

“OPEN THEISM” AND THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION: DOES GOD EITHER ELECT OR FOREKNOW THOSE WHOM HE WILL SAVE?

by *Cornelis P. Venema*

SINCE THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, theological discussion of the biblical doctrine of election has largely focused on the historic differences between Augustinian-Calvinistic and Arminian views. The Augustinian-Calvinistic view insists that God freely and mercifully elected in Christ to save a definite number of persons out of the whole human race that had fallen in Adam. God’s determination to save the elect in and for the sake of the work of Christ is “unconditional” in the strict sense. Before the foundation of the world, God purposed in Christ to save some but not others. While the salvation of the elect requires the saving work of Christ and the communication of all of the benefits of that work to believers in the course of redemptive history, God’s eternal decree is the basis for Christ’s work and its saving benefits. Although all fallen sinners are graciously summoned to believe in Christ for salvation, only the elect to whom God grants faith by his Spirit and Word are saved. Unconditional election is the source from which salvation and every spiritual blessing in Christ proceed.

Contrary to this view, Arminianism insists that God’s decree of election is “conditional.” Since no one benefits from Christ’s saving work apart from faith, and since such faith is a genuinely free response to the gracious call of the gospel, God’s decree of election is based upon his foreknowledge of those who will believe the gospel (*praevisio fidei*). From before the foundation of the world, God knows those who will choose to believe and those who will choose not to believe. Though God’s grace is commonly and equally given to all those to whom the gospel call is extended, those who choose to believe and persist in believing are foreknown by God, and upon that basis, elected to salvation. In traditional Arminian theology, God foreknows and elects those who meet the condition for salvation by freely choosing to believe. God’s decree of election is, therefore, conditioned or *dependent* upon the free decision of some to believe or not to believe.

I summarize the historical divergence between these two views in order to provide the context for my treatment in this article of a recent modification to the traditional Arminian understanding of the doctrine of election. Among recent treatments of predestination and election by evangelical writers in North America, a number of writers have advocated what they commonly call “free will” or “open” theism.¹ Although the extent to which open theism corresponds to or diverges from

1. The term “open theism” was popularized by the book, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). The authors of this volume, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and

classic Arminianism is disputed, the proponents of this view are clearly more in line with an Arminian than an Augustinian-Calvinistic position. With traditional Arminians, they affirm that election is conditional. Only those who freely respond to the gospel by faith will be saved, and this response lies within the capacity of all human beings to whom the gospel call is extended. God graciously desires and wills to save all fallen sinners, although only those who respond freely to the gospel offer are actually saved. As the language, “free will” theism, suggests, the assumption of these writers is that all human beings have the freedom to accept or to reject the gospel promise of salvation in Christ. On this assumption, they generally agree with historic Arminianism.

What distinguishes the open theist view from more traditional forms of Arminianism is the rigor with which its proponents work out the implications of the Arminian doctrine of the freedom of the will.² Compared to historic Arminianism, the open theist view requires a more radical reformulation of the doctrine of election, one which reckons more consistently with the implications of human freedom. Whereas Arminius held to several key features of an orthodox understanding of God’s omniscience, open theists advocate an understanding of God’s omniscience that diminishes God’s ability to foreknow all things, particularly, the free actions or decisions of human beings in response to the gospel. For open theism, such actions are simply unknowable even to God prior to their occurrence in time. For this reason, open theists are no longer able to articulate the doctrine of election in the traditional Arminian manner. Since God himself cannot know in advance what free human beings will do in response to the gospel call to faith, he cannot elect them (or anyone for that matter) to salvation upon the basis of this foreknowledge. While Arminius taught that God elected to save those whom he foreknows will believe in Jesus Christ, open theists teach that God can only know in a general way that his intention to save all who believe in Christ will issue in the salvation of some who freely choose to believe. Though God cannot know either who belongs to this company, how many or few will choose to believe, or why they should choose to believe or not believe, he can know what his general intentions are and have a reasonable prospect of success in saving those who respond in faith to the gospel.

My focus in this article will primarily be upon the significance of open theism for an understanding of the doctrine of election. Rather than offer a comprehensive treatment of all the features of the open theist position, I will consider particularly those features that have a direct bearing upon the formulation of God’s purpose of election. Since a number of excellent, critical studies of open theism have already

David Basinger, are the leading contemporary proponents of this view. The following sources are among the most important defenses of open theism: John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); and David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

2. Cf. Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, xii: “The open view of God continues the much older debate between theological determinists, like Calvin, and free will theists, like Wesley, but also adds something new. It makes the choices even sharper and clearer, being itself *a more coherent alternative to Calvinism than Arminians presented before.*”

been written, I will not offer a general, wide-ranging evaluation.³ Instead, I am interested in the implications of open theism for an understanding of God’s purpose of election and the salvation of those who believe in Jesus Christ. In order to achieve this purpose, I will proceed in two steps: first, I will summarize the principal components or tenets of open theism, especially as they bear upon the formulation of the doctrine of election; and second, I will assess critically these tenets and their consequences for an understanding of divine election. I will then close with a summary comment on the serious implications of the open theist view of election for the confidence of believers in the gracious promises of God in Christ.

1. Open Theism’s Principal Tenets and the Doctrine of Election

Proponents of open theism commonly employ the language of “free will” as well as “open” theism to describe their understanding of God and the nature of his relationship with the world he has created. Both of these terms, “free will” and “open,” are necessary to capture the way in which this view moves beyond the claims of historic Arminian teaching. According to open theists, the Arminian view of human freedom requires a more radical reformulation of our understanding of God’s providence in relation to what happens in the course of history, especially the history of God’s work of redemption. If God has created human beings with the kind of free will that Arminianism affirms, then we must reckon with the far-reaching consequences such freedom has for God’s control of what will transpire in the course of time. In an important volume, which offers a comprehensive summary and defense of open theism by a number of different authors, Clark Pinnock offers a succinct statement of these consequences:

Our understanding of the Scriptures leads us to depict God, the sovereign Creator, as voluntarily bringing into existence a world with significantly free personal agents in it, agents who can respond positively to God or reject his plans for them. In line with the decision to make this kind of world, God rules in such a way as to uphold the created structures and, because he gives liberty to his creatures, is happy to accept the future as open, not closed, and a relationship with the world that is dynamic, not static. We believe that the Bible presents an open view of God as living and active, involved in history, relating to us and changing in relation to us. We see the universe as a context in which there are real choices, alternatives, and surprises. God’s openness means that God is open to the changing

3. For critical assessments of open theism, see John Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000); idem, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004); idem., *Their God is Too Small* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003); John Piper, Justin Taylor, Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Boundaries: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003); Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, (2nd ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), esp. 104-18; and Gary L.W. Johnson and R. Fowler White, *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

realities of history, that God cares about us and lets what we do impact him. Our lives make a difference to God—they are truly significant. God is delighted when we trust him and saddened when we rebel against him. God made us significant creatures and treats us as such.⁴

As Pinnock's summary of the claims of open theism suggests, there are a number of aspects of this view that move beyond the older formulations of the Arminian position. While open theists share with Arminians the conviction that God's grace in Christ is universal and equally extended to all fallen sinners, they do not believe that is possible to speak of God's election of those whom he knows from all eternity will respond in faith to the gospel offer of salvation. Though it is true that God's election to save is conditional, even God himself cannot ensure that any truly free human being will meet this condition. Nor can God know in advance of its occurrence whether or not any free creature will embrace or refuse the gospel offer. If God's decision to create the world with creatures who enjoy genuine freedom is acknowledged, then it follows that God has limited himself with respect to what such creatures may or may not choose to do. In a world of "real choices, alternatives, and surprises," what takes place does not wholly depend upon God's sovereign will or providential governance.

1.1. Creation as an Act of Divine Self-Limitation

Perhaps the most appropriate place to begin in summarizing the open theist position is to consider how God's decision to create the world is construed. Open theists affirm that God freely determined to create all things "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*). God was under no obligation or external constraint outside of himself to call the world into existence. Nor was God under any obligation to create the actual world he decided to create rather than other possible worlds that were known to him but that he chose not to create. In these respects, open theists are anxious to distinguish their position from what is known as "process theology." Unlike process theism, which denies the reality of creation out of nothing and teaches the necessary interdependence of God and the world, open theism shares with orthodox Christian theology the conviction that God did not need to create the world.⁵ Nor was God under any obligation to create a world like the actual world he chose to create. While open theists acknowledge that, once God determined to create the world, he limited

4. Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, 103-04.

5. For an introduction to process theology by two of its leading proponents, see John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976). For a brief summary of the similarities and differences between process theology and open theism, see William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, 138-41. Cf. John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), esp. 165-93. Cooper describes open theism as a form of "voluntary panentheism," since it views God's act of creation to limit God in a way that is materially similar to process theism's limitation of God. Interestingly, Cooper's volume offers considerable historical evidence for the thesis that the "god of the philosophers" (including ancient Greek philosophy) is one-and-the-same with the god of process and open theism alike. This belies the oft-repeated argument of open theists that their view is more biblical and less "Greek" than the view of classic Christian theism.

himself and became interdependent with his creatures, they start from the conviction that this interdependence results from God’s own choice to limit himself. God did not need to create a world in distinction from himself in order to enrich himself. Furthermore, since God exists eternally in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, he did not need to create the world in order to enjoy the fellowship of love that always characterizes the intra-Trinitarian relations between these Persons.⁶

Although open theists affirm the idea that God’s act of creation was a free and sovereign one, they also maintain that by this act God chose to create a world whose existence places limits upon the exercise of his power. The actual world God created includes responsible and free agents (angels and human beings who bear God’s image) to whom God grants the freedom to act independently. By creating the world and sharing power with his creatures, God relinquishes or diminishes his power to exercise exclusive dominion over all that transpires within the created order. As John Sanders, a leading proponent of open theism, expresses it, “Not only does God choose to share existence, the fact that God delegates responsibility implies that God is willing to share power with humans. God sovereignly decides that not everything will be up to God. Some important things are left in the hands of humanity as God’s cocreators such that we are to collaborate with God in the achievement of the divine project.”⁷ Contrary to the Calvinist view of God’s decree to foreordain whatsoever comes to pass, open theism recognizes that the act of creation itself introduces other actors onto the stage of history. The drama that takes place in the biblical story of creation, the fall into sin, and the work of redemption in Christ, is a story that includes not only God’s actions to realize his good purposes but also the actions of free human beings who have the power to embrace or frustrate these purposes. In the words of another advocate of open theism,

We believe that God is completely capable of creating a universe every detail of whose history is solely determined by his sovereign decree. But it seems to us that a wise and good God would not want—and, in fact, has not chosen—to create such a universe. We in turn would ask the Calvinist, Is God as you conceive him unable to create a world in which there are free creatures who voluntarily enter into a relationship of love and friendship with him? Or does he prefer a world in which he alone monopolizes control, leaving nothing to be decided by his creatures? And why should we think that he would prefer a world like that?⁸

6. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 161. Due to the comprehensiveness and thoroughness of Sanders’ argument for open theism, I will cite his book extensively in what follows. There are differences between open theist authors on the extent of God’s providential control over what takes place in history, but these are intramural in nature and do not substantively diverge from Sanders’ basic point. See, e.g., Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*, 83-92, where he notes his conviction that Sanders ascribes too much control to God.

7. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 44.

8. William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 151. The prejudicial manner in which Hasker represents the alternative position of Calvinism is fairly common in the writings of proponents of open theism. In this section of my article, I will not challenge the rhetorical excesses of open theists. In my assessment of this view, however, I will have occasion to challenge the adequacy of this portrayal of Calvinism.

When open theists argue that God's act of creation entailed a decision on God's part to limit himself, they recognize that this claim has significant implications for the doctrine of God's attributes. Whereas the classic doctrine of God in Christian theology insists that God's perfections include the attributes of eternity (God is supratemporal, transcending the limitations of time as temporal duration), immutability (God is unchanging in his being, counsel, and will), omniscience (God knows himself perfectly and necessarily, as well as all possibilities and those actualities that result from his will to effect them, whether past, present, or future), and omnipotence (God sovereignly sustains, governs and superintends all that takes place), the open theist teaching that creation entails an act of divine self-limitation requires that all of these attributes be significantly redefined. For example, God's decision to create the world and enter into meaningful relations with his creatures requires that his eternity must not be defined as though God absolutely transcends time and temporal duration. God only needs to transcend time in the sense that he has no temporal beginning or ending. But the Scriptural teaching that God acts in the course of history obliges us to think of God as one who acts in time and in a way that is subject to the temporal sequence of past, present, and future. Likewise, once we acknowledge the truth of God's self-limitation in creating the world, we have to acknowledge as well that God changes and is changed by his inter-relations with his creatures in time. While God remains unchanging in his character as One who is ever-loving, ever-truthful, ever-wise, and the like, he undergoes innumerable changes in the course of his actions in time and space. We will have occasion below to focus especially upon God's attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, since the redefinition of these attributes by open theists is especially relevant to our focus upon the open theist doctrine of election.⁹ My purpose here is merely to illustrate the wide-ranging implications of the open theist view of God's self-limitation in the act of creation.

