

THEIR  
GOD  
IS TOO  
S M A L L

OPEN THEISM AND THE  
UNDERMINING OF  
CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Bruce A. Ware

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A DIVISION OF  
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Their God Is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God*

Copyright © 2003 by Bruce A. Ware

Published by Crossway Books  
a division of Good News Publishers  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Josh Dennis

First printing 2003

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Ware, Bruce A.  
Their God is too small : open theism and the undermining of  
confidence in God / Bruce A. Ware.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.  
ISBN 1-58134-481-3 (TPB : alk. paper)  
1. God—Omniscience. 2. Providence and government of God.  
3. Free will and determinism—Religious aspects—Christianity.  
I. Title.  
BT131.W275 2003  
231—dc21 2003007907

---

VP	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05	04	03			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

# INTRODUCTION

FROM MY FIRST EXPOSURE to what is called the “open” view of God, I have wanted to help “set the record straight” concerning this new way of looking at God. I have wanted to do all I can to uphold the true character of our glorious God and the true faith we cherish as Christians in the face of this diminished view of both God and our faith. For the glory of God and for the good of Christian people, the open view needs to be seen for what it is and evaluated carefully by biblically-minded Christians. I am confident that when this evaluation has been done, followers of the true and living God will see the openness deity as an imposter and not the true God he is claimed to be.

The treatment of the open view in these pages is anything but exhaustive. Yet it provides a sufficient overview of and interaction with the position that readers will understand this movement’s basic features along with some of its most serious problems. My longer and more sustained interaction with open theism is available in another Crossway publication, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*.

I write this book very much aware that significant portions of the

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

evangelical movement are willing to validate the legitimacy of open theism. Major evangelical publishers and educational institutions have the view that open theism ought to be considered an “evangelical option” even if it is never widely accepted. I differ with this assessment. My own view is that open theism is both wrong and damaging to faith in ways that cannot rightly be tolerated in the evangelical church. Our day certainly is not known for its strong backbone or sharp boundary lines. To the contrary, we live in a era that likes to be defined more by what we hold in common in the center of our faith than by doctrines that distinguish us. On many issues where we differ, I also would strongly urge toleration and ongoing discussion. Open theism has deviated too far, however. This view of God is too small. The openness understanding of God belittles his glory and perfection, and its vision of faith leads to despair. We simply cannot stand by idly and allow the advocates of the openness view to influence the next generation of evangelicals unchallenged.

I wish to offer my thanks to the administration of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where I have the privilege to teach. Faculty writing projects are encouraged and supported, and I am grateful to serve in an institution where such work is valued. And I praise God for Crossway Books. In a day when some of our most respected Christian publishers are advancing various theological positions that represent distressing departures from our common faith, Crossway has shown a willingness and a desire to take a stand and support “the faith once for all given to the saints.” My own family has, once again, prayed much for me throughout the writing process. Phone calls to my mom and dad, or to my sister, nearly always included their encouraging words and expressions of prayer for my writing. Only in heaven will we know just how much these words

### *Introduction*

of encouragement and prayers effected. But I am grateful. And to my wife, Jodi, and to Bethany and Rachel, I wish to give my deepest thanks. Jodi has again borne with me under the pressures of long hours and late nights. Her support has never wavered. And my precious daughters' love for this dad means the world to me. I especially wish to thank Rachel for allowing me to tell some of her story in the pages of this book.

May God be pleased to advance the glory of his name and to buttress the faith and hope of his people. And to the extent that the critique offered here will assist in greater understanding of the true God and greater confidence in him, I will be the first to give God all the praise. For to him alone belongs all the glory, both now and forevermore. Amen.

# OPEN THEISM AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

Consider the following “Christianly” advice:

“God is a God of love, and as such, he respects you and your desires. He’s not one to ‘force’ his way on another. So then, God isn’t interested in planning out your future for you and giving you no say in what you do in your life! No, in fact, much of the future hasn’t been planned yet, and God is waiting on you to make your decisions and choose your course of action so that he knows how best to make his own plans. Of course he wants you to consult him in the process, though what you decide will be your choice, not his. What God wants is for you and him to work together in charting out the course of your life. And you can be sure that he will do everything in his power to help you have the best life that you can.”

