The Openness of God

Clark Pinnock
Richard Rice
John Sanders
William Hasker
David Basinger

A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God

InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois, USA

The Paternoster Press
Carlisle, UK

1994
divine love since it is seen as a one-way, purely active benevolence with no receptivity or passion: a benevolent despot in no way conditioned by or dependent on his creatures. Western thought has tended to define the divine freedom as unaffectedness from time and others instead of openness to the future with others. The openness of God view sees persons in loving relation as the root metaphor from which theology should grow.

Furthermore, when Christian theology applied the classical divine attributes of impassibility, immutability, timelessness and simplicity to the God incarnate in Jesus, a whole host of problems arose for Christology and the Trinity. It became commonplace to deny any real suffering of the Son and it was difficult to speak of relationality within the Godhead. The God of Greek thought is anonymous, self-sufficient, alone (unrelated), invulnerable, self-thinking thought, changeless and egocentric. The triune God of the Bible is “named” (as Yahweh to Israel and then as Father, Son and Spirit through Jesus), is God for others, makes himself vulnerable and is self-giving love. This God, as Nicea established, is essentially related between the Father, Son and Spirit. Moreover, since the creation, the Trinity enjoys genuine external relations with us creatures. This personal God uses the divine freedom to enter into relationships of love involving reciprocity and mutuality. Though the tradition, with good intentions, employed immutability and impassibility in order to protect God’s freedom, they were taken too far and left no room for speaking of divine openness where God, in vulnerability, binds himself to others in love. Christian theology, I am arguing, needs to reevaluate classical theism in light of a more relational metaphysic (not all philosophy is bad!) so that the living, personal, responsive and loving God of the Bible may be spoken of more consistently in our theological reflection and not merely in our devotional practice.

3 Systematic Theology
Clark H. Pinnock

Now that we have surveyed how the Bible construes God’s identity in personal terms (chapter one) and how that portrait was (mis)handled in the tradition (chapter two), our task is to propose a more biblical and coherent doctrine of God. I want to overcome any distortions caused by excessive Hellenization and allow biblical teaching to operate more normatively. My aim is to do greater justice to mutuality and relationality in both the triune God and the God-human covenant.

The concept of God is the most important topic in theology—and the most mysterious. Dealing with it makes one aware of the limitations of our finite understanding. We are not starting from scratch, though, or operating only from the light of human wisdom, but are reflecting on those perfections that must be ascribed to the divine Being on the basis of God’s own self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. On the basis of revelation we strive for a biblically and conceptually sound understanding of God and of the package of divine properties that contribute to a coherent understanding. Each attribute needs to be explained coherently and the attributes together shown to be compatible with one another and with the vision of God as a whole. I believe that unless the portrait of God is compelling, the credibility of belief in God is bound to decline.

In Christian theology we are not dealing with just any old concept of God, but with the surprising God and Father of our Lord Jesus. This is a God
who does not remain at a safe distance, worrying about his own honor, but one who bares his holy arm and rescues humankind through sharing their distress and affliction. We are not dealing with an unapproachable deity but with God who has a human face and who is not indifferent to us but is deeply involved with us in our need.

Doctrines are important because they express the truth-claims of religion both for insiders and outsiders. They try faithfully to state what we believe and to describe the realities that underlie these commitments in a timely way. Doctrines explore the cognitive substance of the Christian message. A doctrine of God seeks to distill in conceptual form what we know about God through revelation, truth that bears ultimate significance for humanity.

No doctrine can be more important than the doctrine of God. It is the principal doctrine in any theology, because apart from it the vision of faith cannot be stated. The whole creation is grounded in God, and the flow of history is the sphere of the outworking of his purposes. The doctrine is of more than academic interest; it is also of great missiological and practical importance. How can we commend belief unless we have formed a convincing conception of God for ourselves? Modern atheism has resulted in part from distortions that were allowed to enter the doctrine of God from the direction of philosophy. We cannot believe if we have conceptualized God in existentially repugnant ways. It makes a difference whether God is portrayed as genuinely related to human life or as standing aloof from it and indifferent to human needs. On the other hand, formulating this doctrine in a way that shows the relevance of belief in God has great apologetic value as people learn that God shares in their sorrows and is touched by the feelings of their infirmities.

Humility is essential when thinking about such lofty matters. What the apostle said about our knowing "only in part" is very apt: and his exclamation rings true: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33 NRSV). In theology, as in the Christian life generally, we are pilgrims traveling en route to God's kingdom. Some things are too high for us, and we can always learn more in conversation with others. Nevertheless, we hope to get a little closer to the truth by our efforts; if we reach a dead end, we will not be too proud to retrace our steps and try a different path. We insist on distinguishing between the Bible and our attempts to interpret it, and we believe that God always has more light to shed on his Word than we have received.

