

God in Man's Image:

FOREKNOWLEDGE, FREEDOM, AND THE "OPENNESS" OF GOD

by Alan W. Gomes

IF GOD KNOWS ALL MY FUTURE choices, are those choices really free? Let's say God knows that on Tuesday I am going to have a terrible day at work, come home, and kick the cat. If God *really knows* that I will kick the cat on Tuesday, when Tuesday comes I will *certainly* kick her. But if there is nothing I can do to change my actions—actions which God knows I will *certainly* do in the future—how am I free? If I am *certain* to do the things I do, then aren't my actions somehow preprogrammed? And if they are preprogrammed, how am I responsible for them? On the other hand, if I *don't* react like God thought I would, then He does not really know the future: He is not omniscient, as Christians have always believed.

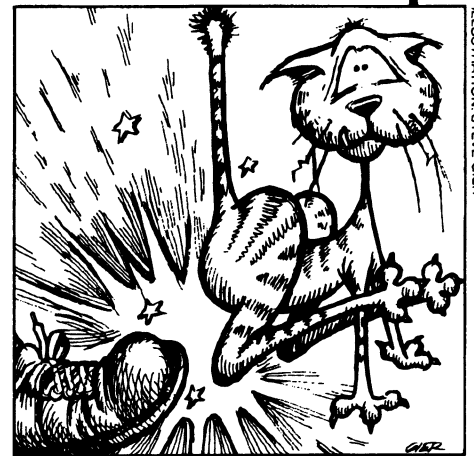


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The question of God's foreknowledge and man's freedom is one of the thorniest in Christian theology. It has perplexed the most brilliant Christian thinkers for centuries. Dealing with the foreknowledge issue is especially difficult because there are so many interconnected doctrines which immediately present themselves for consideration. It is like pulling at one end of a one-piece knit sweater: if one isn't careful a tangle of yarn will soon be left at one's feet! Allow me to give one example. The foreknowledge question relates directly to the doctrine of predestination. We might well ask, "Did God know I would accept Christ? And if He did know, did He know because He ordained that I would? Perhaps God simply looked into the future, foresaw that I would exercise my freedom to receive Christ if given the chance, and then 'predestined' me on that basis."¹ In my opinion, these doctrinal issues are among the most difficult—the "*crux theologorum*" (cross of theologians)!

A RADICAL SOLUTION

There has lately been a resurgence of interest in this topic. That contemporary theological thinkers are willing to "take up their cross" and tackle this sticky subject is certainly commendable; this is not a job for the fainthearted. But, unfortunately, some of these current writers have tried to make their cross more manageable by whittling down its size. Clark Pinnock, Gordon Olson, Howard Elseth, Richard Rice and others feel they have "solved" the tension between God's foreknowledge and man's free will by simply eliminating the first part of the equation: they deny God's foreknowledge of *contingent* events (i.e., future free will choices). In so doing, they believe they have a dynamic, "open" God who can truly respond to His creatures without violating their freedom.

These authors adopt essentially identical positions on God's (lack of) foreknowledge and attempt to support their views with similar argumentation.² Undoubtedly, they sincerely believe they have reconciled this *crux theologorum* with their "open" God. Unfortunately, their solution is like cutting off one's head to cure a headache. The "head" they have lopped off is one of the divine perfections, so clearly mentioned in the Scriptures. It's actually worse than a mere denial of God's foreknowledge (which is certainly bad enough): there are significant ramifications for other areas of their theology. For example, denying God's foreknowledge in particular they have also denied God's *immutability* in general.³ They have a god who grows in his knowledge, and changes his mind in light of what his creatures do. And they have a god who, not unlike the Watchtower Society's god, makes predictions which never come true. Not only do they deny God's immu-

ability, they deny the biblical understanding of His *eternity*. Their god is bound by time. Consequently, he is waiting in heaven to see what his creatures will do.⁴

Practical Ramifications

It is important to realize that the denial of God's foreknowledge has significant practical implications. I have personally talked to and corresponded with scores of individuals who have been taught the doctrines of Olson, Elseth, and others of this persuasion. From a pastoral perspective, I can say that the effects of this teaching can be devastating. Some have found it difficult to have confidence in a God who is not truly in control of their lives, much less His universe.⁵ The biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty is a comfort to the believer, for he can truly say that God is causing all things to work together for his good (Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11). I know Christians who, robbed of that comfort, were ready to throw in the towel and give up their faith.