Or consider this counsel:

“When tragedy intrudes into your life, please don’t think that God had anything to do with it! God doesn’t want pain and suffering to occur, and when it does, he feels as badly about it as those do who are suffering. And don’t think that, somehow, this tragedy must

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

fulfill some ultimately good purpose. It well may not! Evil happens all the time that God doesn't want, and often it serves no good purpose at all. But when tragedy does occur, we can trust God to be with us and help us rebuild what was lost. After all, one thing we know for sure, and that is that God is love. So, although he simply can't keep a whole lot of evil things from happening, he will be with us when they do happen."

Or again:

"God took a huge risk in creating a world with moral creatures who could use their freedom to go against what he desired and wanted to occur. All through history we see evidence of people (and fallen angels) using their God-given freedom to bring about horrific evil and causing untold pain and misery. Of course while God could not have known in advance what free creatures would do, surely he never has wanted *that* to happen! He is love, and he doesn't want his creatures to suffer. But one thing we can know for sure is that God will win in the end! So don't worry, because God will make sure that what he wants most badly to happen will be fulfilled. You can trust him with all your heart!"

These statements are all consistent with a relatively new movement within our evangelical churches called "open theism." This movement takes its name from the fact that its adherents view much of the future as "open" rather than closed, even to God. Much of the future, that is, is yet undecided, and hence it is unknown to God. God knows all that can be known, open theists assure us. But future free choices and actions, because they haven't happened yet, do not exist, and so God (even God) cannot know them. God cannot know what does not exist, they claim, and since the future does not now exist, God cannot now know it. More specifically, he cannot know,

in advance, that large portion of the future which will come about as free creatures choose and do as they please. Accordingly, God learns moment-by-moment what we do, when we do it, and his plans must constantly be adjusted to what actually happens, insofar as this is different than what he anticipated.

**WHY DO OPEN THEISTS BELIEVE  
WHAT THEY DO?**

So, what can be said for the open view? That is, why would Christian people be attracted to this understanding of God? Let me suggest three main reasons that open theists would offer. First, those who hold an openness perspective believe that a relationship with God is much more vital and “real” when the God with whom we interact does not (and cannot) know in advance what we will do. After all, if God doesn’t know what you’re going to say or do or decide until you actually act, then he must wait and learn from you what you have chosen. Upon learning that, God can then interact with you on what you have decided, and your relationship can then resemble much more what we normally think of as a “real personal relationship.” Granted, we all acknowledge that God knows much more than we do, says the open theist; after all, he knows the past and present perfectly. But if he knows the future perfectly also, then this turns our interaction with him into a sham. If God knows all of the future definitely and perfectly, then he knows (and always has known) every word that you will ever speak, every choice that you will ever make, and every action that you will ever perform. So what would God’s response be to your choices and actions, if he knew them all in advance? God could never be truly surprised or delighted or grieved, or relate with you in “real ways,” for he would always

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

have to respond, “Yes, I knew you would say that,” or, “Yes, I knew you would do that.” No real relationship would be possible, open theists argue, if God knows all of our free choices and actions before we do them.

Second, when suffering and affliction come into our lives, open theists believe that their view of God is greatly comforting. Moreover, they think that their solution to the “problem of evil” is more satisfying than anything offered by a more traditional view of God. The open theist says you should always understand that God did not plan for suffering to come into your life. And he surely is not using it in your life to accomplish some hidden purpose. Rather, says the open theist, all evil comes about through the wrongful use of the free will that God has given his moral creatures. As Greg Boyd (a leading advocate of open theism) asserts, “The open view, I submit, allows us to say consistently in unequivocal terms that the ultimate source for all evil is found in the will of free agents rather than in God.”<sup>1</sup> So there really is no “hidden agenda” behind suffering; God is not “secretly” bringing about your affliction. How do we know this? Because God is love and he simply wouldn’t wish suffering on anyone. Often he doesn’t even know just what affliction is coming or how severe it will be. And the fact remains, he doesn’t want or will suffering to occur.

A natural question, then, is this: If God created the world, did he know that this unwanted suffering would be a part of the creation that he would make? And if so, what justifies God in creating a world containing the kinds of horrific suffering we experience? According to the open view, God did know that suffering would be a *possibility* in the world he created, but he did not know that it would *actually* occur. How is this? Well, simply, when God decided what kind of

creation he would bring into existence, he chose for there to be “free” creatures. True freedom means, however, that while God wants people to use their freedom for good, he cannot give them the capacity for freedom and also control how they use it. This would be a contradiction, the openness proponent argues. So, in giving freedom, God accepts the possibility that people might use this good gift of freedom to bring about evil. Instead of using it to love, they might use it in hateful, hurtful, spiteful ways. God, then, knew unwanted evil was a possibility, but he just didn’t know (until it happened) whether evil, in fact, would come about.