There is one question, however, that needs to be addressed with respect to the idea of God's self-limitation: Is this open theist claim compatible with God's transcendent greatness or glory? Doesn't the idea of God's self-limitation in creation compromise God's infinity by placing limits upon him, even though these limits are, in a manner of speaking, self-imposed?

Among proponents of open theism, John Sanders has addressed this question most directly. In his treatment of the question, Sanders begins by noting that Christian theology has acknowledged at least since the time of Aquinas that God cannot do the "logically impossible" in relation to himself and in relation to creation. Regarding the first of these, God's relation to himself, it is generally acknowledged that God cannot cease to exist, change his nature or character, commit moral evils

9. For treatments of God's attributes that largely defend the classical understanding against the claims of open theists, see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 21-118, 387-618; Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and idem, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 39-50.

(God cannot lie), or fail to keep his promises.¹⁰ Regarding the second of these, God’s relation to his creation, there are also several kinds of limitations upon what God can do, once he chooses to call the actual creation into existence. First, God cannot bring the world into existence without ceasing to be “the only being that exists.”¹¹ Once the world is created, God must enter into and engage with his creatures in a relation that “implies dependency on the other for the relationship.”¹² Second, “the concept of God’s creating humans who are distinct from God implies limitation, since God is not the human and God is dependent on them [*sic*] in order to be in divine-human relation.”¹³ Third, if God chooses to create a particular or actual world, he cannot any longer act as though the “selection” of this world places him under no limitations.¹⁴ Now that the world he chose to create exists, God must act in relation to the world in a manner that is consistent with the kind of world he has created.

According to Sanders, the open theist teaching that creation involves an act of divine self-limitation can be defended when these observations are borne in mind. When we say that God cannot do the logically impossible either by acting contrary to his nature or by denying the limitations that follow from his decision to create a particular kind of world, we are not diminishing God’s greatness. Rather, we are emphasizing God’s perfect fidelity in acting according to his own perfections and according to his own decisions regarding the kind of world he wishes to create. If God’s decision to create a world with truly free creatures means that even God cannot control, or know in advance, how such creatures will act in every circumstance, this is not to limit God or make him into a “finite” being. For Sanders, “a distinction must be drawn between a self-restricting (or self-limiting) God and a finite God.”¹⁵ Since the limits God places upon himself by virtue of his act of creation are self-imposed, they no more limit God than he is limited by saying that God “cannot do the logically impossible or that God limits himself to deciding one course of action or another.”¹⁶ In Sanders view, the open theist idea of divine self-limitation should be understood as a form of “self-restraint” on God’s part. While God does not lose the ability to do whatever he wills by virtue of this self-restraint, he freely chooses by his act of creating human beings with free wills to deal with them in a non-coercive manner. Out of God’s love for human beings, he acts in a way that respects human freedom and the mutuality of the loving relationship that he desires to have with them.¹⁷

10. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 224.

11. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225.

12. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225.

13. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225. Sanders (and other open theists) uses the analogy of the “rules of a game” to insist that, once God creates a world with genuinely free creatures, he is no longer the only player who, so to speak, “holds all the cards.”

14. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225.

15. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 227.

16. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 227.

17. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 169: “In light of the divine project we may speak of the limits or boundaries that God established and elects to work within. The desire to bring about a loving relationship with humans means that God does not force himself on us. He gives freely and restricts himself.”

1.2. God's General, Non-Meticulous, Providence

Consistent with the divine self-limitation that is necessarily embedded within God's decision to create a world with genuinely free creatures, open theism, as its name suggests, argues for a view of God's providence that does not involve a comprehensive control over all that occurs during the course of time. Since God has limited his power by the act of calling the creation into existence and granting some of his creatures genuine freedom, what takes place throughout history is partly governed by God and partly governed by the free, undetermined decisions of these free creatures. While God is the principal Actor in the course of history, he is not the only actor. The future course of events is not entirely within God's control or subject to his providential governance. Much of what takes place is the result of the free actions of creatures, and among these free actions there are many that occur contrary to God's will and purpose. For this reason, John Sanders entitles his book on the open theist view of God's providence, *The God Who Risks*. Once God gives existence and true freedom to many of his creatures, it is not possible to maintain that he takes no risks in creating the world and working to secure his good purposes. Nor is it possible to deny that God is often frustrated by the way history unfolds, and needs to adjust his plan to address new and, in some respects, unanticipated turns of events.

In his summary of the "risk view" of God's providence, Sanders begins by noting that this view necessarily follows from the act of God's creating "significant others who are ontologically distinct from himself and upon whom he showers his caring love in the expectation that they will respond in love. God grants humans genuine freedom to participate in this project, as he does not force them to comply."¹⁸ In the world God created, there is an inevitable "contingency in God's relation with creation."¹⁹ Since God has chosen to enter into a give-and-take relationship with human beings, there is an unavoidable indeterminateness in the way that relationship will unfold or be developed through time. "God is free to sovereignly decide," says Sanders, "not to determine everything that happens in history. He does not have to because God is supremely wise, endlessly resourceful, amazingly creative and omniscient in seeking to fulfill his project."²⁰ The only alternative to such a risk view of God's providence is a view that affirms some form of "theological determinism or exhaustive sovereignty."²¹ The problem with theological determinism, however, is that it does not provide a basis for the cultivation of a true relationship between God and human beings. When one partner in the relationship has all of the power over and control of the other, the reciprocity or mutual love that are essential to true communion is missing.

In the estimation of open theists, therefore, a theology of providence that allows for God to take risks in his inter-relations with free human beings reflects a view of God that grants a certain primacy to the divine attribute of love. Unlike the tendency of Western theology to emphasize the impersonal and abstract attributes of God, open theism wants to locate the discussion of God's attributes within the context of

18. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 169.

19. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 169.

20. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 169.

21. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 171.

God’s project in creation and history to enter into meaningful, give-and-take relationships with human beings. According to Sanders,

Beginning with a trinitarian God of love who enters into loving personal relations with his creatures gives some direction to the doctrine of providence. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit love one another. They are involved in a tripersonal community in which each member of the triune being gives and receives love from the others. Relationality is an *essential* aspect of God. The tripersonal God is the perfection of love and communion—the very antithesis of aloofness, isolation and domination.²²

In a true reciprocal relationship of love between God and human beings, God “respects the rule of the game he established and so conditions his love according to the specifics of the individual or group with whom he is relating.”²³ God loves human beings with a limitless love, but he does not force the recipients of his love to respond in a way that is not genuinely free and non-compulsory. For this reason, the love God extends to human beings is always vulnerable to the possibility of rejection. While God seeks to persuade his creatures to respond to embrace the offer of his love, he respects human freedom and refrains from acting in a way that compels the response he desires. Although God wisely, persistently, and graciously pursues a fellowship of love between himself and human beings, he recognizes that the goal he intends is not a “foregone conclusion” that he can unilaterally achieve.²⁴

When we view God’s providence or sovereign superintendence of creation, especially of those creatures he has endowed with genuine freedom, open theists insist that we need to embrace a view of God’s sovereignty that is general and not specific. According to open theists, the traditional Calvinistic view of God’s specific, meticulous control over all that takes place in history does not allow for genuine human freedom. In this view, “there are absolutely no limitations, hindrances or insurmountable obstacles for God to achieve his will in every specific circumstance of the created order. God has *exhaustive* control over each situation: Only what God purposes to happen in that particular time and place to that specific creature will happen.”²⁵ The idea of God’s meticulous, specific control of all that takes place in the created order is incompatible, however, with the biblical representation of God’s inter-relations with his creatures. For example, if God sovereignly controls all things, how can we account for the biblical portrait of God’s being “grieved” by human sin (Gen. 6:6), changing his mind in the face of new circumstances (Ex. 32:14), devising a new plan when his earlier plan was frustrated (Ex. 4:14), being open and conditioned by the actions of his creatures (Jer. 18:6-10), being surprised by the behavior of his people (Jer. 3:7; 32:35), or even responding to the prayers of his people (Jas. 4:2)?²⁶ When God is described as responsive in these ways to what his

22. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 175.

23. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 177.

24. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 178. Cf. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 181: “The divine love is persistent yet capable of being frustrated.”

25. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 211.

26. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 213. These passages are cited by Sanders in support of God’s self-limitation and partial dependence upon the actions of free creatures. For similar

creatures do, the notion that everything is pre-determined and takes place according to God's exhaustive sovereignty makes no sense. If God's providence governs all that takes place, including the free responses of his creatures, then there is no room for genuine dialogue or "conversation" between God and human beings. According to Sanders, "The 'conversation' an omnidetermining deity has with humans is more like that between a ventriloquist and the dummy or a computer programmer and the program or a hypnotist and the subject. Such 'dialogue' is merely a sophisticated form of talking to oneself."²⁷

In order to avoid these undesirable consequences of a doctrine of meticulous providence, open theism advocates a view of God's providence that better accounts for the way God limits his sovereign control in order to afford his creatures room to interact with him in a genuinely free manner. A doctrine of God's general, non-exhaustive sovereignty affirms

that God has sovereignly established a type of world in which God sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out. God desires a relationship of love with his creation and so elects to grant it the freedom to enter into a give-and-take relationship with himself. Since God macromanages the overall project (while remaining free to micromanage some things), God takes risks in governing the world.²⁸

Although God has the freedom to choose occasionally to micromanage or meticulously govern the course of events, ordinarily he chooses to limit his control in order to permit his creatures to act in ways that are undetermined and unpredictable. General sovereignty allows for a measure of indeterminacy or chance. As Sanders puts it, "Whatever was not specifically determined by God may not have been."²⁹ Such a construal of God's general sovereignty allows us to account for "pointless evil," including events in the lives of God's creatures that are not part of God's plan but permitted by God who chooses to limit his power to prevent them.³⁰ While some events are outside of God's control, God by his general sovereignty works relentlessly and successfully to realize his good purposes.

appeals to Scriptural evidence for God's self-limitation and partial governance of history, see Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, 11-58; and Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 25-64.

27. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 215.

28. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 213.

29. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 216.

30. Open theists commonly claim that their view provides a solution to the problem of evil. Because the sinful and evil actions of free creatures lie outside of God's control, he bears no responsibility for them. See, e.g., Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 253-67; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 176-77; Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 135-36; David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*, 83-104; and idem, "Practical Implications," in *The Openness of God*, 168-71. There are two vulnerabilities, however, to this open theist claim: first, God's decision to create free human beings who could sin and bring evil into the world hardly exonerates him from any responsibility for what they might do in virtue of his unleashing them upon the world; and second, God is unable to work in such a way as to achieve his good purposes through the evil he permits.

1.3. Libertarian Human Freedom

In my summary of open theism thus far, I have found it necessary frequently to refer to the subject of human freedom and its importance in the arguments of proponents of this view. The understanding of God’s act of creation in open theism includes the claim that God chose to create a world with creatures whose genuine freedom demands that God limit the exercise of his power in certain respects. God’s act of creation involved the granting of existence to creatures who have the freedom to obey or thwart God’s intentions for their well-being. By creating a world with human beings who are genuinely free, God limited his ability to control all that would take place in the course of time. Though God in his providence strives relentlessly to achieve his good purposes, he does not exhaustively control all that will take place. Due to God’s wisdom and creativity, we may have good confidence that he will achieve his purpose to enjoy true communion with human beings. But there are no guarantees that God will be successful at all times and places in ensuring that his will is achieved. Unless we embrace a Calvinistic doctrine of providence, there will always be a measure of indeterminacy or chance that characterizes a world that God chooses to govern in a general, but non-specific and exhaustive, fashion.

The operative assumption that lies behind, and forms the basis of, the open theist view of creation and providence is a certain understanding of human freedom.³¹ Though the open theist view of human freedom is most commonly termed “libertarian,” this terminology is not particularly helpful. Since the term “libertarian” derives from the Latin word for freedom, this expression amounts to little more than the tautology that human freedom is a “free freedom” or a “freedom of the will.” For this reason, alternative expressions are sometimes used, such as the “freedom of contrary choice” or a “freedom of equipoise.” These alternative expressions are more useful, since they capture the essential claim of this view, namely, that free human beings have the power to choose or not to choose to act in certain ways, especially when these choices involve moral (to do what is good or evil) or religious matters (to love or not to love God). Unless human beings are able to choose equally between different options in moral and religious matters, they cannot be said to be genuinely free.³² Furthermore, since the libertarian view of human freedom assumes that such freedom is incompatible with God’s sovereign foreordination all that happens in the course of history, it is termed an “incompatibilist” understanding of human freedom. For many proponents of open theism, the libertarian view of human freedom scarcely requires any argument for its

31. Frame, *No Other God*, 119: “In my judgment, the concept of human freedom in the libertarian sense is the engine that drives open theism, often called freewill theism. For the open theist, libertarian free will serves as a kind of grid, through which all other theological assertions must pass—a general criterion for testing the truth of all other doctrines.”