Basic Models

Interpretation is a human activity in which we distinguish between the primary biblical data and any presuppositions and interests we bring to the task. In theology, as in science, we also make use of models. Models help us to deal with complex subjects like Christology, ecclesiology, salvation and so forth. We face a great variety of data needing interpretation and are compelled to choose an angle of approach to them. In the case of the doctrine of God, we all have a basic portrait of God's identity in our minds when we search the Scriptures, and this model influences our exposition. What a great difference it makes, for example, whether we think of God as a stern judge, a loving parent or an indulgent grandfather. In theology we experiment with plausible angles of vision and try them out.

Two models of God in particular are the most influential that people commonly carry around in their minds. We may think of God primarily as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of being, as an all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks. Or we may understand God as a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans. These correspond to the differences Sanders has noted between the God of Greek philosophy and the God of the Bible. God is sovereign in both models, but the mode of his sovereignty differs.

In this book we are advancing the second, or the open, view of God. 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 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. We are significant to God and the apple of his eye (Ps 17:8).7

We hope to persuade people both inside and outside the church to regard God in this fashion, because we believe it is more biblical and meaningful to do so. Some critics may speak of "a battle of the gods," as if we were advocating a God other than the God of historic Christianity.3 What we are really doing is conducting a competition between models of God. We are trying to understand the God of Christian revelation better. I realize that reconsidering one's model of God may be a delicate issue for some readers. It may feel as if, when a familiar way of thinking about God is questioned, God himself is lost or has become distant. But the experience of reconceptualizing can be positive. After the initial anxiety of rethinking, one will find God again in a fresh way around the next bend in the reflective road. Rather than worry about our discomfort, perhaps we should be concerned about God's reputation. Does it not concern us that God's name is often dishonored because of poor theologies of God? How can we expect Christians to delight in God or outsiders to seek God if we portray God in biblically flawed, rationally suspect and existentially repugnant ways? We cannot expect it.

Systematic Theology

Many contemporary Christians will not be surprised by the model we call...
dependent on the world, not by volition but necessarily.

Traditional theology has been biased in the direction of transcendence as the result of undue philosophical influences. Greek thinking located the ultimate and the perfect in the realm of the immanent and absolutely transcendent. This led early theologians (given that the biblical God is also transcendent) to experiment with equating the God of revelation with the Greek ideal of deity. However, a price had to be paid in terms of faithfulness to Scripture and relevance to human life. A striking example of this is the way they distorted the divine self-ascription “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). This text, which points to the living God of the exodus, was transmuted into a principle of metaphysical immutability, as the dynamic “I AM” of the Hebrew text became the impersonal “being who is” of the Greek Septuagint (LXX), enabling theologians like Philo and Origen to link a changeless Greek deity with the God who acts in history. What God is saying to Moses in this verse is not “I exist” or even “I will be present.” God is saying that he will be a faithful God for his people. This is an example of the way in which the image of God as defined on the horizon of Greek thinking threatened to replace the image of the living God of the biblical revelation in theology. The God of promise who acts in history tended to be replaced by a metaphysical statement about abstract being.

No one should criticize the fathers for trying to integrate current philosophical beliefs and biblical insights. If God is the God of the universe and if truth is one, theologians should try to integrate all of the truth that they know from any quarter. But it is essential to integrate the various insights in such a way that the biblical message is not negated or compromised. In the integration the insights of revelation must be normative and not swept aside.

Fortunately the tilt toward transcendence in traditional dogmatics was not always extreme. Christians did not consistently lose sight of the dynamic portrait of God in the Scriptures. It was present in hymns, sermons and liturgies, which tend to be more conservative in relation to biblical language. It was even present in theology, particularly in dealing with a subject like the incarnation. When contemplating this mystery, the same theologians would often admit that in becoming flesh the logos underwent change, because of God’s desire to be gracious to humanity. The doctrine of the incarnation requires nuanced thinking about God’s immutability, and this was not lost upon the fathers. Nevertheless, the one-sided stress on God’s transcendence (on God turned away from us, not toward us) would continue to distort Catholic and Protestant theology to the present time.

My task here is to correct this imbalance in the handling of the transcendence and immanence of God. This requires allowing Scripture to challenge tradition and not permitting theology to be Hellenic where that would be unbiblical. While open to everything that is good in Greek thinking, we must discard what is not good. We cannot allow undue loyalty to traditional paradigms and esteemed theologians to prevent needed revision of the doctrine of God for today.

Modern culture can actually assist us in this task because the contemporary horizon is more congenial to dynamic thinking about God than is the Greek portrait. Today it is easier to invite people to find fulfillment in a dynamic, personal God than it would be to ask them to find it in a deity who is immutable and self-enclosed. Modern thinking has more room for a God who is personal (even tripersonal) than it does for a God as absolute substance. We ought to be grateful for those features of modern culture which make it easier to recover the biblical witness.