THE PROPER METHOD

The proper methodology for examining this question is first to ask, "What does the *Bible* teach about God's foreknowledge?" Then it examines the relevant scriptural data to determine the answer. *After* we have established the doctrine from the Word of God, we may *then* attempt to reconcile any philosophical difficulties which arise.

While the Bible contains nothing which contradicts right reason, we may encounter doctrines which we are unable to fully reconcile from our limited, finite perspective. We ought not to forget that our ability to harmonize the complexities of a doctrine should never be the basis on which we accept it as true. We may not understand how three persons can be one God, how Christ can be both divine and human, and how God can foreknow a free event. Nonetheless, if Scripture affirms these doctrines (and it does) we must affirm them as well. Again, this is not to suggest that the orthodox (i.e., biblical) doctrines are nonsense, or that we can't say anything coherent about them. There is much we can say about the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the attributes of God. But even when we reach the limits of our understanding, we must believe what the Scriptures assert.

When we look at the views of Pinnock, Rice, Elseth, and Olson, we shall see that they stand the proper method of doing theology on its head. They begin with dubious philosophical presuppositions about the nature of "freedom" and then build their edifice. But, as Dr. Henry Holloman has remarked, doing theology in this way "is like trying to build a skyscraper on a chicken coop."

The point of this article is not to explain

how God can know a future free will choice. I'm not sure that it can be explained—at least on this side of eternity. My purpose here is to prove that the Bible affirms God's foreknowledge of such events. Then, having established the biblical view, we will see how Pinnock, Rice, Olson, and Elseth's alleged "open God" compares with the God of the Bible. Finally, without presuming to have any final answers, I will offer some thoughts on the philosophical dimensions of this issue.

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF GOD

Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (James 1:17).⁶

The term "immutable" means "unchangeable." When God is spoken of as "immutable," it means that He is not subject to change in His being, attributes, or determinations. God's immutability is portrayed in Scripture as one of the divine perfections (1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 102:26-27; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:18; James 1:17). We will examine the biblical evidence for God's immutability in His *knowledge* and His *counsel*s.

God's Immutable Knowledge

God is omniscient. This means that He knows all things, both actual and possible (Matt. 11:21,23).⁷ He knows all things; past (Isa. 41:22), present (Heb. 4:13), and future (Isa. 46:10). He knows all things by one intuitive act and yet knows the difference between past, present, and future as we relate to them.

Because God is all-knowing, there can be no increase or decrease in His knowledge. Psalm 147:5 declares that "His understanding is infinite." From this it follows that He knows immutably. There is a change in understanding when one gains the knowledge of a thing which was unknown before. Such a change cannot be ascribed to God without destroying the infiniteness of His understanding. If, for example, God is ignorant of the decisions I will make tomorrow, then God will know more tomorrow (*after* my decisions are made) than He does today. But an understanding which is infinite cannot, *by definition*, increase. How can absolute perfection become more perfect?

The authentic deity of the biblical God stands or falls on His perfect knowledge. It is this knowledge which separates Him from the gods of the heathen. Isaiah 41:21-22 reads: "Let them [speaking of the idols] bring forth and show us what shall happen, or declare us things to come: show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods." Commenting on the above passage, Stephen Charnock, a seventeenth century biblical scholar, observes that if Isaiah were speaking of

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a mere conjectural knowledge, the devils might answer that they too can conjecture (i.e., guess) about the future. Admittedly, God might know more things and be able to guess with a higher percentage of success. Yet it would still be only a guess, "and therefore not a higher kind of knowledge than what the devils might challenge."⁸ It is important to realize that God's knowledge is not a conjectural knowledge but an absolute and certain knowledge.

Concerning Free Choices

There are numerous examples in the Scriptures which demonstrate that God foreknew the *free decisions* men would make. Jesus told Peter in John 13:38, "Truly, truly I say to you, a cock shall not crow, until you deny me three times." Peter's bitter weeping shows that he considered his betrayal of Christ a free moral act for which he was solely responsible (Mark 14:72). And yet Jesus predicted this free act of betrayal down to the minutest detail.