So how is God justified in creating a world he knew might contain evil? As long as he knew that the good that could come from freedom could have been accomplished only by giving the freedom itself with the possibility of it being used for evil, God is justified, say the open theists. In other words, the bare possibility of human freedom being used for good (which God expected would happen) provided justification for God to create a world in which he knew that evil *might* also come (as people used their freedom, wrongly, to do evil).

How is this a more satisfying answer to the “problem of evil” than the traditional answers of Christian theologians? Open theists argue that if (as traditionally believed) God knew the complete future of the world before he created it, that is, if he knew every atrocity, every rape, every brutal murder, every malicious insult, every genocide, then it is unimaginable that he would have created *this* world. Surely, the evil of this world is not what God wanted, and God bemoans all specific instances of evil that occur. But the bottom line is this (according to open theists): God simply could not have known in advance that evil would occur, and would occur to the extent that it

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

has occurred, and he never wills such evil to happen. Therefore, they feel that God is vindicated from charges that he bears responsibility, as Creator, for the evil in the world.

Third and last, open theists claim that their view better accounts for Scripture's own teaching about God. That is, although the open view has not been advocated by any portion or branch of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant church throughout history, the bold claim of open theists is that their view is, in fact, more biblical. We will interact with some of these biblical claims as we move through this book, but it might help here to give you just a couple of examples<sup>2</sup> of where open theists base their claim.

Consider Jeremiah 19:5. In this verse God denounces Israel's evil and idolatry in performing such wickedness which, he says, "I did not command or decree, *nor did it come into my mind*" (emphasis added). It appears from this statement (see also, Jer. 7:31 and 32:35) that God is ignorant of the actions Israel will do, such that when they do it, *only then* does this knowledge of their activity "enter" God's mind. Surely this shows, says the open theist, that God has not known in advance just what actions Israel actually will do, even if he has always known what they possibly might do. As Greg Boyd comments, if God actually knew exactly what Israel would do, yet he tells us here that their very actions had not entered his mind, this amounts to a clear "contradiction"<sup>13</sup> Far better, he says, to take the meaning of the passage at face value and acknowledge that God learns what these free and sinful Israelites do only when they actually do it. Then, but not before, does this knowledge "enter" God's mind.

Or consider the account of Jonah being sent to Nineveh to proclaim its impending judgment. After the reluctant prophet finally goes to Nineveh and preaches God's message, the Ninevites repent

and plead for mercy. And then we read, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10). Surely this indicates, says the open theist, that God planned one thing (namely, judgment) based on the sin and wickedness of Nineveh, but then when he learned that they had repented, God himself “repented” and changed his mind about what he had planned to do. How could God thus change his mind, asks the open theist, if he had already known exactly what the Ninevites would do? Does this change of mind not indicate that God does not know the entire future?

Open theism proposes, then, that it presents the nature of our relationship with God in more realistic ways than does traditional theology, that it provides a better answer to the existence of evil in our world, and that it is being more faithful to what the Bible actually teaches. If this is the case, why should we be concerned? Isn’t open theism at least a possible correct understanding of what Scripture teaches, and shouldn’t we accept this as a legitimate view, even if we don’t agree fully with it? Why be concerned with what open theists are advocating?

### **WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?**

Throughout this book we will examine a number of issues that raise deep concerns. But allow me to suggest two overarching concerns about open theism that should raise significant questions in the minds of Christians. First, the very *greatness, goodness, and glory of God are undermined* by the open view of God. While the open view tries to understand God as more “relational” and “really involved” in human

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

affairs, the way it does so is by portraying God as less than he truly is. Of the open view we cannot help but say, “Their God is too small!”

Think about it. Here we have a God who has to wait, in so many, many cases, to see what *we* will do before he can decide his own course of action. While this is a very natural way to think of *human* choice and action, does this rightly apply to the God of the Bible? The true and living God of the Bible proclaims, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isa. 46:9b-10). Surely such a majestic God stands high and exalted and far above the proposed God of the open view. The Bible’s abundant prophecies, most of which involve innumerable future free human choices and actions, should be enough by themselves to indicate that the true God does not have to wait to see what we do before he makes up his mind. If God doesn’t know what we will do before we do it, how could Christ, for example, warn Peter that before the rooster crowed, Peter would deny him three times (John 13:38)? Was this a good guess on Jesus’ part? Hardly! Recall that just a few verses earlier in John 13 Jesus had told the disciples that he would begin telling them things before they take place so that when they occur, “you may believe that I am he” (John 13:19). God knows in advance what we will do, and he can, when he wishes, declare it to us as evidence of his very deity. The open view brings God down, pure and simple. It tries to give more significance to human choice and action at the expense of the very greatness and glory of God. The God of open theism is too small, simply because he is less than the majestic, fully knowing, altogether wise God of the Bible.