Let me attempt now to correct the imbalance in theology’s handling of transcendence and immanence by expounding on the relevant divine perfections. In doing so, I will take care not to engage in overcorrection or to reverse the tilt, this time in the direction of immanence, as liberal theology has customarily done. Let us seek a way to revise classical theism in a dynamic direction without falling into process theology.

The Trinity
The doctrine of the Trinity is the centerpiece of Christian theism. The church has always confessed that the God who created all things is one and many (not an undifferentiated simple unity) and embodies a relational
fullness and richness of being in himself. Given the fact that Father and Son are persons and that the Spirit is spoken of in personal terms in the Scriptures, it is appropriate to speak of God as a community of persons rather than as modes of being.  

This doctrine is relevant to the openness of God because the social trinity is an open and dynamic structure. It does not portray God as a solitary, domineering individual but as the essence of loving community. When presented as a solitary potente, God appears as the enemy of human freedom and atheism flourishes, but when seen as social trinity, God is the ultimate in community, mutuality and sharing. The doctrine enables us to break with substantivalist assumptions about God being a “thing” and puts the idea of three relationally interconnected persons in its place. The Trinity points to a relational ontology in which God is more like a dynamic event than a simple substance and is essentially relational, ecstatic and alive. God exists as diverse persons united in a communion of love and freedom. God is the perfection of love and communion, the very antithesis of self-sufficiency.  

The Trinity lets us say simultaneously two very important things about God—that God is (on the one hand) self-sufficient in fullness and (on the other hand) open to the world in overflowing love. It sheds light on God’s genuine delight in creatures as social beings themselves and on why he would invite them to share the richness of the divine fellowship as his friends. His love for us is not the benevolence of a distant king but like the tender love of a nursing mother (Is 49:15).  

The trinitarian model seems superior to process theism in this matter of the divine openness. It lets us criticize classical theism without moving in that direction. Process thinking does not have a patent on the dynamic, relational and temporal nature of God. The trine God (unlike God in process theism) does not need the world to make up for a love and mutuality lacking in his nature. The Trinity allows the church to confess that God is both self-sufficient and loving at the same time. The problem in process theology seems to be the fact that it requires us to view the world as necessary to God, with the implication that God is not free in creation but necessarily tied to a world. The Trinity, being an event of relationship, can be open to the world by choice and can work toward the mutuality in history already present in God’s being.  

The Trinity depicts a relational God who is ontologically other and a dynamic world that has real value. As internally social and self-sufficient, God does not need the world but creates it out of the abundance of his rich inner life. This makes God free to create and respond to the world, free to be gracious and take the initiative where necessary. Gregory Boyd writes: Only if God is antecedently actual, relational, and self-sufficient in relation to the world can God be free enough to do what scripture proclaims that God did in fact do in Jesus Christ. Only a God who is internally social within Godself can perform the more than necessary feat of opening up this sociality to what is fundamentally other than Godself. Only a God who is socially and self-sufficiently trune as lover, beloved, and loving can take the radical and completely unprovoked initiative to take on within this One’s self the full nature of a non-divine self in order to effect wholeness in the whole of the non-divine creation.  

The Creation  
The triune God is the Creator of the world out of nothing. This means that God does not simply influence preexisting matter but that everything depends on God for its existence. Belief in creation captures an essential dimension of the theistic worldview because it posits the world as the creation of God, as having its origin in God. Each being owes its existence to God, whose own being is independent of any world, making any relationship with the world voluntary, not necessitated. It also implies that God has the power to intervene in the world, interrupting (if need be) the normal causal sequences.  

However, contrary to the opinions of some, this act of creation does not entail that God controls and determines everything. God is free to make such creatures as he wills and has chosen to make some with the capacity for choice. God has given them a relative and derived autonomy. As H. P. Owen puts it, “God can create such beings as he wills; and has chosen
to make some creatures with the capacity for free choice."\textsuperscript{21}

Being socially triune, God has made a world with freedom, in which loving relationships can flourish. It is an ecosystem capable of echoing back the triune life of God. We may think of humanity as the created image of God's social nature, enacting on the finite level the relational movements that occur eternally in God. This must be why in the beginning God said the creation was "good"—because it brings such pleasure to God in this respect. As triune, God would be self-sufficient without creating any world, but as triune, God delights in a world in which he can interact with creatures for whom his love can overflow. God does not need a world in the sense of having a deficiency in his nature but wants one that delights his heart and pleases him.\textsuperscript{22}