32. Here and throughout this essay I am deliberately limiting my focus to human freedom as it relates to moral, ethical, and religious choices. I am not interested in the more general discussion of human freedom in respect to non-moral or non-religious choices. Even among Reformed theologians, who commonly reject the idea of libertarian freedom, there is an ongoing debate about the nature of human freedom in mundane matters that are unrelated to moral and religious choices. For an introduction to this debate, see the *Journal of Reformed Theology* (*Special Issue: Reformed Accounts of Free Will*) 8/3 [2014].

cogency. In their estimation, this is the only view that corresponds with the common “human experience” of what it means to make choices and opt for one course of action rather than another.³³

Among contemporary defenders of open theism, William Hasker has provided one of the more precise and fulsome definitions of libertarian freedom:

On the libertarian (or ‘incompatibilist’) understanding of free will, *an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.* To say that the action is ‘within one’s power’ means that nothing whatever exists that would make it impossible for the power in question to be exercised. If I am free in this sense, then whether or not the action is performed depends on me; by deciding to perform the action I bring it about that things happen in a certain way, quite different from some other, equally possible, way things might have happened had I refrained from the action.³⁴

Although this definition is deliberately stated in a general fashion, it captures well the burden of the libertarian understanding of human freedom. Libertarian freedom means that human beings ordinarily have the power in any circumstance to do the contrary. Though a free human being may choose to do one thing, he or she always has the power to refrain from doing it. There are no factors extraneous to this power of choice that pre-determine the choice that a truly free person makes. In order for the agent freely to decide to act or to refrain from acting, the agent “must have it in her power without qualification to perform the action and also have the power to refrain from performing it.”³⁵ In Hasker’s view, human beings are free when they have equally the power to perform an action or to refrain from performing it, and when “nothing whatever exists that would make it impossible for the power in question to be exercised.”³⁶

1.4. The Nature of God’s Omniscience and Foreknowledge

The last tenet of open theism that we need to consider before taking up its formulation of the doctrine of election is God’s omniscience. What are the implications of open theism for our understanding of the nature and extent of God’s knowledge? Since God’s creation of the world involved an act of self-limitation on his power to control all that takes place in the created order, there are free actors and collaborators with God on the stage of history. The future is partly indeterminate, and even includes chance occurrences that God could not anticipate or prevent. For this reason, proponents of open theism repeatedly speak of a God who takes “risks”

33. Cf. Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 41: “Scripture, like human experience itself, assumes libertarian freedom, i.e. the freedom to perform an action or refrain from it. With such freedom, people usually have alternatives in any situation. It is a gift that makes loving relationships that imply free response possible.”

34. Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 137 (emphasis his).

35. Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 137.

36. Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 137.

in creating the world and granting libertarian freedom to his creatures. If the world is populated with human beings who enjoy libertarian freedom, the question of the extent and nature of God’s knowledge, especially as it concerns future events, becomes pressing. For these features of open theism clearly exclude more traditional conceptions of God’s omniscience, particularly his foreknowledge of the future.

The first view excluded by open theism is that God has an exhaustive and comprehensive knowledge of all actualities in history, past, present, and future, which he has willed. In this view, which has a long pedigree in the history of Christian theology, God’s knowledge of all things corresponds to and is a necessary consequence of his foreordination of all things. From the perspective of open theism, this view entails that God takes no risks by creating the world and granting some of his creatures genuine freedom. On this view, God eternally knows what he has eternally willed to take place. However, the problem open theists have with this view is patent: all history, including the acts of ostensibly free and responsible creatures, amounts to nothing more than the acting out of an exhaustive script that governs to the finest detail everything that will take place. For open theists, this view is incompatible with the freedom that God has granted to human beings. It requires that everything human beings choose to do or not to do is predetermined, and because predetermined, exhaustively foreknown by God. If God foreknows exactly what I will do on a particular date in history (e.g., writing this article), then my decision to do so was not act of genuine freedom. Since I could not do otherwise than what God foreknew I would do (for if I did, he would be mistaken), my performance of the act was certain. Or to state the matter negatively, on this view I would not have the power to choose to do the contrary.

Although open theism’s rejection of this first view of God’s omniscience is predictable, it is important to note that open theism also rejects the historic Arminian view of God’s omniscience. While historic Arminianism assumes a similar libertarian human freedom as open theism, contemporary proponents of open theism do not agree that such freedom is compatible with the traditional Arminian understanding of God’s omniscience and foreknowledge. The Arminian affirmation of God’s exhaustive knowledge of all things, including the free actions of all human agents throughout history, is regarded as untenable. For open theists, once the existence of genuinely free creatures is acknowledged, it is no longer possible to retain the view that God’s omniscience includes his exhaustive knowledge of all future events in history. In the assessment of open theists, the Arminian retention of a version of God’s knowledge of all future contingencies is incoherent with its libertarian view of human freedom. On this subject, open theism aims to be more consistent than historic Arminianism by revising the doctrine of God’s omniscience.

To understand the open theist objection to the historic Arminian view of God’s exhaustive knowledge of all future contingencies, it is necessary here to consider what is known as the Molinist doctrine of God’s “middle knowledge.” The Molinist doctrine of God’s middle knowledge derives its name from the writings of a Jesuit theologian, Luis De Molina (1535-1600). In order to defend the doctrine of God’s omniscience, including his exhaustive knowledge of all the free choices of human beings who enjoy a libertarian freedom, Molina developed the idea of God’s middle

knowledge or a knowledge intermediate between God's *necessary* knowledge and God's *free* knowledge.³⁷

To understand Molina's doctrine of middle knowledge, it is important to recognize that "necessary," "free," and "middle" knowledge are ways to refer to God's knowledge of different sorts of truths. God's *necessary knowledge* consists of all that God knows about himself, necessary truths (such as the laws of logic or arithmetic), and all scenarios or possibilities in every possible world. When God knows himself, necessary truths, and all possibilities, he knows truths that are logically antecedent to his will or decree. For example, regarding himself, God knows necessarily that he exists eternally in three Persons, that the Son is begotten of the Father, and that he is perfectly holy. God also has exhaustive knowledge of all possibilities, that is, of all possible things and events that do not exist, have not existed, and will not exist. Though God knows these possibilities as abstractions, not as actual, his omniscience means that he has an exhaustive knowledge of all possible worlds and what would take place in them, under all possible circumstances, were he to will to make them actual. Because God's necessary knowledge does not depend upon his will or decree, but derives from who he is by nature, scholastic theologians, including Aquinas, described it as a "knowledge of simple intelligence."³⁸ Simply by virtue of who he is, God necessarily and perfectly knows himself, as well as all scenarios, all concatenations of possibilities, in every possible world.

In distinction from his necessary knowledge (or "knowledge of simple intelligence"), God's *free knowledge* refers to his knowledge of all things that are actual (or exist) by virtue of his will or decree. God's exhaustive knowledge of creation and history, past, present, and future, is a knowledge that depends upon his free decision to create or actualize this world. In a way analogous to our knowing what we have done by the performance of a specific action, God eternally knows what is true about the actual world by willing it.³⁹ For example, God eternally foreknows that the Declaration of Independence will be written in 1776, but this

37. For an introduction to Molina's view of God's foreknowledge, see Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)*, trans., with an Introduction and Notes, by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 417-32; and Kirk R. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina: The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 79-105. For critical, open theist assessments of Molina's doctrine of middle knowledge, see Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 196-98; and Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," 143-47. For an insightful treatment of Arminius' use of Molina's view of God's middle knowledge, see Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 159-66, 182-85.

38. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, rev. ed. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics reprint, 1981 [1920]), 1.14.10 & 12.

39. I use the language "analogous" to distinguish the way in which God eternally knows what is actual by virtue of his will to make it so from the way we *come to know* what we have done after the deed is performed. Our knowledge is derived from our acquaintance with the act already performed. God's foreknowledge of the actual world is derived from his eternally willing it to be so.

knowledge of an actual event depends upon his free will to make this actual.⁴⁰ Because God’s free knowledge is a perfect knowledge of his own all-comprehensive and unchangeable will or decree, Aquinas and later theologians termed God’s exhaustive knowledge of the actual world a “knowledge of vision.”

In addition to God’s necessary knowledge (“knowledge of simple intelligence”) and his free knowledge (“knowledge of vision”), Molina introduced the idea of God’s *middle* knowledge in order to account for God’s knowledge of truths that are neither necessary (God cannot but know them as such) nor free by virtue of God’s will to make them actual. According to Molina, God’s middle knowledge is his knowledge of events and occurrences that he has not willed to take place, but that take place wholly through the creature’s exercise of libertarian freedom. Thus, Molina introduced the category of God’s middle knowledge to account for God’s exhaustive knowledge of the actual world, including especially the free choices of creatures who possess libertarian freedom in that world. God’s middle knowledge stands between his knowledge of all possibilities and his knowledge of the world he willed or decreed. Through his middle knowledge, God is able to foreknow the free choices of creatures in all conditions and circumstances, even though these choices were not willed by God and none of these conditions or circumstances determine the choices such creatures will make. God’s middle knowledge, accordingly, is in effect his knowledge of the indeterminate choices of free creatures in the actual world that God has not willed. Through his middle knowledge, God knows a special class of things, namely, the future acts of free creatures who make choices apart from God’s will or any circumstances that might determine those choices. Unlike God’s necessary knowledge, which is *absolute* or antecedent to anything that he wills to be, God’s middle knowledge is *dependent* or consequent upon God’s ability to foresee by a kind of special intuition what free creatures will do in any circumstance. Furthermore, unlike God’s free knowledge, which is dependent upon or conditioned by his knowledge of what he has willed or decreed, God’s middle knowledge is dependent or conditioned upon the free acts of creatures that take place independently of his will.

In Molina’s use of the doctrine of middle knowledge, God’s knowledge of all future choices by free creatures includes his knowledge of all the circumstances that would need to be true for a free (non-determined) agent to choose to do one thing rather than another. To state the matter abstractly, God knows all possible propositions that have the following form:

(A) In circumstances C, if Jones freely chooses between X and Y, he will choose Y.⁴¹

40. For this reason, even though God’s free knowledge means that what he wills is certain to happen, such knowledge does not undermine the contingency of creation and its subsequent history. For any actual thing or event to be contingent or not necessary, it must wholly depend upon God’s will alone to make it actual. Though God’s foreknowledge of any future contingency makes it certain to be or to occur, such foreknowledge does not make it any less contingent.

41. Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, 57.

One way to understand Molina's point is to view God's middle knowledge as a kind of rehearsal in God's mind of how an agent with libertarian freedom would choose to act in all possible conditions or circumstances in the actual world. In his definition of God's middle knowledge, Molina argues that it explains how God could will to create an actual world with genuinely free agents who would retain the power to do the opposite of what they choose to do. Through his middle knowledge of the world, God would know beforehand in an exhaustive way what all free agents would actually do, even though they could have done the contrary.⁴² In his description of God's middle knowledge, Molina clearly distinguishes it from God's knowledge of vision and his knowledge of simple intelligence:

Finally, the third type is *middle* knowledge, by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each free will, He saw in His own essence what each such will would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or in that or, indeed, infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.⁴³

While discussions of Molina's view of God's middle knowledge are often highly complex and subtle, for our purpose it is enough to recognize that it was employed by Arminius (and many subsequent Arminians) to reconcile human libertarian freedom with God's exhaustive foreknowledge of all that transpires in the world he chooses to create. If God through his middle knowledge can know all future contingencies, particularly the free choices of creatures who have the power to do the opposite of what God knows they will actually do, then it is possible to affirm both God's exhaustive foreknowledge of all things and libertarian human freedom.⁴⁴ My purpose in this brief account of Molina's view is to provide a setting for considering the open theist understanding of God's omniscience and foreknowledge.

According to open theists, both of the doctrines of God's exhaustive foreknowledge of all future events that we have considered must be rejected. The first view, which correlates God's foreordination of all things with his foreknowledge (the latter being a necessary consequence of the former), leads to the

42. A common way of expressing this is to say that God's middle knowledge includes an exhaustive knowledge of "counter-factuals of freedom," that is, those actions that free creatures could freely choose to do but would not under circumstances known to God.

43. Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, disputation 52, par. 9.

44. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 275: "The *scientia media* ["middle knowledge"] underlies their synergistic theory of salvation and was adopted in the seventeenth century by the Arminians for the same purpose. Middle knowledge is a conditioned and consequent knowledge of future contingents by which God knows of an event because of its occurrence. In other words, it is a knowledge eternally in God consequent on, and causally independent of, events in time. Such events are outside of the divine willing. The effect of such a doctrine upon soteriology is to allow an area of human choice, prior to the effective operation of divine grace, the results of which condition the divine activity or operation *ad extra*. God can elect individuals on the basis of his foreknowledge of their freely willed acceptance of the promises given in Christ, and this election will be grounded upon no antecedent willing or operation of God."

worst sort of determinism. On this view, human beings are little more than puppets on a string or robots who have been pre-programmed to do what God has decided. If God exhaustively pre-determines and foreknows all that human beings will actually do, at no point and in no circumstance do such human beings have the freedom to do the contrary. From the standpoint of open theism’s view of libertarian human freedom, the first understanding of God’s omniscience leads to an intolerable fatalism or determinism.

The second view of God’s omniscience, however, fares no better in the estimation of open theists. However subtle Molina’s and the traditional Arminian doctrine of middle knowledge may appear, this doctrine fails to stand up to scrutiny. If free agents possess genuine libertarian freedom, even God cannot know how they will choose to act in future circumstances and conditions.

There are serious questions concerning the logical compatibility of comprehensive divine foreknowledge and libertarian free will. The idea, roughly, is this: If God knows already what will happen in the future, then God’s knowing this is part of the past and is now fixed, impossible to change. And since God is infallible, it is completely impossible that things will turn out differently than God expects them to. But this means that the future event God knows is also fixed and unalterable, and it cannot be true of any human beings that they are both able to perform a certain action and able not to perform that action. If God knows that a person is going to perform it, then it is impossible that the person fail to perform it.⁴⁵

The point is that, upon the assumption of a libertarian doctrine of human freedom, it is not logically possible for God to know what a truly free agent will do in the future. If God foreknows all the choices of free human beings, then those choices will *necessarily* be made and no contrary choice will be possible.

The claim of open theist authors, therefore, is that we have to redefine God’s omniscience, especially in respect to the future actions of genuinely free agents, as a knowledge of all things and events *so far as it is logically possible for God to know them*. God’s knowledge in respect to past and present events is perfect and exhaustive. Indeed, as one open theist remarks, God is “the first to know” such events.⁴⁶ But it is logically impossible that God should have foreknowledge of future events that depend upon genuinely free agents. This is precisely the reason we need to articulate a doctrine of providence in which God is a risk-taker, one who must realize his good purposes on many occasions in the context of events that do not accord with his will and that he is unable to have foreseen. According to open theists, God is truly omniscient in the sense that he knows all that it is possible to know. We need to define God’s omniscience as his exhaustive knowledge of the past and present, and his awareness of an extraordinary array of probabilities regarding

45. Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 147. Cf. Helm, *The Providence of God*, 59: “The universe cannot, given the strong view of freedom endorsed by the Molinists, have a shadow form; a form of a purely conditional kind which is the mirror-image of how the universe will be when it is actual. For how it will be when it is actual is, at least in part, up to the free actions of the agents who are actualized, once God decided to actualize that universe.”

46. Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 148.

the future (many of which, however, may not be actualized). But this knowledge does not, indeed cannot, include an exhaustive knowledge of all future contingencies that become actual through the choices of creatures who have libertarian freedom. If God foreknows exhaustively what such creatures will do in every circumstance, then their choices to perform the action will be rendered certain. Simply put: God's foreknowledge of such choices would exclude the possibility of their choosing to do the contrary.

1.5. Gracious Election or God's General Goal to Save All Persons

The foregoing summary of the principal tenets of open theism provides a framework for considering open theism's doctrine of election. What are the implications of these tenets for a formulation of the biblical teaching of God's purpose of election in Christ? It should be evident that the claims of open theists imply that the two major views that have dominated theological discussion since the early seventeenth century, the Augustinian-Calvinistic and its Arminian alternative, are not viable.

In the writings of leading advocates of open theism, it is remarkable how little consideration is actually given to the interpretation of Scriptural passages that speak of God's predestination or election of some persons to salvation in Christ.⁴⁷ Most of the appeal to Scripture in open theist literature focuses upon the formulation of a general doctrine of God's providence that denies God's power to predestine or foreordain the salvation of some human beings in distinction from others. Contrary to traditional formulations of the doctrine of predestination, which distinguish God's general providential rule of all things from his particular saving purpose in Christ to save the elect, open theists represent God's good and saving intentions in the most general terms. God's gracious election or intention to save human beings is equally directed to all human beings who have fallen into sin and stand in need of God's grace in Christ. In their treatment of the Scriptures, however, open theists do occasionally address passages that speak explicitly of God's purpose of election. Among these passages, treatments of passages like Romans 8:28-30, Romans 9-11, and Ephesians 1:3-11 by open theist authors are especially instructive for determining their formulation of the doctrine of predestination.

The standard approach by open theist authors to these passages takes them to be descriptions of God's *general* and *non-particular* love for all human beings whom he wills to save but whose salvation depends upon their meeting freely the conditions that must be met in order for anyone to be saved. For example, Richard Rice, in his article, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" (in the volume *The Openness of God*), treats these passages upon the prior assumption of the open view of God. After identifying these passages and the typical way in which they are interpreted by advocates of a strong doctrine of unconditional election, Rice points

47. See, e.g., Roger Nicole, "A Review Article: God of the Possible," *Reformation and Revival* 10/1 (2001): 170-71, who observes that Gregory Boyd's book, *God of the Possible*, "contains no reference to any of the 26 passages in which the words 'elect' or 'election' are found, except Rom. 8:33, 9:11, and 11:28." Nicole also notes that Boyd refers only to four of the nine passages that deal with God's purpose before creation, and only five of the eighty-nine passages "in which God is presented as the one who chooses those on whom he will bestow his blessing."

out that they have to be interpreted in the light of many Scriptural passages that speak of God’s plans being frustrated or thwarted. In particular, Rice argues, we must remember that many biblical passages describe God’s will or intention that all human beings come to salvation, and yet God’s will “does not guarantee the outcome that he desires.”⁴⁸ Since we know that God’s gracious will to save all human beings is often thwarted through unbelief and disobedience, we must understand these passages in a more general way to describe God’s universal intention to save all who respond to the call of the gospel in the way of faith. Furthermore, Rice maintains that these passages should not be interpreted to refer to God’s election and calling of particular individuals. Rather, these passages refer to a “corporate call to service” or a “corporate body” rather than the specific persons who compose the number of those who will be saved.⁴⁹ Since the calling of the gospel is conditional, God’s election is his general and inclusive “goal” that all human beings should be saved. Whether or not those whom God genuinely calls to salvation are saved, ultimately depends upon their willingness to answer freely the gracious invitation that he extends to them.

John Sanders takes a similar approach in his treatment of Romans 9-11. Whereas this passage is adduced by Calvinists to argue for the predestination of specific persons to salvation, Sanders argues for an interpretation that gives special attention to the occasion and purpose of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

I cast my lot with those who identify the central issues in the epistle as Jewish-Gentile relations and God’s plan for the world. According to this view, Paul is not debating the eternal salvation and reprobation of individuals in chapters 9-11. His concern, rather, is whether God’s election of Israel has turned out to be a failure, since the majority of Jews were not accepting Jesus as the Messiah.⁵⁰

According to Sanders, the real burden of Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11 is not the “pancausality” of God’s sovereign predestinating will in respect to the salvation of some individuals whom God elects and others whom he rejects.⁵¹ Paul’s aim throughout these chapters is to defend God’s faithfulness to his promises, and to demonstrate the breadth of God’s mercy that is extended to Jews and Gentiles alike. Throughout the course of history, God has and continues to work relentlessly to show mercy toward and save all human beings without exception. Though God’s purpose is often thwarted through unbelief and he is unable to achieve everything he desires, we may be confident that God will faithfully pursue his good intentions toward all. Since God has assumed the risk entailed by the creation of genuinely free

48. Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 55.

49. Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 56-7. Cf. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 139-44.

50. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 121. For a critical assessment of the claim by modern interpreters of Romans 9-11 that Paul is only speaking of the election of corporate peoples rather than individuals, see Cornelis P. Venema, “‘Jacob I Loved, But Esau I Hated’: Corporate or Individual Election in Paul’s Argument in Romans 9?,” *Mid-America Reformed Journal* 26 (2015): 7-58.

51. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 122.

human beings, he cannot always expect to get his way or avoid failure in his endeavor to save all human beings in Christ.

While this summary of the way open theists treat Scriptural passages that speak of God's purpose of election is a brief one, it illustrates the way they understand predestination or election. Since God has chosen to limit his power to determine the course of history, especially the actions of free human beings with libertarian freedom, he cannot unilaterally determine that any particular person will be saved. Since God is perfectly loving and wills to enjoy genuine and reciprocal communion between himself and all sinful human beings, he works relentlessly by his non-coercive and non-controlling providence to achieve the goal that he sets for their salvation. Because human beings are free in the libertarian sense of the term, God's good purpose and intention to save all depends on their willingness to cooperate with him and not choose to act to the contrary. What is especially remarkable about this view is that God's universal intention to save all sinners is a temporal response to a circumstance that God could not have foreknown with certainty would become actual. Though God took a risk in creating free creatures for fellowship with himself, his purposes of redemption or salvation were devised in time as a response to human unbelief and disobedience. Therefore, within the framework of open theism's risk doctrine of providence, it is scarcely possible to speak meaningfully of God's eternal (or pre-temporal) decree to save anyone in Christ. To the extent that we may use the language of God's plan or decree to save, it must be understood as God's *response in time to a contingency that he could neither have foreknown nor determined to address in Christ from before the foundation of the world.*

Within the framework of open theism, election is God's gracious and merciful response in time to the sin and disobedience of all human beings whom he desires to restore to free and loving communion with him through faith in Jesus Christ. God's election is his general goal to save all sinful human beings, and he seeks to achieve this goal by graciously inviting and seeking to persuade free human beings to enter into a loving relationship with him. God's purpose of election is universal and indiscriminate. Election is God's desire and will to save all fallen human beings without exception. In the open theist construal of election, this desire or will is *strictly conditional*, since it depends upon the free choice of human beings to respond in faith to God's gracious call expressed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. God's electing will alone does not ensure the salvation of any particular person. Those who are saved are saved if and only if they exercise their plenary power to choose to believe. Those who are not saved are all those who choose to persist in refusing God's overtures of mercy toward them. Furthermore, because God cannot foreknow what free human beings will choose to do in response to the gospel call, he cannot foreknow who among the persons to whom the gospel is extended will be saved until their response is made in time. God neither foreordains nor knows in advance who will ultimately respond favorably or unfavorably to his gracious summons. In the strictest sense, it is always possible that no free human being will choose to be saved. Though this is highly improbable, given God's wise and persistent pursuit of his saving intention toward all, it belongs to the risk God has taken in creating free human beings. In the final analysis, God does not know in advance, nor is he able to ensure, that his electing purpose toward all human beings will be succeed in the case of any of them.

2. A Critical Assessment of the Open Theist View of Election

Upon the basis of my summary of the most important tenets of open theism, especially as they bear upon the doctrine of election, I want to offer a critical assessment of the open theist view. Does this view provide a more satisfactory account of Scriptural teaching than the alternatives of the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition or historic Arminianism, as its advocates claim? And does it provide a coherent account of how God’s act of creation, including the creation of free human beings, must limit his power to ensure that his goal to save fallen sinners through Jesus Christ will be successful? Are open theists correct when they argue that the Arminian notion of libertarian human freedom is incompatible with the traditional doctrine of God’s exhaustive foreknowledge of future human choices?

While these are large questions, which could be addressed at considerable length, I will seek to address them as concisely as possible. In order to do so, I will begin by returning to the open theist claim that God’s act of creation necessarily diminishes his power to determine the course of history. In my judgment, this claim cannot sustain careful scrutiny and underlies many of the problematic features of the open theist view of election. Thereafter, I will take up the open theist claims about the nature of human freedom and the consequences of this freedom for our understanding of God’s foreknowledge of future events. One of the ironic aspects of open theism is the way it exposes the consequences for the doctrine of God and his purpose of election that stem from the traditional Arminian view of human freedom. I will then return to the important and central topic of open theism’s radical re-interpretation of the biblical doctrine of election.

2.1. Does Creation Require God to Limit Himself?

While open theists claim to hold to a traditional understanding of God’s act of creating the world out of nothing, they insist that God’s free decision to create the world out of nothing was an act of self-limitation. Once God gives the world existence, and chooses to create free human beings who are independent of his control, God’s power is circumscribed by the power such creatures possess to act freely in a variety of circumstances. This freedom includes the power to frustrate God’s intentions, since God has relinquished his power to determine what a free creature may choose to do or not do. There are several weighty objections, however, to this claim and the arguments that are given for it.⁵²

First, though few open theists offer much of an argument for the idea of God’s self-limitation, they insist that God’s decision to limit his power by creating the world is similar to other ways in which theologians have acknowledged divine limitations. Sanders, for example, argues that this form of divine self-limitation is similar to a variety of forms of divine self-limitation that Christian theology has historically affirmed. For example, Christian theologians have traditionally said that

52. See Ron Highfield, “The Function of Divine Self-Limitation in Open Theism: Great Wall or Picket Fence?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45/2 (2002): 279-99. In my assessment of the open theist idea of divine self-limitation, I make grateful use of Highfield’s essay.