Another example is Jesus foretelling that Judas would betray Him. Again, no competent Bible student would deny that Judas both acted freely and was morally responsible for what he did. Now, did Jesus simply make an educated guess about the betrayal, or did He know it because He was God? Please note that after foretelling Judas's betrayal Jesus *did not say*, "I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does you will be convinced that I can make highly accurate guesses," but instead He declared: "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He" (John 13:18-19).

Consider also Acts 2:23. This passage states that Christ was crucified "by the predetermined and foreordained plan of God." Notice that it says His sufferings were "predetermined" and "foreordained." There is certainly no question that God foreknew that the crucifixion would happen—even if we cannot explain in just

what sense He *ordained* the event. Notice also that the perpetrators were morally responsible for their part in the act ("this Jesus whom you crucified"). They were pierced to the heart and cried out, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). In other words, Christ's crucifixion was predetermined and foreordained (and hence foreknown) while at the same time performed at the hands of responsible men. Along these lines, the Bible also says that the Lamb was "foreknown (Greek: *prognosmenou*) from the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:20). How could this be, unless God foreknew that Adam would use his freedom to sin? Furthermore, how could our names have been written in the book of life "from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8) and how could we have been "elect in harmony with the foreknowledge [Greek: *kata prognosin*] of God" (1 Pet. 1:2) unless God foreknew⁹ we would be saved?

There are so many passages in Scripture which show God foreknowing contingent moral choices that we cannot possibly investigate them all here. I advise the interested reader to consult *Discourses Upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, Vol. 1, by Stephen Charnock, pp. 441-51 and 468-69 for a more detailed treatment of this subject.

God's Immutable Counsels

Biblically, the word "counsel" refers to one's intention, resolution, will, or purpose. God's counsels are not subject to change, fluctuation, or failure. The Scriptures expressly declare that God's purpose is "unchangeable" (Heb. 6:17). He is a God who "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11), and assures us that His purpose will be established and that He will accomplish all His good pleasure (Isa. 46:10). Whatever He plans He surely does (Isa. 46:11); no plan of His is thwarted (Job 42:2). As A.W. Pink observes: "It is no more possible for the Divine counsels to fail in their execution than it would be for the thrice Holy God to lie."¹⁰

Does God Change His Mind?

The following Scriptures clearly indicate that God does not change His mind or alter His plans:

And so the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind (1 Sam. 15:29).

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent: Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num. 23:19).

There are certain passages which, at first glance, appear to show God changing His mind in response to new (and some would say unforeseen) actions by His creatures. We will deal with two representative passages which are frequently cited. Explaining these should clear up difficulties with the others, since the same principles of interpretation are involved.

1/ **Jonah and the Ninevites.** God sent Jonah to preach against the Ninevites because of their great wickedness—to inform them that in forty days they would be destroyed (Jonah 3:4). As a result of Jonah's preaching, the Ninevites repented in sackcloth and ashes. Because of their repentance, God spared the Ninevites and did not destroy them in forty days as originally threatened (Jonah 3:10).

How can we reconcile this apparent change of God's mind with the concept of a God who is unchanging in His counsels? Stephen Charnock explains:

But the answer to these cases is this, that where we find predictions in Scripture declared, and yet not executed, we must consider them, not as absolute, but conditional... with a clause of revocation annexed to them, provided that men repent; and this God lays down as the general case, always to be remembered as a rule for the interpreting of His threatenings against a nation, and the same reason will hold against a particular person. (Jer. 18:7-10) "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and destroy it; if that nation against whom I

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have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them; . . ."¹¹

In other words, the principle is that God will not carry out His threat to destroy a nation *if* that nation repents. Apparently the Ninevites knew and understood this principle, at least instinctively. In verse 9 of chapter 3 they state, "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?" Furthermore, the fact that God gave them forty days certainly is evidence that the purpose of His threat was to induce them to repent. Why would God give them forty days if they were to understand their destruction as inevitable, regardless of what they might do?