This helps to explain why God made human beings—because they are able to respond to God and to hear his Word. Their lives, like God's own life, are dynamic and oriented toward fulfillment in the coming kingdom. God wanted a world where personal relations and loving communion could occur. It would be a world not wholly determined but one peopled with creaturely free agents. Without having to do so metaphysically, God seeks fellowship with us, out of grace and overflowing love. Sovereign and free, God chooses to be involved with us.\textsuperscript{23} He does not remain in splendid isolation but enters into relationship with his creatures. In the incarnation God stoops down, shares our lives and involves himself in our joys and sorrows. God chooses to express his deity not in the mode of aloofness, independency and total control but in creating free beings on the finite level and entering lovingly into their lives.\textsuperscript{24}

Thus God has created a world that in a creaturely way reflects the goodness that characterizes God's own experience as triune. At great cost, God is leading the world forward to the place where it will reflect more perfectly the goodness that God himself enjoys. God does all this without having to do it, without being compelled by anything outside of himself. God's bliss cannot be increased, but it can express itself in the world. The creation is an occasion for the expression of God's experience outside of God. In the spirit of the ancient image of the ecstatic dance of the triune God, we can say that the purpose of creation is to express this same delightful movement on the level of the creature, ever summoning new partners to the dance. Beyond metaphysical necessity, God creates a nondivine world with real significance and accepts the risks of entering into a relationship with it. The aim was to create an echo in space and time of the communion that God experiences in eternity, a reflection on the creaturely level of the loving movement within God. The decision gave God the possibility of reflecting on himself in the created other and of enjoying the delight of real interaction. It should be plain why the creation is so dear to God's heart.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Transcendence and Immanence}

In relation to the world, God the Creator is both transcendent and immanent. There are many polarities in theology: one and many, three persons and one essence, one person and two natures, and so forth. In a dialectical way, God both transcends the world and participates in it, is both high and lifted up and at the same time very close to it. God transcends and surpasses the world as its Maker but also indwells it and is active within it. Though transcendent, God is committed to us and wills to be in relation with us. As Isaiah says, God the Holy One is in our midst (Is 12:6). Though sovereign and free, God decides not to dwell alone but to establish communion with us. He has chosen to be God for us, even God for us in a human form.

A partial analogy is that of the artist, one who transcends her work and shapes it outside of herself and yet also imparts something of herself to it. The analogy cannot capture the intimacy and penetration of God's indwelling the world, though, for in a much greater way God, though ontologically distinct from created forms, creates a world external to himself and chooses to be present and immanent within it. On the one hand, God is sovereign and free and does not need the world; on the other hand, God has decided not to be alone but uses his freedom to establish communion with creatures and to exist in openness to the unfolding world.

By divine immanence I mean that God is everywhere present in all that exists. The world and God are not radically separated realities—God is present within every created being. As Paul said, quoting a Greek poet, "In
him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Today we understand the world as an interconnected ecosystem, a dynamic and developing whole, which has made this idea of God's immanence even more meaningful. It has become easier for us to imagine God the Spirit everywhere working as creativity in the whole cosmic situation. God is not detached from the world. Creation is not an event that happened and is done with. It is an ongoing process in which every particle, every atom, every molecule is held in existence by the Creator. Divine creativity has been taking place from the beginning until now, respecting what has already been made and calling forth new possibilities for the future. The whole world in which we dwell expresses God's continuous activity.

Process theology denies ontological independence, maintaining that God needs the world as much as the world needs God. This drops out the crucial distinction between God and the world so central to the scriptural portrayal. It makes God too passive, able only to experience the world and to organize the elements that present themselves to him. The Bible describes God as more present to the world than that, as a deity working out salvation in history and moving all things forward to a new creation.

The relation of God and creation is asymmetrical. The Creator gives life and freedom to the creature and voluntarily limits the exercise of his power in relation to it. God's openness to the world is freely chosen, not compelled. Process theism deserves commendation for opposing a static concept of God and for seeking a dynamic model, but not just any dynamic model will do. It is important to have a dynamic model that is biblically and theologically sound. Social trinitarian metaphysics (a relational ontology) gives us a God who is ontologically other but at the same time is ceaselessly relating and responsive.

In the second verse of Genesis we read about God's Spirit soaring over the creation. God not only created out of nothing—God also sustains the world, calls forth life and renews the face of the ground. God is on the inside of creation, in the processes not in the gaps. God is immanent throughout the universe in all of its changeableness and contingency and active in the whole long process of its development. The Creator has a mysterious relationship with every bit of matter and with every person. We need to recover the immanence of God, which helps us to relate to the new creation story being supplied by modern science.  