One more example may help us see how the open view undermines the true portrayal of God in Scripture. In open theism, because God often makes his plans not knowing exactly how things will work out (after all, he can't predict exactly what his moral creatures will do in light of the actions he performs), it may be the case that God actually looks back on *his own past actions* and concludes that what *he did* was not best. A striking example of this is found in John Sanders's *The God Who Risks*, in which Sanders discusses the account of the flood (Genesis 6–8). Because of the rainbow and God's pledge never to flood the earth again, Sanders suggests that here God reconsiders whether he actually should have brought the flood, and its painful judgment, on the world in the first place. Sanders writes, "It may be the case that although human evil caused God great pain, the destruction of what he had made caused him even greater suffering. Although his judgment was righteous, God decides to try different courses of action in the future."<sup>4</sup> In other words, we are left with the very uneasy and deeply distressing notion that even God (as is often true for us humans) may look back on his own past actions and say, "While this was just, it may not have been best!" Such a view of God calls into question God's very wisdom and the flawless goodness of both his character and actions. Can we count on God to do, always and only, what is best? If the open view is true, the answer must be no. Again, it should be apparent to Bible-believing Christians that the open view of God diminishes God's full integrity, wisdom, greatness, goodness, and glory. Their God is just too small.

Second, *the strength, well-being, faith, hope, and confidence of Christian people in and through their God are undermined* by the open view. To see just how devastating to true Christian faith the open view is, consider for a moment one of the most cherished passages and promises in all

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

the Bible: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5-6). What happens to these admonitions and assurances if the God of open theism is considered to be the true God? For one thing, the extent to which we can place our full trust in God, simply put, is demolished. Yes, the God of open theism will always *want* our best, but since he may not in fact *know* what is best, it becomes impossible to give him our unreserved and unquestioning trust. What if we trust him in his leading, for example, but begin experiencing hardships? What are we to conclude? Can we say with confidence, “These hardships are all part of the plan God has for me by which his good purposes will be accomplished”? If the God in whom we trust is the openness God, the answer must be a resounding no. Instead, when hardships come, the natural and unavoidable question of our anxious soul will be, “Did God anticipate these hardships when he gave me the direction that I have followed? Is it possible that the path I’m on is not really for my best, even though God might have thought it was earlier? And might it not be better to follow a different course than the one God directed me to take?” Just how are we to trust in the Lord with *all of our hearts* when we have doubts about God’s ability to lead and direct in the best way?

Further, just how will we be inspired to acknowledge God and his wisdom and purposes in all of our ways, or have confidence that the paths he puts us on are “straight”? Whatever “straight paths” means in Proverbs 3:6, surely it indicates that the path you take will fulfill what God knows is best for your life. As we all know, the “straight” paths of God may have many twists and turns unanticipated by us. But from God’s perspective, these paths are nonetheless “straight” because they actually fulfill exactly what God knows is best. Consider

Joseph, despised by his brothers, sold into Egypt, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, thrown into prison—yet all that occurred, we are told, was part of God's plan (Gen. 50:20). Because Joseph is so sure of God's leading in all that happened in his life, he can say to his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God!" (Gen. 45:8). But if, as open theism claims, God doesn't know what will happen in much of the future, and if God may find out that things have not gone as he intended, then it simply cannot be the case that God can rightly promise us that as we acknowledge him in all we do, he will ensure that our paths are "straight." But be clear on this: God—the true and living God of the Bible—*does* in fact make this astonishing, faith-inspiring, confidence-building, human-humbling promise! He *does* tell his children to trust him unreservedly, because he knows all that will occur and he promises to oversee everything in our lives as we keep our hope fixed exclusively on him! Our paths, as God's children, will be "straight," according to God's perfect and unassailable plan, as we place our faith and hope in him. But, sadly, nothing of the sort can be true with respect to the God of open theism. Again the assessment must be: their God is too small.