The will of God is unchangeably set to reward righteousness and punish iniquity. Notice that God did not "repent" of the evil He said He would do to the Ninevites until *after* they themselves had changed. When the threatening was made, they were fit objects for God's wrath. When they repented, they became fit objects for God's mercy. Again, we must stress that it was the Ninevites who *first changed* their relationship to God (i.e., from objects of wrath to objects of mercy). Then God, applying His unchanging principle of rewarding righteousness and punishing iniquity, dealt with them accordingly. When the Scripture speaks of God "repenting" of the evil He had threatened (3:10), we are to understand that this repentance in God is only a change in His *outward conduct*, according to His infallible foresight and immutable will.

John Owen insightfully pointed out that God's attributes of mercy and justice "have no egress [i.e., outward manifestation; out-working] but towards objects placed in particular circumstances."¹² In other words, there is no change in God when He punishes the wicked and spares the penitent, any more than we can say the sun is "changed" when it at one moment hardens clay and at the next melts butter.

God would have changed His mind *if*: 1) The Ninevites *had not* repented and God *had* spared them, or 2) The Ninevites *had repented* and God *had not* spared them. If one of these two sets of circumstances had taken place, then it could truly be said that God changed His mind and did not behave according to His principle of punishing those who sin and sparing those who repent. But it was the *Ninevites* who changed their minds, eliciting a change in God's outward behavior in accordance with His immutable will.

2/ **Genesis 6:5-6.** This passage reads: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth . . . and the Lord repented that He had made men on the earth and it made Him sorrowful at heart." Here is a verse which clearly shows God "repenting" or regretting something He had done. Was God genuinely shocked to discover that man rebelled? Was He having second thoughts about having created man in the first place? Had man's behavior surprised God with an unexpected turn for the worse?

We must realize that a given word may have a variety of meanings, depending on its usage in the context. Sometimes the Hebrew word for "repent" (*nacham*) found in this verse is used concerning a change of mind (see 1 Sam. 15:29), but it is often used in other senses as well. *Nacham* may also mean "to be sorry" or "to console oneself."¹³ That this is the meaning here is clearly shown from the *poetic parallelism* of the verse. In Hebrew, poetic parallelism is a common literary style in which an idea stated at the beginning of a verse is restated in different words at the end of the verse. In Genesis 6:6, the sense of the phrase "it repented the Lord" is further explained by the statement ". . . and it made Him sorrowful."¹⁴ God "repented" in the sense that He was *grieved* over man's sin. This verse is *not* talking about God's knowledge or His will, as though He were having second thoughts about having created man. Rather, the verse is a refer-

ence to God's *emotions*, and simply describes how God *felt* about the sin of man.¹⁵

Having examined what the Scriptures say about God's immutable knowledge and counsels, we will now evaluate the so-called "open" view of God.

THE "OPEN" VIEW OF GOD

The "open god" theologians are concerned with having a God who is actively involved in the affairs of this world. They complain that the immutable God of "classical theism" is immobile, static, and unable to relate to His creation on a personal level. Conversely, their God is dynamic and active. Pinnock states:

The profile of God which I derive from reading the Bible is characterized by flexibility and dynamism. Our Lord is the living God who acts and reacts on behalf of his people. He does not exist far off in splendid isolation from the realm of time and change but relates to his creatures and shares their lives with them. We might compare Aristotle's God to Satan in the biblical narrative in that he lives in solitary isolation, relating to nothing and contemplating only himself. How ironical that the aloofness of Aristotle's God should have influenced the Christian doctrine of God and done so much damage to it. I believe God relates to his creatures in every dimension of their lives.¹⁶

These "open" theologians believe that the traditional view of God is tainted with pagan Greek philosophy¹⁷—particularly the Aristotelian notion of God as an "unmoved mover." They say we must return to a Hebraic conception of God—a God who is dynamic, changing, relational, and eminently personal.¹⁸

In place of the "classical" God, they have postulated a god who lives *in time*, who responds to our actions as they occur. If God exists in an eternal "now," they argue, He cannot think new thoughts or experience new things. How can such a God be genuinely moved by our prayers, or have the loving concern of a father

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for us?