The Power of God
As Creator, God is unquestionably the superior power. His is the power to exist and the power to control all things. God depends on nothing else in order to be and is therefore free at the most fundamental level. But almightiness is not the whole story. In a world reflecting a trine community, God does not monopolize the power. Were he to do so, there could be no created order, certainly not a dynamic one with free agents, and not one producing love and communion. To achieve that kind of creation, God needs to deploy his power in more subtle ways. Though no power can stand against him, God wills the existence of creatures with the power of self-determination. This means that God is a superior power who does not cling to his right to dominate and control but who voluntarily gives creatures room to flourish. By inviting them to have dominion over the world (for example), God willingly surrenders power and makes possible a partnership with the creature.

Condescension is involved in God's decision to make this kind of a world. By willing the existence of significant beings with independent status alongside of himself, God accepts limitations not imposed from without. In other words, in ruling over the world God is not all-determining but may will to achieve his goals through other agents, accepting the limitations of this decision. Yet this does not make God "weak," for it requires more power to rule over an undetermined world than it would over a determined one. Creating free creatures and working with them does not contradict God's omnipotence but requires it. Only omnipotence has the requisite degree and quality of power to undertake such a project. God has the power and ability to be (in Harry Boer's words) an "ad hoc" God, one who responds and adapts to surprises and to the unexpected. God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B.
Divine condescension is apparent in the realm of redemption, where God manifests his power paradoxically in the cross of Christ. What an astounding way for God to deploy power, in the form of servanthood and self-sacrifice. This was the mode of power God knew in his wisdom to be appropriate for bringing about reconciliation, and it reveals that love rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God. When love says that power will not work in a situation, power is allowed to withdraw in favor of powerlessness. God does not overcome his enemies (for example) by forcing but by loving them. God works, not in order to subject our wills but to transform our hearts. Love and not sheer power overcomes evil—God does not go in for power tactics.99

We could also say that love is the mode in which God's power is exercised. God neither surrenders power in order to love nor denies love in the need to rule, but combines love and power perfectly. This power creates life and then awakens and stimulates it in others. The question is not whether but in what manner God exercises power. The model cannot be domination but is one of nurturing and empowering.99

We must not define omnipotence as the power to determine everything but rather as the power that enables God to deal with any situation that arises. Plainly God is not at the moment all in all—this has yet to happen when the kingdom comes (1 Cor 15:28). God's power presently is more subtle, much greater in fact than the coercive power of a puppeteer. Monopoly power is easy to manage—more difficult is a power that makes free agents and governs a universe where creatures can disobey. Omnipotence does not mean that nothing can go contrary to God's will (our sins go against it) but that God is able to deal with any circumstance that may arise. The idea that it means a divine decree and total control is an alarming concept and contrary to the Scriptures. Total control is not a higher view of God's power but a diminution of it.99 The biblical narrative plainly reveals that God has rivals and has to struggle with them.99

In an attempt to preserve the notion of God's power as total control, some advocate what they call biblical compatibilism, the idea that one can uphold genuine freedom and divine determinism at the same time.99 This is slight of hand and does not work. Just the fact of our rebellion as sinners against God's will testifies it is not so. The fall into sin was against the will of God and proves by itself that God does not exercise total control over all events in this world. Evils happen that are not supposed to happen, that grieve and anger God. Free will theism is the best way to account for this fact. To say that God hates sin while secretly willing it, to say that God warns us not to fall away though it is impossible, to say that God loves the world while excluding most people from an opportunity of salvation, to say that God warmly invites sinners to come knowing all the while that they cannot possibly do so—such things do not deserve to be called mysteries when that is just a euphemism for nonsense.99

The all-powerful God delegates power to the creature, making himself vulnerable. In giving us dominion over the earth, God shares power with the creature. The fact of sin in history reveals the adverse effect that disobedience has on God's purpose. God allows the world to be affected by the power of the creature and takes risks accompanying any genuine relatedness. There is a paradox of strength and vulnerability of God according to the Scriptures. Though ontologically strong, God can be vulnerable because of the decision to make a world like this. The Lord of the universe has chosen to limit his power by delegating some to the creature. God gives room to creatures and invites them to be covenant partners, opening up the possibility of loving fellowship but also of some initiative being taken away from God and creatures coming into conflict with his plans. God gives us room to rebel against him, and when that happens patiently waits for the prodigal to return.99

The theme of God's kingdom helps us to understand divine sovereignty from another angle. Jesus announces that God's rule is near but not yet in full effect. At present, God's will is resisted by powers of darkness, but the day will come when his will shall triumph. At present, evil is mounting a challenge to God's rule with considerable effect. The powers of darkness put up stiff resistance and to a degree block God's plans; that is, they can restrict God's ability to respond to a given crisis. Hence Paul says that the Spirit groans and waits with us for the final redemption (Rom 8:23). God's
ability to turn things around is circumscribed in ways we cannot understand, yet this is more than countered by the hope of the coming kingdom. Evil may have its day, but it will not finally triumph. By his decision to create a world like ours, God showed his willingness to take risks and to work with a history whose outcome he does not wholly decide. Theology does not work with an abstract idea of power that confuses sovereignty with tyranny.

