what could I add to a treatment as full, balanced, and

2. See the previous footnote.

persuasive as Ware's? But third thoughts have prevailed: I believe now that I can contribute some things, both to the foundation and to the superstructure of Ware's argument, as his enthusiastic fellow worker, without detracting from his achievement. Among other things, I give more attention than Ware does to (1) the universality of divine sovereignty, (2) the unscripturality and incoherence of the libertarian view of human freedom, (3) the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of open theism, and (4) the movement's historical background. As I look over my manuscript, I find that, although Ware and I share many concerns and ideas, one who reads both books will not notice much repetition. And, apart from any differences between our two treatments, Ware should have company. It is important to gather multiple witnesses in defense of what we believe to be the biblical position.

Thanks also to P&R Publishing for their quick expression of willingness to support this effort, and to my students at Westminster Theological Seminary in California and Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando for their stimulating interaction. Especially, I am thankful to my student Justin Taylor for bibliographic suggestions and for his comments on an early draft of this volume, and to James Scott, who edited this volume on behalf of P&R. Also, thanks to Canon Press for their permission to include parts of my article, "Open Theism and Divine Foreknowledge,"³ and generally for cheering me on.

3. Forthcoming in *Bound Only Once: The Openness of God as a Failure of Imagination, Nerve, and Reason*, edited by Douglas Wilson, to be published by Canon Press.

What Is Open Theism?

In this chapter, I shall try to describe the open-theist position in general terms, contrasting it with traditional theism. But first I need to clear away some barriers to mutual understanding.

The Rhetoric and the Reality

Open theists have not always been clear in describing what they believe. Many (though certainly not all) of their expositions are more like motivational talks or political speeches than philosophy or serious theology. They seem to be more interested in persuasion than clarity. They often write emotive prose, calculated to give the reader a good feeling about their position and a bad feeling about traditional views of God. I must begin by warning readers not to let themselves be carried away with this rhetoric.

For example, the open theist Clark Pinnock distinguishes “two models of God” that people “commonly carry around in their minds”:

We may think of God primarily as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable

in every aspect of being, as an all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks. Or we may understand God as a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans.¹

Pinnock endorses the second model and identifies it as open theism.² But this description of supposedly common models of God doesn't quite ring true. My impression is that most Christians combine elements of both models: God is a monarch, but not aloof. He is an all-determining and irresistible power, but also a caring parent.³ He is not contingent (that is, dependent) on the world, but neither is he "removed from the contingencies of the world," for he is very much involved in the world he has made. He is aware of everything that happens and never takes risks, yet he abounds in love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity. He is a person, not merely a metaphysical principle.⁴ Nor do I think that most Christians (even

1. Clark H. Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, by Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994) (henceforth cited as OG), 103.

2. I should note that Pinnock intends the first model to represent "the God of Greek philosophy," rather than the God of traditional Christian theism, but he does regard the two as largely equivalent. I wonder, incidentally, which Greek philosophers he has in mind. See the section on "God and the Greeks" in chapter 2.

3. God is not only a parent, but a father (*pace* feminism)! He is, indeed, "our Father in heaven," as Jesus taught us to address him (Matt. 6:9). But Scripture relates our Father's heavenly domain to his irresistible power: "Are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you" (2 Chron. 20:6).

4. He is both a person and a metaphysical principle, the very cornerstone of the universe. That is to say, he is both absolute and personal. For more discussion of God's remarkable combination of absoluteness and personality, see my *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1995), 51–61.

traditional ones) would object to Pinnock's description of God as one "who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans."⁵

What Pinnock presents as two distinct models of God are, for the most part, aspects of a single model—the biblical model that has governed the thinking of most Christians through the centuries. I would reject two elements in the first list (God's aloofness and his removal from the world process), and I would question two from the second list (God's openness and his vulnerability).⁶ I think most Christians throughout history would agree with me.

The Openness of the Sovereign God

I said that I question Pinnock's terms *openness* and *vulnerability*, not that I reject them. In fact, I can affirm these terms in some senses. However, they are ambiguous. *Openness* is, of course, a metaphor. It is not used in Scripture as an attribute of God, and it does not have a standard meaning in the theological literature. Richard Rice defines it as showing that open theism "regards God as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world."⁷

But I believe that Pinnock and others use the word *open* also because of its connotations.⁸ The term has a good feel

5. Open theists, of course, question whether these qualities can be integrated into the traditional view of God. I shall argue in this book that they can be.