### **WHERE TO GO FROM HERE**

The purpose of this book is to help thoughtful Christian people comprehend more clearly what happens to our understandings of God and of the Christian life if we accept the open view of God. Clearly, the proponents of open theism are commending their view as both biblical and enhancing of our understanding of how we should live as Christians. But it is my deep conviction, and the conviction of many other evangelicals, that the open view distorts the Christian portrayal of God and his relations with his people so much

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

that open theism must not be viewed as “just another” legitimate Christian understanding. In other words, this issue is not like our differences over questions of the nature of the millennium and the timing of the return of Christ, or of whether all of the charismatic gifts have continued to this day or not, or of whether we should advocate believer’s baptism or bring the infant children of believers to the baptismal font. No, the open view of God represents a departure from the church’s uniform understanding of Scripture and a distortion of the biblical portrayal of God. To allow this as a legitimate view is essentially to allow the worship of a different God than the God of the Bible.

For some readers, this may sound like an overstatement, but I am convinced it is not. Recall that the true God challenged the false gods of the pagan nations surrounding Israel to “prove” their supposed deity, and the test he gave them was this: “Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods” (Isa. 41:23a). Because these pagan gods had not predicted what was taking place, and because they were unable to tell what was coming afterwards, God’s own judgment of them is telling: “Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind” (Isa. 41:29). Furthermore, God’s indictment of those false gods and those who worship them is striking: “Behold, you [gods] are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you” (Isa. 41:24).

Is it too harsh, then, to say that the open view of God is unacceptable as a legitimate evangelical option? I do not think so, when it is clear that the one criterion by which God rejected the pretender deities of Isaiah’s day is the same criterion by which the “God” of open theism may be tested and found wanting. The true God knows

the future, can predict it accurately, and can state exactly what will take place, including innumerable future free human actions and events. And when things happen just as God said, we know that he is God. Because the “God” of open theism does not know most of the future of humankind, because he cannot declare what his creatures will or will not do, and because Scripture places this as a test for true deity, it is clear that the God of open theism is not the God of the Bible. Both the belittling of God and the harm done to Christian people through this view of God demand that we understand better just why we must say no to the openness proposal. As is evident in so many ways, affecting so many areas of life and theology, their God is just too small!

The chapters that follow will try to show more clearly in certain areas of our common faith and the Christian life just where the open view of God falters. Along the way, we will surely notice legitimate concerns that openness proponents raise that must be addressed. But the pattern that will clearly emerge is this: if Christians work from the understanding and theology that the open view of God proposes, we end up with biblical, theological, and practical problems of such a magnitude that the view itself must be called into question in its entirety. Here, then, is a brief overview of the areas we will cover and what we hope to see in these chapters.

Chapter 2 begins where we should begin, with a consideration of what Scripture teaches about God and his knowledge of the future. I will attempt to show that the open view is deeply flawed in its attempts to account for Scripture’s own teaching about both God and his foreknowledge. Because this is a large topic, and because I have written at length on it elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> I propose here to offer some responses to key openness arguments, followed by selective medita-

## THEIR GOD IS TOO SMALL

tions on other biblical passages and teachings, all with the goal of establishing the clarity and forcefulness with which Scripture teaches God's exhaustive and definite knowledge of the future.

Chapter 3 will dive right into one of the areas that open theists argue commends their view to the Christian community, namely, the problem of suffering and evil. Even though openness advocates claim that the open view deals much better with problems of suffering and affliction than does any traditional understanding, we will see that this simply is not the case.

Chapter 4 takes up the practice of prayer in the Christian life. Here, too, openness proponents claim that praying to a God who faces an open future makes prayer real and vital. We will examine this claim and notice some of the problems the Christian is left with if he moves in an openness direction.

Chapter 5 will ask what sort of hope we can rightly have in the God of open theism. While the true God wants his people to hope in him alone, both for life now and for eternity, the God of open theism undermines such hope and robs Christian people of the confidence to know that God's purposes will not fail and his plans will not falter.

Having read this digest of the problems attendant on the open view, the reader will, I hope, be in a better position to behold the greater glory and majesty of the true and living God. I hope the reader will also see, quite clearly, that the God of open theism is just too small to be the God of the Bible.

# NOTES

## CHAPTER 1

### OPEN THEISM AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 102.
2. In Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), I discuss two broad categories of passages appealed to by open theists: "divine growth in knowledge texts" (65-86); and "divine repentance texts" (86-98). The two examples that follow provide one passage from each category.
3. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 62.
4. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 50.
5. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 65-141.

## CHAPTER 2

### OPEN THEISM AND GOD'S FOREKNOWLEDGE

1. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 52-53.
2. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 56.
3. Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 50.
4. For a much more extensive discussion of both of these lines of response, the reader may wish to consult my larger critique of open theism in which