God cannot lie, cease to exist, be mistaken in what he knows, act contrary to his holiness, or perform an act that is logically impossible. According to Sanders, even the traditional doctrine of God's all-controlling providence limits God in its own way by asserting that God cannot "create beings over which he does not exercise specific sovereignty. If God must control every detail of human life in order to achieve his goals, then God is limited."⁵³ Within the framework of classic Christian theism, negative or *apophatic* language was often employed to emphasize rather than diminish God's transcendent greatness. For Sanders, the open theist idea of God's decision to limit his power in order to create independent, free creatures is comparable to the way Christian theologians have often employed language that places limits upon what God can or cannot do, but without diminishing his being and perfections.

The problem with Sanders' argument is that he confuses two very distinct senses in which we may speak of limitations with respect to God. As one perceptive critic of the open theist view of divine self-limitation puts it, Sanders "fails to distinguish between negative language that *imposes* a limit and negative language that *removes* a limit."⁵⁴ When classic Christian theology says that God cannot lie, it does not impose a limit upon God but expresses in negative form the fact that God's truthfulness is unlimited. That God cannot lie is but a negative way of affirming that he is invariably truthful in all that he says and does. Far from limiting God, this language distinguishes God as One who is perfectly, surpassingly, and incomprehensibly great in his truthfulness. Such language is no more than an abstract way of saying what the apostle James declares in a more elegant way, when he says that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). Or, to put it in the more prosaic language of Hebrews 6:18, "it is impossible for God to lie." No limit is placed upon God by this language. Rather, God's truthfulness is magnified.

Now the same holds true for the historic conviction of Christian theology that God cannot limit his power by virtue of his act of creating the world. Christian theologians traditionally rejected the idea of creation as a form of self-limitation because they believed it was inconsistent with God's self-existence or independence. There is a basic difference between God as Creator and all that he has created. Whereas God exists from himself, all created things exist only by God's free decision to give them existence and thereafter to conserve their existence. What distinguishes God as Creator from all created things is that he never depends upon any creature he has called into existence. What distinguishes all creatures is that they "live and move and have their being" in God alone as their Creator (Acts 17:28). Because of this essential difference between God as self-existent Creator and all created things, God's act of creation cannot involve the creation of creatures who possess the divine perfection of self-existence. However, the open theist doctrine of God's self-limitation is set forth precisely in order to affirm that some creatures have a limited kind of self-existence. For open theists, God's decision to create free creatures whom he cannot determine to act in one way or another, entails a limitation upon his power and independence. By virtue of this act of self-limitation, God must cease in some respects to be unlimited or independent in his being, power and works.

53. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225.

54. Highfield, "The Function of Divine Self-Limitation," 287.

God’s power is now curtailed by the existence of creatures who possess unlimited power within their own domain.⁵⁵ As Ron Highfield expresses it,

Sanders does not appear to recognize, however, that a being that is uncontrollable by God (or independent of God) could be considered a sort of second God. Sanders’s argument, then, begs the question of the ontological status of an “uncontrollable” being. One need not be a hidebound traditionalist to suspect that uncontrollability (or independence) in any strict sense is an attribute of God alone. Attributing to God the “ability” to create a second independent being actually calls God’s unique deity into question. Conversely, the (traditional) statement, “God cannot create an independent being,” really removes a limit from God and affirms his unique deity.⁵⁶

Second, the open theist view of creation as an act of divine self-limitation also entails that the world’s existence enriches God in a way that would not be true, if God had not created the world. In this view, the creation of the world implies a limitation on God, since God is no longer the only being that exists. According to open theism, the creation of human beings “implies limitation, since God is not the humans and God is dependent on them in order to be in divine-human relation.”⁵⁷ This claim on the part of open theists suggests that, once God decides to create the world and give it existence, the world adds something to reality that would be lacking were God the only being with existence. If the world were to cease to exist after its creation out of nothing by God, there would be a sense in which reality would be impoverished. God minus the world is less than God plus the world. God’s self-limitation entails that he make space and time for another form of (created) being whose existence reduces his omnipresence and omnipotence. By creating the world, God fenced himself in or placed insurmountable boundaries upon who he is and what he can now do. The net effect of God’s work of creation is that reality now consists of two kinds of being, a sort of “metaphysical dualism,” wherein the being of God is less than the being of God and the world.⁵⁸ However, if God truly created the world “out of nothing,” it is not possible to say that God “needs” the world or that God-plus-the-world is more than God alone (cf. Acts 17:25). The doctrine of creation out of nothing obliges us to acknowledge that there is nothing in the world that was not first in God, or that does not serve to reveal his inexhaustible goodness and wisdom. The doctrine of creation means that “No good, power, being, or beauty resides in the world that was not already in God.”⁵⁹ However, open theism is obliged

55. Although open theists frequently allege that the traditional doctrine of God’s providence owes more to the influence of Greek philosophy than Scriptural teaching, it is remarkable how similar the open theist view is to ancient Greek philosophy, which affirmed a plurality of independent beings and advocated a libertarian view of human freedom. For a concise treatment of this point, see Frame, *No Other God*, 27-32.

56. Highfield, “The Function of Divine Self-Limitation,” 288-89.

57. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225.

58. Highfield, “The Function of Divine Self-Limitation,” 291.

59. Highfield, “The Function of Divine Self-Limitation,” 291. Highfield observes that “for all its criticisms of classical theology’s use of ‘pagan’ philosophy, open theism reasons about

to say that there is much good, power, being, and beauty in the world that derives its existence, not from God, but from the created world itself.

In addition to these problems with the open theist idea of divine self-limitation, there is a third that requires comment. In the open theist understanding of creation, God is under obligation to limit his power in order to provide room for free creatures with libertarian freedom. While open theists acknowledge that God could have created any number of possible worlds, they deny that it was possible for him to create a world with free human beings without having to give up the power to control meticulously all that takes place. Even though God could have created a world in which he retained the power to control meticulously all that would occur, such a world could not be populated with human beings who enjoy libertarian freedom.⁶⁰ According to open theists, God was eternally limited in his choices among possible worlds that he could create. Indeed, proponents of open theism claim to know that God's preferred world is one in which there are free human beings with whom he can enjoy loving communion. Because the love of God is a privileged and pre-eminent divine attribute, and since love requires reciprocity and libertarian freedom in order for genuine mutuality in the divine-human relationship—God was obliged to limit his power when he willed to create the actual world that exists.

There are two difficulties with this claim. In the first place, it assumes that human freedom must be defined in terms of libertarian freedom, apart from which there is no genuine reciprocity in the relationship between God and human beings. I use the term, "assumes," deliberately, since open theists offer little or no argument for their definition of human freedom. I also use it because open theists also offer little or no argument for their claim that a truly loving relationship between God and human beings requires the kind of "give-and-take" (perhaps better: "take it or leave it") reciprocity that they assume as a given.⁶¹ And in the second place, the open theist argument for God's "choice" to create a world with libertarian freedom is governed by a pre-established set of possibilities over which God himself has no control. The open theist view of God's choice to create the world that exists was itself governed by limitations to which even God was obliged to subject himself. It is difficult to suppress the conviction that this view not only limits God from the outset, but is based upon unexamined assumptions that do not stand up under scrutiny.

God's relationship to the world on presuppositions that resemble metaphysical dualism more than they resemble the Christian doctrine of creation. It assumes that God's relation to the world is now (even if it was not eternally) constitutive of God" (291-92).

60. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 225: "God cannot exercise meticulous providence and grant human beings libertarian freedom."

61. I cannot help noting that the ideal marriage (either in a relationship between a man and a woman or in the relationship between God and his people) is an "unbreakable bond" between the two parties. Why, then, should we assume that a true love relationship always requires that one or both of the parties remain free to do the contrary, that is, break or dissolve the relationship?

2.2. The Incoherence of Libertarian Human Freedom

The most important unexamined assumption of open theism is its view of libertarian human freedom. All of the principal tenets of open theism that I have identified in this article are based upon this view, which functions as a kind of basic presupposition or starting point for its proponents.

What is most remarkable about the idea of libertarian human freedom is that it abstracts the way human beings make choices from any concrete consideration of who such human beings are, what kind of choices they are called upon to make, and under what circumstances this may occur. Hasker’s definition of libertarian freedom is illustrative: “An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.”⁶² It is no exaggeration to say that this definition ascribes to human freedom a godlike independence, such that the choice to act or to do the contrary is ultimately determined by nothing other than the free person’s naked power to make (arbitrary) choices. For this reason, open theists have no choice (note well!) but to limit God’s power and influence in respect to such choices. God must limit his power in order to create human beings whose choices are uncontrolled and uncontrollable. No one, not even God, could foreknow how such creatures will choose to act in circumstances of genuine responsibility and accountability. Accordingly, free will theists are obliged to say that such libertarian freedom is “incompatible” with a strong view of divine providence or divine foreknowledge of future contingencies.

Before I proceed to offer a critical evaluation of libertarian human freedom, it is necessary here to offer a few comments regarding a very different conception of human freedom. Among theologians who affirm a strong view of God’s providential rule over all things and his foreknowledge of the future, human freedom is defined as a freedom of *self-determination*. In this understanding of human freedom, human beings are free when they are not constrained or coerced by some kind of external compulsion to do what they do, but are moved to act according to what they regard or judge to be desirable or good. In the words of Millard Erickson, a proponent of this understanding of human freedom,

Freedom ... is freedom from constraint or external compulsion. It is freedom from unwilling action. This is freedom to act consistently with who one is. It is freedom to act as one chooses, and choose as one wishes. But it does not necessarily mean pure spontaneity, nor does it mean freedom to choose contrary to one’s nature or character. Just as ... God is not truly free to act contrary to his nature, to lie, be cruel, or break his covenant word, so

62. Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 136-37. Cf. R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 43-44, who defines libertarian human freedom as follows: “[T]he belief that the human will has an inherent power to choose with equal ease between alternatives. This is commonly called ‘the power of contrary choice’ or ‘the liberty of indifference.’ This belief does not claim that there are no influences that might affect the will, but it does insist that normally the will can overcome these factors and choose in spite of them. Ultimately, the will is free from any necessary causation. In other words, it is autonomous from outside determination.”

humans are not necessarily free either to act in ways that presuppose that they are someone other than themselves. We may be free to do as we please, but we are not necessarily free to please as we please.⁶³

In this understanding of human freedom, the power of human beings to choose responsibly and be accountable for their choices is fully acknowledged. But the choices that human beings make are not made in a vacuum. They do not float freely, as if they could be detached from the persons who make them. Rather, they are choices that are informed by what a person knows or judges to be desirable.⁶⁴ They are shaped, and can therefore be explained, only in terms of the kind of person who makes them. Just as a good tree bears good fruit, and an evil tree bears evil fruit (Matt. 7:17), so the character of human persons influences and directs them in the choices they make.⁶⁵ Human beings are highly complex, and their choices and actions reflect this complexity. When free human beings make moral and religious choices particularly, they do so in a way that reflects the state of their hearts, out of which are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23; cf. Luke 6:45). They make such choices in accordance with their dispositions, inclinations, values, sentiments, and the like, and these together provide an explanation for the choices that are made.⁶⁶

In this understanding of human freedom as a freedom of self-determination, it is possible to have some inkling as to how God could foreordain and foreknow the choices that humans beings will make in the actual world that he wills to exist. In this understanding of human freedom, God's foreordination and foreknowledge of what will occur is compatible with the non-coerced and non-compulsory actions of

63. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 206-7. Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:675: "In vain is it said that man can do this or that if he will, since it is evident that he is not able to will; not because he is destitute of natural power to will (because thus he differs from brutes), but because he is without the disposition to will what is good (concerning which alone we are speaking in this question)." Turretin's point is the same as Erickson's: the exercise of human freedom does not occur in a vacuum, but takes place in the context of human discernment, dispositions, affections, etc.

64. For older and more recent elaborations of this view of freedom as a freedom of self-determination, see Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:665-82; D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), chapters 11-12; John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), chapters 13-16; and Mark R. Talbot, "True Freedom: The Liberty That Scripture Portrays as Worth Having," in *Beyond the Bounds*, 77-109. For a recent popular defense of this view, see Scott Christensen, *What About Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God's Sovereignty* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016). The classic defense of this view, of course, is Jonathan Edward's *Freedom of the Will* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

65. Highfield, "The Function of Divine Self-Limitation," 295: "Hasker's 'agent' then appears to be a transcendental (pure) will hovering above the entire causal nexus, above itself as a concrete entity or even beyond itself as an essence."