6. This is a kind of rhetorical trick, concealing potentially controversial assertions in an uncontroversial context. Pinnock here evidently expects the favorable connotations of *love*, *responsiveness*, *generosity*, *sensitivity*, etc., to rub off on *openness* and *vulnerability*. Open theists speak this way rather often, and it does not serve the cause of clarity or edification.

7. Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in OG, 16.

8. The phrase *open theism* seems to have been used first by Rice in *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1980). The book was republished as *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985).

to it. It suggests vistas of spacious meadows, full of merry sunshine, welcome mats, unlocked gates, undogmatic thinking, and people who are willing to share their inmost secrets. That kind of imagery is certainly attractive to people in our culture. But we should be careful of it. Sometimes, after all, closed is better than open. Food will spoil if we leave the refrigerator door open. An open safe is an invitation to thieves. And it is not wise to leave the door of a moving car open. Perhaps it is better, in some respects, for God to be closed. For example, if he really has left the future completely open, he has left open the possibility of Satan's victory.

The sovereign God of traditional Christian theism is closed in certain ways, as we shall see. But in other respects he is also a God of openness. He opens the world wonderfully to his children, commanding them to exercise dominion over the whole earth (Gen. 1:28), enabling Paul to say that he can do all things through Christ (Phil. 4:13)! He sets an open door before his people as they proclaim Christ throughout the world (Col. 4:3; Rev. 3:8). God can open and close the doors of creation precisely because he is sovereign: "What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (Rev. 3:7).

His sovereignty makes him fully open to our prayers, for he is always able to answer them. No door is closed to him. He can, indeed, even open the doors of human hearts to his influence; we cannot keep him out. His sovereign power opens us to him and him to us.

So the openness metaphor cuts both ways. Indeed, the relatively few biblical uses of *open* fit better with the traditional model than with Pinnock's. But, of course, theology should not be built on metaphors, which typically can be taken in many different directions, but rather on the teaching of Scripture.

Sovereign Vulnerability

Vulnerability is an idea that I shall discuss later in this book. My own view is that God cannot suffer loss in his essential nature, and that his eternal plan cannot suffer any defeat. In those senses, he is invulnerable. But when he interacts with creatures, yes, he does experience grief (Eph. 4:30). Jesus was vulnerable unto death, and he is nothing less than God the Son. And even apart from the Incarnation, the prophet declares that “in all their distress [God] too was distressed” (Isa. 63:9). This biblical emphasis is fully compatible with classical theism, as I shall argue in this book.⁹

The Ambiguities of Open Theism

We have not, however, made much progress in defining the nature of open theism and its precise differences with the traditional view. Pinnock’s two lists, as we have seen, are far too vague, ambiguous, and misleading to define the differences. I have spent some time on his lists in order to show that the appeal of open theism is often based on connotations, on the sounds of words, on rhetoric, rather than substance.

Another example is provided by the preface to *The Openness of God*:

God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God’s will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us.

9. Alister E. McGrath refers to Luther’s theology of the cross and Charles Wesley’s hymn “And Can It Be” as examples of traditional theologians affirming in various ways the vulnerability of God. He comments about OG: “Why should we abandon this tradition when, in fact, it has not been fairly and thoroughly presented in this book? Modern evangelicalism has often been accused of a lack of familiarity with its own historical roots and traditions. Curiously, this book merely confirms that impression” (“Whatever Happened to Luther?” *Christianity Today*, January 9, 1995, 34).

The Christian life involves a genuine interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God's gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses . . . and on it goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.¹⁰

The authors admit, to their credit, that this description of open theism is only in "broad strokes."¹¹ But this is the sort of description that grabs the attention and emotions of the average reader. The authors offer to take us on a grand adventure, with great risk, but arm in arm with God himself. Who would not want to come along?

But what is "significant freedom"? Open theists also describe it as "real freedom" or "genuine freedom." (Compare the later reference to "a genuine interaction.") Of course, everybody wants to have "genuine" freedom, and everybody would like to believe he has it. (Indeed, what other kind of freedom is there?) But that language hugely prejudices the discussion. As we shall see below, open theism teaches a particular view of freedom, namely, libertarianism, which is highly controversial in theology. I shall argue that the concept is unbiblical and incoherent. And, upon careful analysis, it turns out not to be genuine freedom at all, but a kind of bondage to unpredictable chance.