Another major worry for the "open god" theologians is how man can be "significantly free" if his future is completely foreknown down to the last detail. If God has perfect knowledge of everything we will choose, this implies to them that our choices are fixed in cement. As Pinnock states:

The whole idea of a free action is that the future is open to be determined by that choice when it is made. If the future is exhaustively known, it is not open in the required sense, and freedom is illusory.¹⁹

I think the "open god" theologians are correct in affirming a personal, involved God. However, they err when they charge that "classical" theology teaches a "static" God. So-called "classical" theologians from the early Fathers through the post-Reformation scholastics to the present time have consistently affirmed that God *does* interact dynamically with His creatures without in any way experiencing change. Classical theism has always rejected the Greek notion of God's inability to relate to the external world, while at the same time professing a God who does not change in His being, will, or knowledge.²⁰

I also believe the "open god" theologians' desire to maintain man's freedom is to some extent legitimate. The Bible certainly does affirm that man exercises his will in making genuine choices. They correctly reject any view which sees man as a preprogrammed robot, or compelled to act against his will. The real problem here is that they maintain man's freedom at the expense of God's perfections and infinity.

Since the most important consideration before us is whether this changing, "open" god is really the God of the Bible, let's compare the "open" god with the God of Scripture.

The "open" God is not omniscient in the true sense of the term. While they assert that He knows "all that is knowable," they deny that the free decisions of men fall into the category of the "knowable."²¹

Elseth maintains that "God does not know ahead of time the free decisions of men . . ." ²² Similarly, Gordon Olson states: "Future choices of moral beings, when acting freely in their moral agency, have not been brought into existence as yet and thus are not fixities or objects of possible knowledge."²³ Since the "open" God cannot know what men will do in the future with certainty, he can only venture an educated guess. Elseth asserts:

Freedom can be predicted, but not with certainty. Thus God may have predictions and theories as to what man will do, but He cannot know with certainty what man will do in areas where God has given man absolute freedom of choice.²⁴

This unbiblical view of God's foreknowledge is not new. The seventeenth-century Socinian sect (which was unitarian, not trinitarian, in its doctrine of God) likewise restricted God's foreknowledge. McClintock and Strong's summary of the old Socinian view reveals remarkable similarities to the "new insights" presented by Rice and company.²⁵

Some Christians might argue that although God can know our future choices, He voluntarily limits His knowledge of them for the sake of our freedom. But this solution is untenable. We have already seen numerous biblical passages where God clearly does foreknow such choices. Additionally, we must realize that omniscience is an *essential* attribute of God. The divine nature could no more become ignorant than it could become finite, sinful, or weak.

When we considered the biblical view, we saw that God's knowledge is *infinite* (Ps. 147:5). If God is ignorant of the free decisions a person will make tomorrow, then when tomorrow arrives he will know more than he does today. Furthermore, considering the billions of people on the face of the earth, each making many moral decisions every day, the "open" god's knowledge increases astronomically as each day passes. Rice directly affirms this when

he states:

The contents of God's experience, therefore, are not fixed or static. They are constantly increased as new data pass from the developing world into the mind of God . . . God's experience of the world is open and dynamic . . . and His knowledge of the world is constantly increasing.²⁶

The "open" God is therefore not the God of the Bible, for the biblical God possesses infinite knowledge, not a finite knowledge which is daily approaching perfection.

The "open" theologians recognize that the passages about Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial (discussed earlier) are manifestly embarrassing to their view. Their attempts to skirt the obvious meaning of these passages are utterly unconvincing. One "solution" given by both Rice and Olson for the Judas case is that Jesus really didn't know all along that Judas would betray Him, but began to piece together the betrayal as He "perceived its development in His mind."²⁷ By the time the Last Supper arrived, Jesus had observed enough of Judas to predict with confidence that a betrayal would take place. As Rice states, "Perhaps by then [i.e., the Lord's Supper] Judas had so committed himself to his course of action that there was no turning back . . . With His astute insight into human behavior . . . Jesus could have detected Judas's plans."²⁸ But this impossible interpretation is demolished simply by reading the text. John 6:64 says Jesus knew "from the beginning . . . who would betray him." He not only knew it long in advance ("from the beginning") but He also knew it as a certainty ("who would betray him," not "who might betray Him").