Divine sovereignty involves a flexible out-working of God's purposes in history. It refers to his ability, as the only wise God, to manage things, despite resistance to his will. Owing to the emphasis in theology on almightiness, we have tended to neglect the form of power called persuasion. It is not the only kind of power God has at his disposal, but it is a noble form that has been neglected in the tradition, where power tends to be associated, even equated, with coercion. The power of God’s love (for example) does not command but woos and transforms us. This power can deliver us from evil and transform the wicked heart. Yet to reduce God’s power to persuasion would make God too passive—it would be an overreaction against almightiness.

At the same time, however, the power of persuasion is an admirable power. Is God’s power not as wonderfully displayed in his condescension to our weakness as in the starry heavens? It is so clear from Scripture, illustrated in God’s dealings with Moses, that God does not overpower his servants, even though he could easily do so, but rather works with mortals and all of their hesitations and uncertainties. God honors Moses’ dignity to the extent that when he cannot persuade him to accept the call, he resorts to an alternate plan, calling Aaron into the picture. God aims for the best in every situation and is even willing to work with options that are less than the best. God accepts what people decide to do with the powers they have been given. The future is determined by God not alone but in partnership with human agents. God gives us a role in shaping what the future will be. He is flexible and does not insist on doing things his way. God will adjust his own plans because he is sensitive to what humans think and do.

Understanding God’s power gives us some help with the vexed problem of evil. If this is a world in which evil is possible but not inevitable, then it can be seen as stemming primarily from the misuse of freedom. The full display of God’s sovereignty would not be a present reality but something to come at the end of history, when his glory is revealed, rather than at the present time, when the Spirit suffers with us and the universe groans.

We can call this model of divine openness free will theism. Upholding God’s power, it understands God to be voluntarily self-limited, making room for creaturely freedom. Without making God finite, this definition appreciates God’s delighting in a universe which he does not totally control.

The Immutability of God
The Trinity is unchangeably what it is from everlasting to everlasting—and nothing can change that. Furthermore, we can always rely on God to be faithful to his promises; he is not in any way fickle or capricious. Immutability ought to focus on the faithfulness of God as a relational, personal being.

But the tradition has taken immutability far in the direction of immobility and inertness. Some have claimed that God is wholly actual and not at all potential and thus cannot change in any way. They have equated the biblical idea of faithfulness with the Greek idea that requires any changes related to God to occur only on the human side. This is the error that tempted some of the early theologians to explain the incarnation without admitting that God changed, and to explain away dozens of biblical references to God’s repenning and changing.

This is a mistake from a biblical standpoint. The God of the Bible is a God of action, not inaction. God is immutable in essence and in his trustworthiness over time, but in other respects God changes. For example, God changes in his response to events in history. The Bible states that when God saw the extent of human wickedness on the earth, he was sorry that he had made mankind (Gen 6:5). The book of Jonah says that when God saw the conversion of Nineveh, he repented of the evil he said he would do to it (Jon 3:10). This latter passage is very revealing because it tells us that
God experiences temporal passage, learns new facts when they occur and changes plans in response to what humans do.

God is unchanging in nature and essence but not in experience, knowledge and action. In nature, God is consistently reliable and loving and can be depended on completely. God's character is faithful and reliable—he is a steadfast friend who binds himself to us and does not forsake us. His concern for the creature is constant and unaffected by anything. From the point of view of experience, however, God responds to the changing needs of his children and changes direction when necessary. God is changeless in nature, but his nature is that of a creative person who interacts. God's immutability does not rule out God's responsiveness, the quality that enables God to deal with every new happening and to bend it toward his objectives without violating its integrity.

When I say that God is subject to change, I am referring to a uniquely divine kind of changeability. I do not mean that God is subject to change involuntarily, which would make God a contingent being, but that God allows the world to touch him, while being transcendent over it.

**The Impassibility of God**

Impassibility is the most dubious of the divine attributes discussed in classical theism, because it suggests that God does not experience sorrow, sadness or pain. It appears to deny that God is touched by the feelings of our infirmities, despite what the Bible eloquently says about his love and his sorrow. How can God be loving and not pained by evil? How can God be impassible when the incarnate Son experienced suffering and death?28

The suffering or pathos of God is a strong biblical theme—God's love, wrath, jealousy and suffering are all prominent. God suffers when there is a broken relationship between humanity and himself. In this context, God agonizes over his people and says: "My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hosea 11:8 RSV). God is not cool and collected but is deeply involved and can be wounded. The idea of God's impassibility arises more from Plato than from the Bible.29

The theme of suffering strongly brings out God's openness to the world.