66. I have often used the following, relatively trivial, illustration of this truth. I have a friend who loathes pizza and who was once given, as a gag gift, a package of frozen pizzas. What he did with these pizzas was easily predictable: although he was perfectly free to eat them, he chose instead to trash them. Because he had no "taste" or "appetite" for them, he did what his friends assumed he would do. So it is with human beings who make choices, especially in moral and religious matters, to do what they find palatable.

responsible human beings. Since God knows all possible human beings whom he could bring into existence, and he also knows how they will be pleased to act in every possible circumstance, he can determine to create a world in which what he has foreordained and foreknown will come to passage with certainty. By choosing to create a world that is ordered in such a way as to ensure with certainty what free human beings will choose to do, God can ensure that what is going to happen will happen, but not in a way that diminishes the freedom of any human to do what he or she is pleased to do. In a manner of speaking, God so orchestrates the course of events that his will is always done, but without in any way diminishing the freedom of human beings to act as they are pleased to act. Millard Erickson summarizes well these implications of a compatibilist doctrine of human freedom:

God works in numerous ways to bring about his will by rendering it certain that I and each other individual will freely choose what he foreordained. He does this through placing circumstances such that I will want to act in a certain way. ... He has control over all sorts of circumstances that most humans could not control or even influence. And out of this, he does not coerce but renders his will certain. There may be various ways in which he brings this about in different situations. In some cases, he provides the means or the strength to accomplish something. In others, he simply refrains from intervening to prevent a particular action.⁶⁷

I will return in the next section to the implications of a compatibilist view of creaturely freedom for an understanding of God’s providential governance and exhaustive foreknowledge of all things. At this point, however, I want to offer a series of arguments that demonstrate the incoherence and unacceptability of the idea of libertarian human freedom.

First, in the Scriptural representations of the responsibility of human beings to obey God and submit to his will, we do not find any hint of an incompatibility between such accountability and God’s foreordination or foreknowledge of the actual choices human beings make in their responses to him. For example, in the narrative of Joseph’s betrayal by his brothers in the book of Genesis, the narrative concludes with Joseph saying to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). Joseph’s brothers are held fully responsible for what they did against Joseph, even though their actions fulfilled God’s will to bring about his good purposes. Similarly, in the well-known words of Peter in his Pentecost sermon, the crucifixion of Jesus, which was brought about through the culpable actions of “lawless men,” occurred in accordance with “the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). These passages are not exceptional in the Scriptures, but are illustrative of a common pattern: human choices and actions occur in accordance with God’s will, even when they involve disobedience to his revealed rule of conduct, and are nonetheless ones for which the human actor is fully responsible.⁶⁸

67. Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 207.

68. For additional examples of this compatibility in Scripture, see Frame, *No Other God*, 57-88; and Ware, *God’s Greater Glory*, 35-160. My use of the language, “rule of conduct,” is

Although the Scriptures do not provide a technical, theological account of the nature of human freedom (they do not speak in the language of an “incompatibilist, libertarian human freedom” or a “compatibilist, freedom of self-determination”), their descriptions of the responsible acts of human beings make clear that the freedom of such acts does not require that they take place *independently* of God’s will or purpose. Furthermore, the Scriptural representation of the way human beings act in specific circumstances cannot be *abstracted* from the concrete person whose actions always correspond to or depend upon his or her concrete desires, affections, values, and inclinations. In the language of several, well-known Bible passages, a “good tree bears good fruit” in the same way a “evil tree bears evil fruit” (Matt. 7:17); what flows from a person’s mouth is an “overflow of the heart” (Luke 6:45); and “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

Second, upon careful analysis of the libertarian view of human freedom, it becomes clear that this view is incoherent and self-defeating. One of the most common questions we may pose regarding any human choice is, what *moved* or *inclined* a human being to act in a particular way. In the prosecution, for example, of a person who commits a crime, one of the most important pieces of evidence is the determination of the perpetrator’s motive. However, in the libertarian understanding of human freedom, there can ultimately be no satisfactory answer to this question. The best you can say is something like, “though I was equally free to do otherwise, I exercised my indeterminate will to do what I did.” A libertarian will is one that always retains the inherent power to do the contrary. Perhaps another way to make this point is to observe that a truly free action in the libertarian sense springs from “nothing.” Such an act is analogous to God’s creating the world “out of nothing.”

In this connection, it is no accident that the libertarian view of human freedom is sometimes called a “freedom of equipoise.” In the circumstances that obtain when a truly free act is performed, the actor is in the same place as a high wire or trapeze artist finds himself. So long as such a high wire artist finds himself in perfect equipoise, balanced by the equal weight of a pole so as to preserve his balance and keep him from falling to the left or to the right, he will remain stationary, keeping his balance or equipoise. There is literally nothing that would cause him to fall in one direction or another. Such a state of equipoise is perfectly equivalent to a form of paralysis. Or, to change the analogy, such a person’s freedom is not unlike Alice in Wonderland, when she comes to a fork in the road. When Alice asks the Cheshire cat what way she should go, the Cheshire cat asks where she is going. To this question Alice replies by saying, “I don’t know.” To which the Cheshire cat responds, “then it doesn’t matter.” In a similar way, the libertarian view of human freedom amounts to

related to a traditional distinction in Reformed theology between God’s “will of decree” and God’s “will of precept.” God’s “will of decree” is his will whereby he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, which is never frustrated. God’s “will of precept” is the rule of life that God has revealed for the conduct of his moral creatures, which is often disobeyed. For a brief treatment of this distinction, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 77. For a treatment of this distinction and its relevance for a critical assessment of open theism, see Frame, *No Other God*, 105-18.

saying that the free choices that we make arise out of nothing, and are not made for any reason other than that we made them.⁶⁹

Third, the libertarian view of human freedom raises questions regarding the nature of God’s freedom and the freedom of human beings whom he created in his image. Christian theologians commonly affirm that the three Persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, enjoy an eternal and perfect communion of love. There is an eternal communion and reciprocal relationship between the three Persons of the Godhead. In their relations, the three Persons act in perfect freedom, but they cannot, being the Persons they are, do otherwise! The three Persons necessarily exist and inter-relate in loving fellowship, which theologians call the “perichoresis” or mutual indwelling of their Persons (see, e.g., John 14:10-20; 17:20-26). The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not free to inter-relate in a non-loving way, for in doing so they would deny themselves in the literal sense of ceasing to be who they truly are. Just as God cannot lie, being perfectly truthful, so the Persons of the Trinity cannot fail to love each other perfectly. The point of this comment is to say that God’s freedom to be loving is not incompatible with saying that he necessarily is loving and could not be otherwise than loving. God’s freedom is radically dissimilar to the libertarian view of freedom in respect to human beings, which according to open theists must always permit them to do the contrary. In a similar way, in order to affirm that God is morally responsible and free in all of his actions in relation to the world, we do not need to affirm that he was free to do the contrary in every choice he makes. Though God is free to create a different world than the one he chose to create, he is not free to act in any possible world in a way that conflicts with who he is. One way in which this comes to expression in theology is to say that God is “impeccable.” God’s impeccability means that God, though free to act or not to act, is never free or able to sin in any of his actions.⁷⁰ God must “do all his holy will,” and therefore he cannot do anything contrary to his holiness.⁷¹

Now if it is true that God’s freedom is perfectly compatible with his inability to do anything that conflicts with his character, there does not seem to be any reason that human beings, who were created in his image, must have libertarian freedom in order to be morally or religiously responsible. If there is an analogy (similarity as well as dissimilarity) between God’s freedom and the freedom of creatures who bear his image, creatures who act in accordance with their character are no less free on that account. The open theist insistence that a truly reciprocal and loving relationship between God and human beings requires libertarian human freedom cannot be

69. I cannot help being reminded of a similar illustration. Yogi Berra, the legendary player for the New York Yankees, well-known for his amusing way of putting things, was once asked which way a person should go when coming to a fork in the road. Yogi’s answer, “take it,” sounds suspiciously like the libertarian view of the abstract, inexplicable, and irrational choices that human beings make in circumstances of genuine freedom. It is no wonder that neither God nor the person who makes the choice has a reasonable basis to predict what choice will ensue.

70. Cf. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 328fn47. Remarkably, Sanders suggests that “impeccability,” even if it were affirmed of God, is an “incommunicable” attribute that cannot be shared by human beings who bear his image.

71. The phrase “do all his holy will” is taken from an answer to the question in a children’s version of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “Can God do all things?”

sustained. Why could not the divine-human relationship, which enjoys some analogy to the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity, be genuinely free and reciprocal, and at the same time immutable and unbreakable?

Fourth, consistent with my third observation regarding God's freedom to act in necessary conformity to his character, a compatibilist view of human freedom is able to explain the final state of those whom God redeems in a way that the open theist doctrine cannot. In the biblical understanding of the believer's final glorification in union with Christ, God's work of salvation ultimately brings the believer to a state of perfect and consummate holiness. Since God aims in salvation to "conform" those whom he elects to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29), the sanctifying work of God's Spirit is not finished in believers until they become "impeccable" or no longer able to sin or act contrary to God's good and holy will. This seems to be the clear implication of the Scriptural language of "perfection" or "maturity," when the goal of God's redemptive work in believers is reached (1 Cor. 13:9-12; cf. Eph. 4:13). In the language of the author of Hebrews, believers will be joined in irrevocable union with Christ and the "spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23). For this reason, the same author describes Christ as the "founder and perfecter" of the faith of believers (Heb. 12:2). Or, as the apostle John says, believers will be "like" Christ at his appearing, for they "will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

The implications of these passages for our understanding of true human freedom are clear. True freedom is not the freedom to act or not act in conformity with God's will. True freedom is the glorious liberty that belongs to the children of God, when they are brought to a condition where they are not able, because always unwilling, to sin. Because the believer's condition in glorification is that of someone who is sanctified through and through (1 Thess. 5:23), it is impossible for a believer in glory to be or do anything but what is holy, righteous, and good. Upon the assumptions of open theism, however, no such liberty seems to be possible, now or in the future. But if human freedom in the highest state of glorification precludes libertarian freedom, the assumption of open theism that libertarian freedom is an ultimate value to be prized above God's independence, omnipotence, and omniscience, is exposed as fallacious. What open theism prizes, libertarian freedom, is contrary to the perfection God aims to provide believers through the work of Christ and his indwelling Spirit.

And fifth, the open theist doctrine of libertarian free will is based upon the same premise that drove Pelagius to deny that believers are saved by grace alone on the basis of the work of Christ alone. The premise assumed is that humans are not responsible for their actions unless they are able to perform these actions by their will and power alone. Human freedom can only flourish within a circumstance in which the obligation God stipulates is within the capacity of the person to whom the obligation is given. Although this premise has some plausibility and application in certain respects, it fails to recognize that it is possible for those who are unable to do what God requires to be responsible for having lost this ability. To put the matter more specifically, the biblical doctrine of original sin teaches that human beings were created with the ability to do what God required of them, but through the willful disobedience and sin of Adam this ability has been lost. The only way a fallen sinner can do what God requires is by a powerful intervention of God's grace that ensures that this requirement is meant. To paraphrase the Church Father, Augustine, God's grace allows him to command what he will and give to us the ability to do what he commands.

2.3. God’s Providence is Not Mere “Conservation”

Before I take up directly the open theist view of divine election, I need yet to consider the open theist claim that God’s providence is a general, non-meticulous providence that leaves room for human beings with libertarian freedom. This doctrine of providence and its corollary, the denial of God’s foreknowledge of the future actions of free human beings, depends upon the assumption of libertarian human freedom. Upon the basis of my critical evaluation of the libertarian view of human freedom, I now wish to defend a view of God’s providence and foreknowledge that corresponds to a compatibilist view of human freedom.

In the history of theology, a common distinction is drawn between three aspects of God’s providence: 1) God’s “conservation” (*conservatio*) or “sustenance” (*sustentatio*) of creation and all created beings throughout history subsequent to the initial act of creation out of nothing; 2) God’s “concurrence” (*concursum*) with the free actions and decisions of all creatures who in a non-coercive and non-compulsory way act in conformity to God’s will or counsel; and 3) God’s “governance” (*gubernatio*) or rule over all created beings throughout history by which he unfailingly realizes his good purposes. The identification of these three components of God’s providence belongs not to Reformed theology alone, but was a “commonplace” (in the technical sense of the term) among scholastic theologians since at least the end of the sixteenth century and thereafter. Roman Catholic (Aquinas), Lutheran, Arminian, and orthodox Reformed theologians utilized these terms to articulate the nature of God’s comprehensive providence.⁷² While each of these dimensions of God’s providence needs to be distinguished for the purpose of clarity, none of them can properly be affirmed and understood apart from the other. They are like three strands that are woven together in the comprehensive, rich tapestry, which is God’s providential handiwork. In the exercise of all of his perfections, God personally conserves the existence of his creation, works to realize his will through the engagement of those creatures who are responsible to obey his will, and directs all things to their appointed end.