Regarding Acts 2:23, Rice says that this passage "need not mean that their [i.e., Christ's crucifiers'] actions were predetermined and that they were simply doing what God planned and/or foresaw for them." He denies the obvious sense of the text by arguing that if God either foreknew or foreordained their actions they could not be held accountable for them, since fore-

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known actions cannot be free. But that is a crucial point of the whole debate! Rice just assumes what he is trying to prove, leaving us with a classic example of begging the question. Now I would like Rice to explain this: if Acts 2:23 does not teach that Christ was crucified by the predetermined and fore-ordained plan of God, what does it teach? He offers no explanation at this critical point.

Rice and Olson's answer for those passages which speak of the Lamb as "slain from the foundation of the world" fare no better. They both understand these passages to mean that God had a contingency plan in place from the foundation of the world, which was put into effect when sin became an actuality.³⁰ But 1 Peter 1:20 and Revelation 13:8 decisively refute this view. The inevitability of Christ's sacrifice could not be stated more clearly than in these passages.³¹ There is not even the remotest hint of a "contingency plan" here.

These teachers reject God's foreknowledge of man's choices because they—like the Socinians before them—cannot reconcile this knowledge with the freedom of the will. But the ability to reconcile a difficult question must never become the basis on which doctrine is determined. We must take the scriptural statements as they are, believe them, and be humble enough to admit that our finite, sinful understanding will never plumb the depths of God's wisdom and being. Charnock's caution is particularly appropriate:

But what if the foreknowledge of God, and the liberty of the will cannot be fully reconciled by man? Shall we therefore deny a perfection in God to support a liberty in ourselves? Shall we rather fasten ignorance upon God and accuse Him of blindness, to maintain our liberty? That God does foreknow everything and yet that there is liberty in the rational creature, are both certain; but how to fully reconcile them, may surmount the understanding of man.³²

Changeable In His Counsels

We have already shown from the Scrip-

tures that the biblical God does not change His mind or alter His plans. The "open" god is a chameleon god who does both. Elseth states:

Prophecies do not occur out of necessity of God's foreknowledge, or even always because God said they would take place. In fact, God often changes His mind and does not do the things He says He will.³³

Such a view is plainly unbiblical. Elseth, Pinnock, and Olson attempt to support this position with arguments similar to the ones explained earlier, such as Jonah and the Ninevites.³⁴ Pinnock states:

On the contrary, it [the Bible] presents God as a dynamic agent who deals with the future as an open question. You see that very clearly in the book of Jonah. God had intended to destroy Ninevah, but then something unexpected happened—Ninevah repented. Neither God nor Jonah knew this was going to happen. God approved and the prophet disapproved. As a result God changed his mind and decided not to go through with his plan to destroy the city.³⁵

Pinnock may be correct about *Jonah's* ignorance, but as we have already seen, this passage in no way demonstrates God's ignorance of what the Ninevites would do. These verses, when properly understood and considered in context, do not support the idea that God changes His mind or fails to carry out His plans.

As noted previously, God is not a man that He should repent or change His mind (1 Sam. 15:29; Num. 23:19). Furthermore, Deuteronomy 18:20-22 reads: "But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name . . . that prophet shall die . . . if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken." Now if it is true that "God often does not do the things He says He will," as Elseth asserts, then Deuteronomy 18:20-22 becomes meaningless as a test for exposing false prophets, because even a true prophet of God can occasionally prophesy something which does not come to pass.

Had the "open" God inspired Deuteronomy 18, we would have expected Him to say something like: "If the thing does not come about or come true, this may or may not have been the thing which I told the prophet to say, since sometimes I say things will take place which never do." Fortunately, this chameleon god is not the God of the Bible, for "what comfort could it be to pray to a God, that like the chameleon changed colors every day, every moment? What encouragement could there be to lift up our eyes to one that were of one mind this day and of another tomorrow?"³⁶

Elseth concludes that it is "tragic" for Christians to exercise faith in God's sovereignty: "The ultimate end of this tragedy is that Christians begin to believe that God is satisfactorily working out His plan as He wants it in the world."³⁷ If Elseth's view is true, then the Apostle Paul was the most "tragic" of all Christians, for it was he who stated that God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). And it was Paul the Apostle who encouraged the saints to believe God is "satisfactorily working out His plan as He wants it in the world" by saying: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While I am not going to try to solve the problem of how God can foreknow free choices, I would like to suggest some factors which I think ought to be considered as the reader works on his or her own solution.