Not aloof and impasive, God does not just imagine what it would be like to suffer, he actually suffers because of his decision to love. God has chosen to be open to the world and to share in its suffering because of his love. God's transcendence over the world does not prevent him from interacting with the world or from being affected by the world.

What does it mean to say that God suffers? This is a mystery of God's inner life. Plato was not altogether wrong to say that God must be free of certain kinds of passion and emotion. After all, God is not a creature; therefore, he does not suffer in exactly the same ways that we do. Responding to pain, for example, must in some ways be an imaginative response to the suffering of a creature. How could God experience physical pain, if he is not physical? How could he suffer the pain of loneliness, if he is triune? Or the pain of fear when he is securely God? What we should say is that God sympathizes in his relationship with us. God risked suffering when he opened himself up to the world, when he made it possible for the creature to have an impact on him. God risked suffering when he decided to love and be loved by the creature. A lover's existence is inescapably affected by the other, especially when the loved one acts in ways that grieve and disappoint. Listen to the suffering in God's yearning for his wayward son: "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him" (Jer 31:20 RSV). Obviously God feels the pain of broken relationships.

At the same time, impassibility is a subtle idea with a grain of truth. We have to distinguish ways in which God can suffer from ways in which God cannot suffer. God is beyond certain modes of suffering, just as he is beyond certain modes of change. We could say that God is impassible in nature but passible in his experience of the world. Change occurs in the world and affects God when he becomes aware of it. When that change involves innocent suffering (for example), God responds tenderly to it.40

**God's Eternity**

Should we say that God is temporally everlasting or timelessly eternal?
Classical theism has made the strong claim that God is timeless, in the sense of existing outside of time and sequence. This view strongly emphasizes God's transcendence over the world. And since a timeless being would be totally actualized, it implies strong immutability and impassibility as well.43

However, timelessness presents many difficulties from a theological standpoint. First, it is hard to form any idea of what timelessness might mean, since all of our thinking is temporally conditioned. A timeless being could not make plans and carry them out. Second, it creates problems for biblical history, which portrays God as One who projects plans, experiences the flow of temporal passage and faces the future as not completely settled. How can a timeless God be the Creator of a temporal world? Why is God described as being involved in temporal realities? Third, it seems to undermine our worship of God. Do we not praise God, not because he is beyond time and change but because he works redemptively in time and brings about salvation? Fourth, if God did not experience events as they transpire, he would not experience or know the world as it actually is. If God's eternity were timeless, God could not be related to our temporal world. In actual fact, though, the biblical symbols do not speak of divine timelessness but of God's faithfulness over time. Though we wither and die, God abides and is not threatened or undone by time. We need an understanding of God's eternity that does not cancel or annihilate time but stands in a positive relation to it, which is for us not against us.

Experiencing temporal passage, God confronts a future that is open. The distinction between what is possible and what is actual is valid for God as well as for us. The past is actual, the present is becoming, and the future is possible. The everlasting One is active and dynamic through all of this flow, envisaging future possibilities and working to realize them. Transcendent to temporal passage, God is in the process without being involuntarily subject to it.44

When I say that God is eternal, I mean that God transcends our experience of time, is immune from the ravages of time, is free from our inability to remember, and so forth. I affirm that God is with us in time, experiencing the succession of events with us. Past, present and future are real to God.

This underlies the biblical claim that God is an agent who works in history, who makes plans and carries them out, who remembers the past and gives promises about the future. God's eternity embraces time and takes temporal events into the divine life.

The God of the Bible is not timeless. His eternity means that there has never been and never will be a time when God does not exist. Timelessness limits God. If he were timeless, God would be unable to work salvation in history, would be cut off from the world, have no real relationship with people and would be completely static. God is not temporal as creatures are, however, but can enter into time and relate to sequence and history. When I say that God is in time, I do not mean that God is exhaustively in time. Even in human experience, we partially transcend time through memory, imagination and reason. God's transcendence over time is vastly more perfect than is ours. Putting it positively, the Creator of time and space is at the same time the One who most perfectly experiences time. God loves time and enters into the experience of time, not only in the incarnation but always. The Bible sees God as present to the flow of history, facing the future as partly an unsettled matter. I say partly because much of the future is settled by what has already happened and by what God plans to do.45

Divine Knowledge

Obviously God must know all things that can be known and know them truly. To be able to know all that can be known is a dimension of God's power. Ignorance, or not to know something God needs to know in order to govern the universe and pursue his will, would be a serious limitation. However, omniscience need not mean exhaustive foreknowledge of all future events. If that were its meaning, the future would be fixed and determined, much as is the past. Total knowledge of the future would imply a fixity of events. Nothing in the future would need to be decided. It also would imply that human freedom is an illusion, that we make no difference and are not responsible.