And what is a "dynamic" relationship to God, as opposed to a static one? Modern theology praises things that are dynamic and demonizes anything static, and the authors of *The*

10. Preface to OG, 7.

11. Ibid.

Openness of God follow that trend dutifully. But what, actually, is the difference? Evidently, in this context, *dynamic* means “changing,” rather than “powerful.” But even in classical theology, our relationship to God changes in some respects, even though God in himself does not change. That is, God is unchanging in his nature and eternal plan, but his relationships with creatures do change. So in fact both classical theology and open theism promise us a dynamic relationship with God.

And do we really want to exclude all static (unchanging) aspects of our relationship to God? Is it not important that some aspects of that relationship do not change, such as God’s promises, his way of salvation, and his justice, holiness, and mercy? Does not the writer of Psalm 136 delight in repeating the refrain, “His love endures forever”? Would any open theist be pleased to see God’s love change to cruelty?

I plead with readers of open-theist writings not to be carried away with rhetoric. Don’t let anything get past you. Think it through; ask what these writers really mean. Don’t let them sweep you off your feet by means of ambiguous, but rhetorically attractive, language.

The Open-Theist View of Traditional Theism

We must now move from the rhetorical to the real differences between open and traditional theism. Open theists, to their credit, do sometimes move beyond the rhetorical posture to an analytical one. Richard Rice, for example, gives us a rather precise account of the issues, and we should look at that. We should consider first the open theists’ view of what traditional theism teaches. Here is my summary of what Rice calls the “traditional” or “conventional” view:¹²

12. Rice, “Biblical Support,” in OG, 11–12. John Sanders, in “Historical Considerations,” in OG, 59, calls the traditional view “the classical view of God worked out in the Western tradition.”

1. It emphasizes God's sovereignty, majesty, and glory.
2. God's will is the final explanation of everything.
3. His will is irresistible.
4. He is caring and benevolent, but he is glorified equally in the destruction of the wicked.
5. He is supratemporal.
6. He knows everything in the past, present, and future.
7. He is essentially unaffected by human events and experiences.

The terms *traditional* and *conventional* suggest that most theological traditions would agree with these propositions. But, in fact, Rice's description reflects Calvinist beliefs specifically, more than any other tradition. Arminians, for example, would not agree that God's will is the final explanation of everything or that his will is irresistible. On the other hand, not all Calvinists would agree that God is glorified equally (or in every sense) in the salvation of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked. Calvinists believe that God equally foreordains both of these outcomes, as he foreordains all the events of nature and history. But not all events are pleasing to him, and in that sense all events do not equally glorify him. As for the destruction of the wicked, Scripture says that God takes no delight in that (Ezek. 33:11), and many Calvinists take that teaching quite literally.¹³ Nevertheless, Rice's list indicates the views that open theists want to reject.

13. Calvinists distinguish between God's "decretive" and "preceptive" wills. The former is God's eternal decree, which necessarily comes to pass; the latter is God's standard of behavior. No one can violate God's will in the first sense, but many violate it in the second sense. In the first sense, everything that happens brings glory to God; in the second sense, he is glorified only by the obedience of his creatures. See my discussion of this distinction in chapter 7.

The Main Contentions of Open Theism

Later, Rice sets forth his own view of God, which he shares with other open theists. Again, I paraphrase and summarize, using much of Rice's own language:¹⁴

1. Love is God's most important quality.
2. Love is not only care and commitment, but also being sensitive and responsive.
3. Creatures exert an influence on God.
4. God's will is not the ultimate explanation of everything. History is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.
5. God does not know everything timelessly, but learns from events as they take place.
6. So God is dependent on the world in some ways.

There is also a seventh proposition that Rice does not mention here, but which is central to open theism—possibly even the root from which the whole system grows:

7. Human beings are free in the libertarian sense.

Libertarianism is the philosophical name for what Pinnock calls "significant freedom" in a passage I quoted earlier. The open-theist philosopher William Hasker defines libertarian free will as follows:

An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action.¹⁵

14. Rice, "Biblical Support," in OG, 15–16.

15. William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in OG, 136–37.

On this view, our free choices are absolutely undetermined and uncaused. They are not foreordained by God, or by circumstances, or even by our own character or desires. I shall argue in chapter 8 that this view of freedom is unscriptural. Scripture does affirm that we are free to act according to our desires and nature, and that God's grace can set us free from sin to serve Christ. However, it does not teach libertarianism, but rather excludes it. Further, I shall argue that, contrary to Hasker and others, libertarianism does not establish moral responsibility, but rather destroys it.

In the chapters that follow, I shall examine these distinctive contentions of open theism, both positive and negative, by comparing them with the teaching of the Bible.