We must make a distinction between *knowing* and *causing*. Knowledge of an event does not cause that event. The "open" theologians confound these repeatedly throughout their arguments. For example, Pinnock erroneously states that

for the so-called "determinist" "[one] can only choose to do actions which God has always known he would do. Therefore he cannot do otherwise than what he is destined to do" (emphasis added).³⁸ Pinnock equates God's "knowing" with His "destining." This confusion of knowing and causing is a major philosophical blunder.

Secondly, a proper understanding of God's relation to time must be considered. The "open" theologians place God wholly in time; He in no way transcends it. The Scriptures teach, and Christians have historically affirmed, that God is "outside" of time—though He can and does intervene in it.³⁹ Time was created by God with the universe. Because God transcends time, He can see the past, present, and future in one intuitive act. Thus, while "foreknowledge" is "fore" from our perspective, God sees the panoramic sweep of events in an

"eternal now."⁴⁰ Therefore, perhaps a closer analogy is our apprehension of a present event. As we observe a present event we know it with certainty without necessarily causing it to be. Similarly, God can view our future actions as "present" (in the sense of an "eternal now") without causing them. Many of the greatest theological thinkers have raised this point in their discussions on the foreknowledge issue, and I think it merits serious consideration.

We have seen that the Bible clearly teaches that God knows all things, including the free choices we will make. We have also seen that the "open" god of Pinnock, Rice, Elseth, Olsen, and others is a god who makes mistakes, changes his mind, and gets more knowledgeable with each passing day. The "open god" theologians believe their notion of God leaves man

"significantly free." Unfortunately, all they have done is created a god after man's own finite image, in whom no Christian could trust or find comfort.

I must agree with Norman Geisler's astute observation, when he calls attention to "the depraved tendency of man-centered philosophy that desires both to tame God and tone down His sovereignty so as to make him domestically harmless." I echo his conclusion, that "the result is disastrous for a truly biblical and supernatural theism."⁴¹

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Notes

¹The first option is held by some Calvinists, while the latter explanation is given by many Arminians. In both the Calvinistic and Arminian models God is assumed to have absolute foreknowledge of all events.

²Pinnock sets forth his view in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views*, ed. Randall Basinger and David Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986). As the title implies, four noted theologians (John Feinberg, Norman Geisler, Bruce Reichenbach, and Pinnock) offer their suggestions for solving the dilemma. Howard R. Elseth's *Did God Know?* (St. Paul: Calvary United Church, 1977) develops the denial of God's foreknowledge found in the earlier writings of his mentor, Gordon C. Olson (e.g., *Sharing Your Faith and The Truth Shall Make You Free*). Olson taught this doctrine for years at Youth With a Mission (YWAM) schools, where his books were used as training guides. Elseth's book was likewise influential there; see Alan W. Gomes, *Lead Us Not Into Deception* (published by Telion, P.O. Box 1464, La Mirada, CA 90637-1464 [36.35]; 3rd Ed., 1986). Richard Rice's *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1985) claims to provide "new insights into the balance between divine knowledge and human freedom."

³Pinnock states, "If God is immutable, that is, if he cannot change in any way at all, how can he interact with free persons and be affected by them as the Bible says? How can he even contemplate a changing historical scene without running the risk of learning something new? He can do so only if events are not genuinely contingent and thus cannot produce new knowledge" (Clark Pinnock, "Response to Norman Geisler," in *Predestination and Free Will*, 95-96).

⁴"He learns about our decisions as they happen, not before they happen." *Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁵I have documented this in some detail in *Lead Us Not Into Deception*, Appendix B.

⁶Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

⁷Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:417ff.

⁸*Ibid.*, 1:432.

⁹In either the Calvinistic or Arminian sense—take your pick!

¹⁰Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 19.

¹¹Charnock, 1:343.

¹²John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 10: *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 581.

¹³Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 636-37.

