

A Response to “Open Theism”¹ or “Freewill Theism”²
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Historical Review

For centuries theological battles have raged over the interrelationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Some, following the teachings of the British monk, Pelagius, a fourth century moralist, have argued that the sin of Adam did nothing more than provide a bad example for his posterity. There is no such thing as original sin; man is neither depraved or under condemnation because of Adam’s sin. All people have free will, and because of it God’s grace is universal.³

Augustine, a contemporary to Pelagius, stood in opposition to his teachings and stressed man’s total inability to gain right standing before God. Augustinianism, later developments of which would be called by some Realism or Calvinism, also taught that man’s entire nature was corrupt; that he was under condemnation because of Adam’s sin; and that his will was bound to that nature, thus limiting his choices to the sphere of that corrupt nature.⁴

Later developments of Pelagianism were more moderate and by the middle of the sixteenth century, a large number of its adherents became known as Arminianists, following in the traditions of the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Although the views of Arminius were not that different

¹ The term used in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

² The term used in David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

³ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology & Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 86.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 635.

from traditional Calvinism, subsequent developments by others went considerably further.⁵

Ryrie sums up the central issues well by saying, "Arminianism teaches that Adam was created in innocency, not holiness, that sin consists in acts of the will, that we inherit pollution from Adam but not guilt nor a sin nature, that man is not totally depraved, that man has the ability to will to do good and to conform to God's will in this life so as to be perfect, and that the human will is one of the causes of regeneration."⁶

The Current Issue

Over the past two decades the issue of man's depravity and "freewill" has come to affect some people's views of God. Some have reasoned that if God is eternal (has always existed and will always exist), immutable (unchanging), impassible (cannot be moved emotionally), absolutely sovereign (either directly causes or permits all things), and is exhaustively omniscient (knows all things actual and potential), it rules out any genuine sense of human responsibility or relationality between God and His creation. The primary presupposition behind this sort of thinking is that man possesses *freewill*. And if man possesses freewill, then he can exercise self-determination and God cooperates with his self-determination to affect His purposes. In simple terms, God is not exhaustively omniscient and learns from the free choices of His creatures. God is not immutable because He is constantly changing in His knowledge. God is not impassible because He is moved either by His own emotions in response to man's free choices or to man's emotional pleas for His assistance. Those who propose such views of God and man are known as freewill theists.

⁵ Ibid., p. 634.

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1997), p. 221.

Sanders explains this sort of thinking when he says that God loves His creatures and desires His creatures to freely love Him back. God has also sovereignly chosen to subjugate some of His purposes to the requests and actions of man, thus exercising general rather than particular providence in the affairs of man. He sums up by saying “God freely enters into genuine give-and-take relations with us. This entails risk taking on his part because we are capable of letting God down. This understanding of divine providence deeply affects our views concerning salvation, suffering and evil, prayer and divine guidance.”⁷

Freewill theists reject the traditional understanding of God by saying that there is a philosophical lineage stretching from Parmenides to Plato to Plotinus setting forth a strong metaphysical and valuational preference for permanence over change, a bias, in their view, that has powerfully influenced classical theology, leading to the insistence on an excessively strong doctrine of divine immutability.⁸

As Hasker sees it, most orthodox Christian thinkers have been or are engaged in *perfect being theology* – influenced by the now defunct neo-Platonic metaphysical tradition. He sees himself and other freewill theists as being in a position to correct their mistakes and thus to rescue the biblical portrayal of God from an outmoded metaphysics that forces us to interpret an excessively large part of that portrayal as metaphorical rather than literal. In short, he suggests, having been freed from classical metaphysical prejudices, we can – and should – be true to our own metaphysical predispositions. In other words, “It is in the end out of the question for anyone to ‘prove’ that a particular conception of God is the correct one. Rather, one simply finds that a particular way of understanding the things of God makes the most sense, and provides the greatest illumination, in the overall context of one’s thinking and living.”⁹

⁷ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 282.