The first component of God’s providence, conservation, refers to the way God, after having called the creation and all creatures into existence (sometimes called “first creation,” *creatio prima*), acts to conserve or preserve the existence of all that he first created (sometimes called “continuing creation,” *continuata creatio*). Since God alone is absolutely independent, deriving his existence and being from himself, all creatures to whom God first granted existence and endowed with unique properties and powers, can continue to exist with these properties and powers only as

72. See, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.21; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:501-15; and Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. by John Bolt, trans. by John Vriend, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 604-19. For an exposition of Arminius’ view of God’s providence, which distinguishes it from the view of open theism, see John Mark Hicks, “Was Arminius an Open Theist? Meticulous Providence in the Theology of Jacob Arminius,” in *Reconsidering Arminius: Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide*, ed. Keith Stanglin, Mark G. Gilby, and Mark H. Mann (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 137-60. Hicks shows that Arminius’ doctrine of providence included each of the aspects of conservation, concurrence, and governance.

God conserves them.⁷³ For this reason, Louis Berkhof defines conservation as “*that continuous work of God by which He maintains the things which He created, together with all the properties and powers with which He endowed them.*”⁷⁴ Since no creature has self-existence, God alone continuously maintains the creation’s existence, and enables the creature to act in a manner appropriate to its own nature. Contrary to pantheism, which teaches that all that is and occurs represents a necessary overflow of God’s being (like a great waterfall that endlessly cascades downward), the biblical doctrine of providence insists that God distinctly and willfully acts, subsequent to creation, in a way that sustains all things in being and action. Therefore, conservation is not an act of granting the creature existence, but an act whereby God upholds and sustains all creatures in accord with their distinct features or properties.

The second component of God’s providence, concurrence, focuses on the way God acts in and with the actions of his creatures to whom he grants real power to act in ways commensurate with their natures and properties. The special interest of the doctrine of concurrence is to provide an explanation (to the extent this is possible) of the inter-relation between God’s will and the creature’s will. By means of his concurring providence, God accomplishes his good purposes through the willful actions of creatures who are themselves fully engaged and responsible for all that they do. Louis Berkhof offers the following useful summary of God’s *concursum* in and with the actions of his creatures:

It should be noted at the outset that this doctrine implies two things: (1) That the powers of nature do not work by themselves, that is, simply by their inherent power, but that God is immediately operative in every act of the creature. This must be maintained in opposition to the deist position. (2) That second causes are real, and not to be regarded simply as the operative power of God. It is only on condition that second causes are real, that we can properly speak of a concurrence or co-operation of the First cause with secondary causes. This should be stressed over against the pantheistic idea that God is the only agent working in the world.⁷⁵

In the Westminster Confession of Faith’s treatment of God’s providence, the idea of *concursum* is expressed clearly: “Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he orders them to fall out, *according to the nature of second causes*, either necessarily, *freely, or contingently*” (WCF 5.2, emphasis mine). The point of this language is to affirm that, in the case of responsible or free

73. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 169-70. Among the Scripture passages that Berkhof adduces for the idea of conservation, the following are illustrative: Deut. 33:12, 25-28; Ps. 107:9; Matt. 10:29; Acts 17:28; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3.

74. *Systematic Theology*, 170.

75. *Systematic Theology*, 171-72. Among the Scriptural passages that Berkhof adduces in support of *concursum*, the following are illustrative: Gen. 45:5; 50:19-20; Ex. 10:1, 20; Acts 2:23; 1 Cor. 12:6; Eph. 1:11; Phil. 2:12-13; Acts 17:28. Phillipians 2:13 is a classic example: “... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

creatures, God concurs with their actions in such a way as to effect his will, but not in such a way as to diminish the real engagement of the creature’s will in the act performed. Furthermore, concursus involves the *simultaneous* working of God and the creature, but not the *co-ordinate* or *partitive* working of God and the creature.⁷⁶ God’s will remains prior and determinative. The creature’s will always depends upon and is governed by God’s will. While the creature’s will and action are real and operative, the creature never wills and acts independently of the divine concursus in a manner that makes the action partly God’s act and partly the creature’s act.⁷⁷

The third component of God’s providence, governance, refers to the way God rules all things, directing them to the end that he has ordained for them. God’s kingly rule or dominion means that nothing takes place in the created order without God’s superintendence. When God’s providence is viewed from the vantage point of the *telos* or end that God wills to accomplish, the idea of God’s rule over all that takes place comes to the foreground. God’s conservation of, and concurrence with, all that occurs in the course of history require the acknowledgment of his governance of all things. Likewise, God’s governance of all things presupposes his conservation and concurrence in all things.⁷⁸

76. In a helpful essay on the failure of open theists to recognize the “analogical” nature of all biblical and theological language about God, Michael Horton (“Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method,” in *Beyond the Bounds*, ed. John Piper et al.), 222, makes an important observation about the way God’s providential concursus does not exclude genuine human agency: “Methodologically, theological proposals must do more than offer an alternative to a dominant position that nobody actually holds. For Pinnock, it is either ‘libertarian freedom’ or despotic ‘omnicausality,’ not even recognizing that Reformed theology (like other traditions) affirms a fairly well-developed and well-known account of double agency.” The point Horton is making is that God’s will and the human will may not be viewed univocally, as though we were speaking of two equivalent actors on the same stage, not recognizing the difference between God as Creator and human beings as creatures.

77. For this reason, B. B. Warfield chose to speak of the “mode of revelation” known as “inspiration” as an instance of God’s “concurrent operation.” Although the common language today is that of “organic inspiration,” the idea is that God is the primary author of Scripture, but he concursively works through human authors who are fully engaged and responsible for what they chose to write. See Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948), 94-96.

78. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, expresses the intimate interplay and inseparability of conservation, concurrence, and governance, by noting that each of them are not simply a “part” of God’s providence but the “whole of it” viewed from a different vantage point (175). For this reason, God’s governance of all things differs in respect to the kind of creatures he governs. “In the physical world He has established the laws of nature, and it is by means of these laws that He administers the government of the physical universe. In the mental world He administers His government mediately through the properties and laws of mind, and immediately, by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. In the government and control of moral agents He makes use of all kinds of moral influences, such as circumstances, motives, instruction, persuasion, and example, but also works directly by the personal operation of the Holy Spirit on the intellect, the will, and the heart.” (175-76). For a comprehensive treatment of these aspects of God’s providence in relation to the claims of open theism, see Ware, *God’s Greater Glory*, 35-160.

When God's providence is defined in terms of each of these three components, it becomes clearer how God can foreknow all the acts, past, present, and future, of creatures who have genuine freedom. God's foreknowledge of these acts corresponds to his foreordination and providential work to make them occur. God knows all that he will do in conserving, concurring, and governing all of the free, contingent acts of his creatures in the course of history. Without his providential conservation, concurrence in, and government of what transpires, no free creature would have existence or be endowed with the powers and characteristics that are required to make decisions or act in a particular way. Furthermore, by his concurrence in the free acts of his creatures, God works to accomplish his will, but he does so in a way that fully respects the real decisions that such creatures make. Although it may be impossible to plumb the depths and understand completely how this can be, God's providence is exhaustive, even "meticulous," to use the term open theists employ when they argue for their alternative view of a general, non-controlling and non-exhaustive providence. But God's providence does not coerce or compel any free creature to act contrary to what the creature is pleased to do or not do. Nor does God's providence diminish the responsibility of free creatures whose choices accord with what they judge to be pleasing or valuable.

The problem with the open theist view of God's providence is that God's conservation of all things, including the free actions of some creatures, is affirmed, but his concurrence and governance of such actions are denied. Open theists acknowledge that the doctrine of creation out of nothing requires God's providential conservation of human beings who enjoy libertarian freedom. For example, in his treatment of God's providence, Hasker distinguishes open theism from process theology by noting that the "persistence of any entity in existence depends wholly on the divine activity—which is just what is affirmed by the doctrine of divine conservation."⁷⁹ Hasker also observes that "All created things depend on God for their existence from moment to moment; this is the divine 'conservation' of created reality."⁸⁰ However, it is not at all clear that open theists can retain a robust affirmation of God's conservation, when at the same time they deny God's concurrence and governance in the case of the free actions of human beings. In the open theist understanding of libertarian human freedom, free human beings have a God-like power to act independently of any reliance upon God. This means that free human decisions are, quite literally and properly, decisions that spring forth *ex nihilo* by virtue of the indeterminate power of libertarian freedom.⁸¹ Such decisions have no other source than the power of free human beings to act or not to act in various circumstances.

The difficulty with the open theist view is that it separates God's providential conservation of the free acts of human beings from his providential concurrence in

79. William Hasker, "An Adequate God," in *Searching for An Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 225.

80. Hasker, "An Adequate God," 219.

81. Cf. Hasker, "God as Personal," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 176: "Our Response is, in a real sense, *ex nihilo*, since it originates within us and is not merely the effect of divine causation." This statement might be clarified by removing the qualifier "merely."

and governance of these actions. But such a separation is impossible. These three aspects of God’s providence necessarily entail each other. In the open theist view, God’s conservation of the creature’s existence “from moment to moment” is affirmed, but God is *walled off* from any presence within the space and time of the creature’s free actions. When creatures with libertarian freedom make choices to perform an action, it is as though they are in a private room which God has created for them but to which he can have no access. God cannot enter this room or exercise any influence within it. Within the little world of libertarian human freedom, there is a creature whose actions are self-created and self-dependent in the strictest sense of these terms. Even though God is said to have created this world and to conserve its existence, he is also said to have given it an independence and self-existence that belie its dependence upon his continual conservation of it from moment to moment. However, the conservation of the creature’s existence and powers by God is only possible to the extent that the creature’s actual choices involve God’s concurrence and governance. God conserves the creature’s action precisely as he concurs with and governs it. Each of the aspects of God’s providence, conservation, concurrence, and governance, offer different angles of vision upon God’s comprehensive providential handiwork.

The point of these remarks is that “mere conservationism” represents an untenable view of God’s providence.⁸² This was already acknowledged in the scholastic theological discussions of the doctrine of providence in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For example, the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit theologians, Luis de Molina and Francisco Suárez, argued that it was impossible to affirm God’s conservation of human beings in their free choices without also affirming his concurrence and governance of these choices. Even though Suárez and Molina differed in their understanding of God’s middle knowledge, they nonetheless concurred (no pun intended) on the inseparability of God’s conservation, concurrence and governance of the free actions of human beings. According to Molina,

No effect at all can exist in nature unless God ... immediately conserves it ... But since that which is necessary for the conservation of a thing is *a fortiori* necessary for the first production of the thing, it surely follows that nothing at all can be produced by secondary causes unless at the same time the immediate and actual influence of the First Cause intervenes.⁸³

Similarly, Suárez argued that

If God does not have an immediate influence on every action of a creature, then a created action itself does not of itself require God’s influence essentially in order to exist, even though it, too, is a participation in being;

82. Alfred J. Freddoso, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is Not Enough,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 554: “According to mere conservationism, God contributes to the ordinary course of nature solely by creating and conserving natural substances and their accidents, including their active and passive powers.”

83. *Concordia*, II. 25, 14 (as quoted in Freddoso, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes,” 554).

therefore, there is no reason why the form that comes to exist through such an action should require for its conservation an actual influence of the First Cause.⁸⁴

In these incisive comments, Molina and Suarez identify the critical problem with any view of providence that involves no more than God's conservation of a free creature's existence and power of choice. In the same way that a creature has no existence or power of choice except through God's act of conservation, so no creature can exist and exercise this power in a particular way except through God's concurrence and governance. This follows from the basic difference between God, who is self-existent and independent in his being and works, and the creature whose existence and action wholly depends upon God. The only way in which a creature could act and make choices without God's concurrence and government would be for the creature to become another God. Such a creature would have the power to exist and to exercise the power of choice without depending upon God in any sense. Quite literally, the creature would be self-existent, self-sustaining, and utterly independent of God in the exercise of its freedom.

2.4. The Eclipse of God's Eternal and Merciful Election

Upon the basis of my critical evaluation of the open theist view, I want to conclude with a few comments on the implications of what I have argued for the open theist doctrine of election. In some ways, these comments are hardly necessary, since the burden of my argument thus far yields what might appear to be a rather obvious conclusion: *open theism has no doctrine of election*, certainly no doctrine that bears much resemblance to the two primary expressions of the doctrine in the history of Christian theology, the Augustinian-Calvinistic and Arminian views. To put it rather tersely: the claims of open theists amount to the "eclipse" of the Scriptural understanding of God's merciful election of his people in Christ from before the foundation of the world. If open theism represents a more Scriptural doctrine of God than the one that has prevailed in the history of Christian theology, as its proponents claim, it does so by ignoring or explicitly contradicting what the Scriptures teach about God's gracious and eternal purpose of election in Christ.