¹⁴Franz Delitzsch and C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1: *Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1877), 140-41.

¹⁵Some theologians feel that Scriptures which speak of God as "grieved," "angry," "sad," etc., are to be taken in an anthropopathic sense, i.e., that such emotions do not properly belong to God, but are ascribed to Him to aid in understanding certain truths which could not be understood any other way. It is not my purpose here to get into this issue. If and to what extent God's emotions correspond to man's is a question certainly worthy of study. But for the present purpose it is sufficient to note that Genesis 6 has nothing to do with God changing His mind or will.

¹⁶Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Free Will*, 154. Statements like this are found throughout Rice's book; note particularly chapters one and two.

¹⁷"We have to say that the Greek idea of utter unchangeableness in God is false and misleading when measured by the Scripture." (Clark Pinnock, "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a neo-Classical Theism," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Stanley Gundry [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 40.)

¹⁸"The dynamic ontology of the Bible clashes inevitably with the static ontology of the Greek thinkers, so that when the two visions of reality are brought together, biblical teaching becomes warped and twisted and the resultant synthesis doctrinally objectionable." *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁹Clark Pinnock, "Response to Bruce Reichenbach," in *Predestination and Free Will*, 138.

²⁰In this connection, I highly recommend an article by Richard A. Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 22-40.

²¹Pinnock states, "God knows everything that can be known... But he does not know what is unknowable, and cannot do what is undoable... it is no deficiency in God's omniscience that he does not know them [i.e., future contingencies]. He knows everything that can be known." (Pinnock, "Response to Norman Geisler," 97; see also Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," 157.)

²²Howard R. Elseth, *Did God Know?* (St. Paul, MN: Calvary United Church, 1977), 70.

²³Gordon C. Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (Franklin Park, IL: Bible Research Fellowship, 1980), III-13. Rice expresses the same sentiment. See Rice, 53-55.

²⁴Elseth, 97.

²⁵McClintock and Strong point out, "It [Socinianism] also denies that God foresees the actions of his creatures, or knows anything about them until they come to pass; except in some special cases in which he has foreordained the event, and foresees it because he

foreordained it. That they may not seem to derogate [take away] from God's omniscience, they admit that God knows all things knowable; but they contend that contingent events are unknowable, even by an infinite being." (*Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 1880 ed., s.v. "Socinianism," by John McClintock and James Strong.) For additional information on the Socinian system of theology, the reader is advised to consult the following sources: George Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1908), 317-25; William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 2 vols. (London: Billing and Sons, Ltd., 1960), 2:163-88; and Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 7 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1958), 7:137-67.

²⁶Rice, 39.

²⁷Gordon Olson, *Sharing Your Faith* (Chicago: Bible Research Fellowship, 1976), 1-13/[e].

²⁸Rice, 96.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 86.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 64; Olson, *Sharing Your Faith*, 1-10.

³¹Note that Rev. 13:8 could read either "the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world" or "our names were written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." Grammatically, either rendering is possible, although the latter is more probably correct. But theologically the significance is the same. God could not actually write our names in the sacrificial Lamb's book of life "from the foundation of the world" unless He knew the Lamb would be offered.

³²Charnock, 1:450.

³³Elseth, 109.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 85, 117, 123.

³⁵Pinnock, "Response to Bruce Reichenbach," 139.

³⁶Charnock, 1:348.

³⁷Elseth, 98. On this point Elseth bravely carries his theory to its logical conclusion, while Rice does not. Rice tries to maintain that God is working out His plan in the world, at least in its broad outlines: "God's infinite capacity to work for good provides a basis for confidence that His ultimate objectives for the world... will be finally realized" (105). But Elseth sees what Rice does not: if God is not in control of the means of accomplishing His plan in human history (i.e., the free decisions of men), He cannot guarantee the end which is contingent on those means.

³⁸Pinnock, "Response to Bruce Reichenbach," 138.

³⁹Consider Ex. 3:14; John 8:58; Jude 25; Heb. 1:2; Ps. 90:2; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16, which speak of God's timeless existence.

⁴⁰Again, this is not to suggest that God does not know the distinction between past, present, and future events. God eternally knows our past, present, and future.

⁴¹Norman Geisler, "Process Theology," in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 280.