⁸ Hasker, *The Openness of God*, p. 129.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

It should be clear at this point that one's presuppositions about man would have a dramatic impact on one's views of God. If man is absolutely free, then God cannot be absolutely sovereign. Unless, of course, as the freewill theists insist, God chooses to limit His particular providence by allowing man the absolute freedom of choice. In their view, all people are free to obey God or disobey God, accept truth or reject truth. And God really doesn't know beforehand which it will be. Further, God is making real-time responses to man's choices – even to the point of changing His mind at times!

Biblical Antinomies

How are we to respond to such views of God? In the words of Scripture we see an explanation of the death of God's Son described in this manner: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur*" (Acts 4:27-28, italics mine).

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of ancient Babylon, learned a life-changing lesson from God's sovereignty and providence, and in response declared, "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the hosts of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:34b-35).

To Joseph it became known that man's choices do not frustrate the purposes of God: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

But then there are those passages that suggest that God has at times changed His mind (e.g. Exodus 32:14, 33:1-3, 24; Deuteronomy 9:13-29; 1 Samuel

2:27-31; 1 Chronicles 21; Psalm 106:23; Jeremiah 18:1-23, 26:19, et al). Does God really change His mind, or is His statement through Malachi correct: "For I am the Lord, I do not change" (Malachi 3:6)? Or, is He correct in His statement through Balaam: "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?" (Numbers 23:19).

Does God use the choices of men to accomplish his purposes? Yes, He does. "Thus says the lord God, 'Behold, I am against you, O Gog, . . . I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and will bring you out . . . After many days you will be summoned . . . It will come about on that day, that thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil plan, . . .'" (Ezekiel 38:3-10).

Even our prayers do not "change" God, for we are told, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 John 5:14-15).

The most basic concern of the freewill theist is this: How does man's freedom under God's providence work? Can a reasonable reply be made to this inquiry - a reply that maintains the immutability of God and at the same time maintains the responsibility of man for his choices? I believe there can be.

Important Biblical Propositions

Sanders was correct when he said that the freewill theist's view of divine providence deeply affects their views about salvation, suffering and evil, prayer and divine guidance. What he did not say, and what is equally correct, is that one's view of the depravity of man will *totally control* one's views of salvation, suffering and evil, prayer and divine guidance.

As we prepare a biblical proposal for the reconciliation of these issues, we must first consider some basic biblical propositions about God and man. With

reference to God, our comments will be limited to His perfections of sovereignty, omniscience and immutability.¹⁰

- God is absolutely and universally supreme. He is absolutely independent and is not subject to any influences outside of Himself. He either directly causes or permits whatsoever shall ever come to pass.

“But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does” (Job 23:13).

“I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2).

“But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Psalm 115:3).

“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all” (1 Chronicles 29:11).

“His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the hosts of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no

¹⁰ Any attempt to put forth a complete defense for these perfections in such a brief paper would be presumptuous indeed. The writer’s purpose is simply to cite several biblical references in support of each perfection.

one can ward off His hand or say, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:34b-35).

"In Him we also have received an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11)

In chapter nine of Romans we observe the following: God's purposes are brought about by His choices (v. 11); whatever God has purposed and however He has chosen to accomplish His purposes is absolutely in keeping with His own standard of moral excellence - there is no injustice with God (v. 14); in the outworking of His plan to accomplish His purposes, God has mercy/compassion on whomever He wills and He hardens whomever He wills (vv. 15, 18); as the sovereign creator (the "Potter"), God is molding two kinds of vessels (people): those who are destined for wrath (vessels of wrath), and those who are destined for glory (vessels of mercy) (vv. 20-24).

- God possess an absolute knowledge of all things - actual or potential. It is impossible for God to learn.

"O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such

knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain it” (Psalm 139:1-6).

“Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite” (Psalm 147:5).

“It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24).

“Thus says the Lord, ‘So you think, house of Israel, for I know your thoughts” (Ezekiel 11:5).

“Lord, You know all things” (John 21:17c).

- God is eternally the same. He never changes in His perfections or His determinations. All that He is today He has always been and forever be will.

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14).

“Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind” (1 Samuel 16:29).

“The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation” (Psalm 33:11).

“Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven” (Psalm 119:89).

“For I, the Lord, do not change” (Malachi 3:6a).

There are also some basic propositions about man that must be noted.

- All unregenerate people are under sin (the condemnation of it).

“We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” (Romans 3:9).

- All unregenerate people are constituted sinners in Adam.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

- All people are born spiritually dead and with a corrupt nature.

“ And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formally walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formally lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest” (Ephesians 2:1-3).

- All unregenerate people are enslaved to their corrupt nature and thus are able only to make choices within the sphere of that nature.

“ . . . though you were slaves of sin, . . . and having been freed from sin, For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, . . . ” (Romans 6:16-22).

“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, . . . For the mind set on the flesh is death, . . . because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:5-8).

“No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:65).

- All unregenerate people lack the ability to understand spiritual truth.

“Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word” (John 8:43).

“He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God” (John 8:47).

“But we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7-8).

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

In Romans 3:10-12, Paul sums up his argument for the corruptness of the human race in this manner: “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.”

The picture should be obvious to all: God is absolute and perfect in His being. Man is totally and helplessly lost in sin. He is under condemnation before God and totally enslaved to his sinful nature. The interaction between such a God and such a man is only possible as such a God chooses to entertain such interaction. And He does so only to accomplish His purposes.

A Proposed Resolution for the Biblical Antinomies

The eternal plan of God is complete in all of its aspects. It was formulated before the foundation of the world and includes everything that shall ever come to pass.¹¹ The purpose of the plan is to glorify God (cf. Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). God is not making up the plan as it unfolds; it is unfolding precisely as He designed it.

By drawing from and applying the propositional statements about God and man set forth above, the following is offered as a proposed resolution to the antinomies presented on pages four and five of this paper.

¹¹ Several passages in the Scriptures speak of certain aspects of the plan as having been planned or accomplished “before (from, since) the foundation of the world” (cf. Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Eph. 1:4; 2:20; Heb. 4:3; 9:6; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8).

When God chose to develop a plan to glorify Himself (make Himself known), nothing existed but God alone. In His omniscience, He knew all the options and possibilities of what He might include in His plan to accomplish His purposes. To narrow things down to a small bite, let us imagine that when God contemplated the creatures within His plan (thinking here of human beings), He did so knowing every thought any would ever think, every word any would ever speak, and every action any would ever perform. He did not know these things by foresight, but by omniscience (remember, it is impossible for God to learn). God also knew the consequences of every potential person's thoughts, words and actions and how they would interact with those of other people. So by choosing to include or exclude potential people, and thereby utilizing their choices, His purposes would come about exactly as He planned them without any possibility of failure.

During God's deliberations (evaluation of His options), He interacted with the choices of His creatures. For example, God knew that the sinful condition of the human race would result in the behavior described in Genesis six and His response to it was sorrow and grief, but their behavior nonetheless would accomplish the purposes of God so He included it in His plan. Likewise, God knew that the children of Israel would fashion the golden calf and worship it. He also knew that Moses' response to that situation would be to pray for the people. God used Moses' intervention as the means of altering His plan for them (see also Jer. 18:7, 8; 26:3; Jonah 3:10; 1 Sam. 15:11).

In the unfolding of God's plan, God revealed His interaction and responses (that actually took place before the foundation of the world) through the writers of Scripture in "real-time" terms. From God's perspective the events had already occurred; from the human perspective they were now occurring.

Conclusion

The presuppositions of Freewill Theism are that man has the capacity for self-determination (freewill), and that God is somehow changing and becoming who He is. Man is not totally corrupt so as to be enslaved to his sinful nature. He has the ability to understand God's revelation and can freely choose to accept it or reject it. God, on the other hand, is presently interacting with and responding to man's choices - which in some measure are unknown to God until they come to pass.

Freewill Theism diminishes God and exalts man. At worst, it is nothing more than old Pelagianism in modern dress. At best, it is nothing more than another emanation of classic Arminianism.

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