In order to illustrate how open theism eclipses the biblical doctrine of election, I note several key features of Scriptural teaching that are undeniably absent from, or contradicted by, the open theist position.

First, in several important Scriptural passages, God's election or predestination of his people in Christ is described as belonging to his eternal counsel and purpose from before the foundation of the world. In these passages, God's gracious intention to save those whom he elects is not viewed as a response in time to an unanticipated turn of events, namely, the fall and disobedience of human beings whom God discovers are now in need of redemption. Election is certainly not represented as a kind of wise strategy that God adopts to save sinners whom he could not have known would choose to disobey him and thereby become worthy of condemnation

84. *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 22, I, 9 (as quoted by Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes," 571).

and death. Rather, God’s purpose of election in Christ belongs to his eternal counsel to magnify his grace and mercy in the salvation of a great number of fallen sinners whom he created after his image and whom he permitted to fall into sin. Perhaps the most striking example of this emphasis upon God’s pre-temporal purpose of election is found in Ephesians 1:3-4, 11:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.... In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to counsel of his will.⁸⁵

This passage is consistent with the general Scriptural teaching that God knows himself and all his works from eternity (Acts 15:18; Eph. 1:11; Col. 1:15-20). It is also corroborated by passages that speak of Christ’s work of atonement upon the cross as a work that God purposed from eternity (Acts 2:23; Heb. 13:20; Rev. 13:8; 1 Pet. 1:20). These passages clearly teach that the saving work of Christ in time was planned by God within his eternal counsel or decree, and that this work is effectual to draw those whom God chooses to himself.⁸⁶ They belie one of the most characteristic features of the open theist view of election, namely, that God’s work of redemption in history represents his loving response to human disobedience that he could neither have foreknown nor eternally planned to redress by the saving work of Christ in the fullness of time.

Second, the open theist denial of God’s foreknowledge of those whom he elects to save in Christ contradicts the explicit teaching of Romans 8:28-30, and is in conflict with the Scriptural teaching that God elects particular persons to salvation. In the open theist view, God’s gracious purpose of election does not concern any particular human beings whom God elects to save. God’s election is his indefinite, gracious will and intention to save all human beings, provided they choose freely to believe and not to disbelieve. If we may speak of “elect persons,” we are speaking only of those whom God does not know or love in any distinctive way until they choose to believe and no longer frustrate his good intentions for them. Furthermore, within the framework of the tenets of open theism, there is no way for God to know that a human being with libertarian freedom will not at some future point choose to become unbelieving and forfeit through such unbelief the salvation they possessed only for a time. The salutary feature of open theism is the way it exposes the vulnerability of the traditional Arminian understanding of libertarian human freedom. If human beings always have the power of contrary choice, then it does seem impossible to claim that God could foreknow those who are elect and who will

85. See also 2 Tim. 1:8-10; 1 Pet. 1:1-2; Rom. 8:28-30; and Rom. 9:6-13.

86. This is evident in several passages in the Gospel of John: 6:35-65; 10:1-18, 29; 13:18; 15:16; 17:2, 6, 9, 24; 18:9. For a treatment of the Gospel of John’s representation of God’s sovereignty in relation to human responsibility, see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 184-98.

certainly be saved. Despite this difficulty, Arminians have nonetheless affirmed God's foreknowledge of the elect, and they have done so upon the basis of the clear teaching of Scripture.

If there is one common thread shared by Augustinian-Calvinistic and Arminian theology, it is that the apostle Paul's language in Romans 8:28-30 settles the question whether or not God knows beforehand those whom he predestines or elects to save. In verses 29-30 of this passage, Paul declares, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." While the meaning of the language "foreknew" is disputed between Augustinian-Calvinistic and Arminian interpreters, I believe it means that God distinguished beforehand those who were the peculiar and distinct objects of his saving grace and mercy.⁸⁷ Those whom God foreknew are not a faceless crowd of persons out of which some will emerge because they choose to believe and not disbelieve (and persist in believing). They are a definite number of persons, known to and loved by God from beforehand, whom God will call, justify, and finally glorify. None of those who belong to this number will fail to enjoy these and all other spiritual blessings that are theirs in Christ. On a straightforward reading of this passage, there is no escaping the conclusion that God foreknows perfectly those whom he has purposed to save, and he knows them in the most intimate way. This passage provides a profound description of the sure communion that God will bring about between himself and those whom he aims to conform to the image of his Son.

Third, the open theist view of libertarian human freedom is incompatible with the Scriptural portrait of the plight of all human beings who have sinned in Adam (original sin), who are now captive to the power and dominion of sin (actual sin), and who have become incapable of performing any saving good. The biblical teaching regarding God's sovereign and merciful election of his people in Christ corresponds to its teaching that fallen human beings are not able to save themselves from their bondage to sin and enmity toward God. Though they remain responsible before God and liable to the consequences of their willful sin and disobedience, they are not able to respond to the gospel call to faith and repentance, unless God himself draw them by the Spirit and Word of Christ. Only those whom God elects to save in Christ, and to whom he grants all that is needed for them to enjoy the benefits of Christ's saving work, are able to be saved from the power and consequences of their willful sin against God.

Accordingly, it is not difficult to adduce Scriptural passages that describe the plight of fallen human beings in a way that fits better with a compatibilist than an incompatibilist view of human freedom. Without excusing or diminishing human responsibility in relation to God, the Scriptures clearly teach the inability of fallen sinners to restore themselves to favor with God. Moreover, this inability is not imposed upon sinners by any external constraint or compulsion. Even though the gracious summons of the gospel calls all sinners to believe in Jesus Christ for

87. For the exegetical argument that supports this interpretation, see S. M. Baugh, "The Meaning of Foreknowledge," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, vol. 1: *Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 183-200.

salvation, they are unable to respond properly to this summons without the initiative, provision, and enablement of God’s electing grace. The inability of fallen sinners to save themselves is entirely of their own making, and corresponds to the deepest inclinations and dispositions of their hearts. Contrary to the open theist insinuation that God’s electing will is directly responsible for the failure of fallen sinners to respond favorably to the gospel’s invitation, fallen sinners, when left to themselves, have no desire to seek God or embrace his truth (Rom. 3:11). The real-life predicament of sinners, when they hear the gospel call to faith and salvation in Jesus Christ, is captured well in the saying, “there is none so blind as he who will not see, none so deaf as he who will not hear.” Any number of Scriptural characterizations of the condition of fallen human beings bear this out: they are not able to see or enter the kingdom of God without being given new birth by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8); they are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1); they are blind to the truth of God, which they suppress in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18); they have minds that are blinded by the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4); they are willfully subject to the dominion and power of sin and unrighteousness (Rom. 6:15-23); and their minds are “hostile” against God so that they cannot submit to his will (Rom. 8:7). These passages, as well as many others, remind us that fallen sinners will always act in ways that spring from sinful hearts that have no will to do what God asks of them. While they may be free to do what pleases them, they are not free to be pleased to do what pleases God.

Fourth, in the biblical understanding of God’s gracious purpose of election, there is an important and necessary link between God’s electing will and the gracious and powerful means that God is pleased to use to accomplish what he wills. In the writings of open theists, the Augustinian-Calvinistic view of God’s election is frequently described as “deterministic” or “fatalistic.” According to open theists, the Augustinian-Calvinistic view reduces human beings to mere puppets in the hands of God, robotic figures who play out their pre-programmed roles. On the one hand, those whom God elects not to save are denied any genuine freedom to respond to God’s desire to save them. And on the other hand, those whom God elects to save are so controlled as to be coercively compelled to respond to the gospel in faith.

Though open theists believe that their quarrel at this point is with Augustine and Calvin, their real quarrel is with the way the Scriptures represent God’s saving work through the Word of the gospel and the Spirit who accompanies this Word. In the Scriptural representation of the work of God’s grace in the hearts and lives of his people, we see that God accomplishes his purpose of election in a way that magnifies his sheer grace while at the same time underscoring the responsibility of believers to respond to his call to faith in Christ. In the “extraordinary providence” of God’s saving work in time, believers discover that God alone is able to grant them the new birth that is requisite to their response to the gospel summons. They find that God alone is able to rescue them from all the tyranny of the devil, the inclinations of their sinful flesh, and the pressures to be conformed to worldly standards. They also find that their spiritual blindness is removed by God’s re-creative act whereby he causes the light of the gospel that shines in the face of Jesus Christ to shine in their hearts (2

Cor. 4:6).⁸⁸ God works through his Spirit and Word in a way that honors the believer's responsibility to believe and to repent, but ascribes to his conserving, concurring, and sovereign grace the power to grant this response (cf. Acts 16:14; Eph. 2:8-10). At no point do believers find that God's gracious work is a kind of divine act of "strong-arming" them into the kingdom. And at no point does God act in a way that diminishes the responsibility of the believer to believe in Jesus Christ and embrace him with all his promises. Believers act by believing, and they believe willingly and gladly. Though it may be difficult, if not impossible, to grasp fully how God achieves his good purpose to save his people in Christ, he achieves it, not at the expense of the believer's full and hearty engagement, but by granting the very response that he requires.

One of the finest statements of this truth is to be found in the Canons of Dort:

Moreover, when God carries out this good pleasure in his chosen ones, or works true conversion in them, he not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds. (Canons of Dort 3/4.11)⁸⁹

As this statement makes clear, God's saving work is born out of his eternal and gracious purpose to save his people in Christ. But it is a work that never diminishes the responsibility of those whom God elects to do what is required of them. Believing in Jesus Christ, embracing the gospel promises, turning from sin and toward God, discerning the things of the Spirit, being heartily ready and willing to do what God requires—these are all responses that believers themselves freely and gladly make in response to God's summons. God does not believe and repent for them, in lieu of their obligation to believe and repent. And yet their believing and

88. For this reason, believers sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved...."

89. Cf. also Canons of Dort 3/4.12: "But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God has done his work, it remains in man's power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation [2 Cor. 5:17-18] or of raising the dead [Eph. 2:1-7], as Scripture (inspired by the author of this work) teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, man himself, by that grace which he has received, is also rightly said to believe and to repent."

repenting occurs only as God graciously conserves their existence, concurs in such a way as to enable their wills, and governs them so as to accomplish his good purpose.

3. Concluding Summary

In addition to its conformity to the teaching of Scripture, the true test of any formulation of the doctrine of election consists of two questions: 1) is the triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—glorified as the sovereign and gracious Savior of his people; and 2) are the elect, who are saved by God’s grace alone in Christ, genuinely comforted?

When the open theist view of election is measured by these questions, it cannot but be regarded as unsatisfying. In the final analysis, the open theist view amounts to saying that human beings have it within their power to save themselves. All they need do is to make the right choice to believe and persist in believing. Though God intends that all human beings be saved, his good intentions are not enough to save anyone. Indeed, God’s best intentions can always be, now and in the future, frustrated. God is powerless to do what he wills, and must remain passively behind the wall of human freedom that he created but over which he has no lordship. When all is said and done, the God of open theism makes no promises in Christ that he can ensure will bear fruit in the lives of those to whom these promises are made. Rather than saying to those who are saved, “what do you have that you have not received?” (1 Cor. 4:7), the open theist is obliged to ask, “what do you have that you have not obtained by your powerful will alone?” God is diminished and human beings are magnified in the imaginary world of open theism.

As to the second question, open theism fares no better. By magnifying libertarian human freedom and diminishing God’s purpose of election, open theism leaves believers with precious little comfort. There is no room in the open theist world for a God who is able to work all things for good in the lives those whom he elects to save. Nor is there any basis for the confidence of which the apostle Paul speaks in Romans 8, that nothing can separate God’s elect from his love for them in Christ.

One of the most beautiful expressions of the comfort that believers derive from God’s powerful work of grace in the lives of his elect people is found in the opening question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

Interestingly, this question and answer does not explicitly speak of God’s gracious election to save his people in Christ. Commentators on the Heidelberg Catechism have often observed how little it speaks expressly of the biblical doctrine

of election. The only place election is mentioned explicitly is in the question dealing with the holy, catholic church, which is described as an “elect community.” But the truth of the matter is this: no one could speak in the language of Lord’s Day 1, unless they knew the God of the Scriptures, who sets his love upon his people from all eternity, who sends his Son in the fullness of time to accomplish what was needed for their redemption, and who makes his people, by his indwelling Spirit, members of Christ, heartily willing and ready henceforth to live for him. This God is the God of “all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3) whose grace toward his people in Christ is invincible and will not let them go. Open theism, by contrast, can provide no warrant for such comfort.