What does the Bible say about God's knowledge? Many believe that the Bible says that God has exhaustive foreknowledge, but it does not.44 It says,
for example, that God tested Abraham to see what he would do and after
the test says through the angel: "Now I know that you fear God" (Gen
22:12). This was a piece of information that God was eager to secure. In
another place Moses said that God was testing the people to order to know
whether they actually love him or not (Deut 13:3). Total foreknowledge
would jeopardize the genuineness of the divine-human relationship. What
kind of dialogue is it where one party already knows what the other will
say and do? I would not call this a personal relationship. Commenting on
Israel's wickedness, God expresses frustration: "nor did it enter my mind
that they should do this abomination" (Jer 32:35 NRSV). God had not
anticipated it. In the book of Jonah, God threatens Nineveh with destruc-
tion and then calls it off (much to Jonah's chagrin) when the people repent
(Jon 3:10). Their repenting was not something God knew in advance would
happen. He was planning to destroy them but changed his mind when they
converted.

Oftentimes God says things like this in the Bible: "Perhaps they will under-
stand" or "It may be that they will listen." From such phrases we must
deduce that God has different options depending on people's responses
that are still outstanding (see Jer 26:3; Ezek 12:3; etc.). In saying "perhaps,"
God also indicates that he does not possess complete knowledge of the
future. The dozens of examples like this throughout Scripture establish that
the Bible thinks of an open future that is not completely certain. The
popular belief in God's total omniscience is not so much a biblical idea as an
old tradition. 15

The few verses that seem to go further do not require exhaustive fore-
knowledge. God's knowledge is wonderful and far-reaching (Ps 139:1-6) but
need not be limitless with respect to the future. Isaiah records prophecies
about things to come (Is 44:23-28), but these chiefly establish what God
promises to do and do not prove limitless foreknowledge. Prophecies are
generally open-ended and dependent in some way on the human response
to them. 16

We should not think of God's omniscience as a vast encyclopedia of past,
present and future facts. The Bible does not see it this way, nor is it a helpful
way to think of it. When God gave creatures freedom, he gave them an open
future, a future in a degree to be shaped by their decisions, not a future
already determined in its every detail. We do not limit God by saying that
he can be surprised by what his creatures do. It would be a serious limita-
tion if God could not experience surprise and delight. The world would be
a boring place without anything unexpected ever happening.

Those who are unsure of this should ask themselves if they think God
could create a world where he would not be in total control of everything,
where he would experience risk and where he would not foreknow all
decisions of his creatures in advance. Surely this must be possible if God
is all-powerful. Then is this world not just like that? Has God not already
made just such a world? Does the Bible not assume it—do we not experi-
ence it as such?

Philosophically speaking, if choices are real and freedom significant,
future decisions cannot be exhaustively foreknown. This is because the
future is not determinate but shaped in part by human choices. The future
is not fixed like the past, which can be known completely. The future does
not yet exist and therefore cannot be infallibly anticipated, even by God.
Future decisions cannot in every way be foreknown, because they have not
yet been made. God knows everything that can be known—but God's fore-
knowledge does not include the undecided.

It would seriously undermine the reality of our decisions if they were
known in advance, spelled out in a heavenly register and absolutely certain
to happen. It would make the future fixed and certain and render illusory
the sense of our making choices between real options. We might think of
this with the analogy of parents and children. As a parent, God knows what
he needs to know to deal with any contingency that might arise but does
not know or need to know every detail of the future. God is a person and
deals with us as persons. This means that God understands us, has intuation
into every situation we face and is able to deal appropriately with every
situation.

This implies that God learns things and (I would add) enjoys learning
them. It does not mean that God is anybody's pupil or that he has to
overcome ignorance and learn things of which he should have been aware. It means that God created a dynamic and changing world and enjoys getting to know it. It is a world of freedom, capable of genuine novelty, inexhaustible creativity and real surprises. I believe that God takes delight in the spontaneity of the universe and enjoys continuing to get to know it in a love that never changes, just as we love to get to know our children as they grow up. God is the best learner of all because he is completely open to all the input of an unfolding world, whereas we are finite and slow to react, reluctant to learn and inclined to distort reality in our own interest. Rather than supposing God cannot learn, we should try to learn as God learns. If this manner of God's learning surprises anyone, be reminded that simple foreknowledge also implies that God learns from what creatures do. I am not speaking in a temporal sense now but in the sense that part of what God knows depends on what creatures do.

Thus, God does not foreknow every future choice or the outcome of every human decision. God is all-knowing in the sense that he knows all that is possible to know and powerful enough to do whatever is needed. Under these circumstances, more power and wisdom are required for God to bring his will to pass in a world that he does not control than in one that he did control. As Gregory Boyd remarks, "It takes far more self-confidence, far more wisdom, far more love and sensitivity to govern that which is personal and free than it does to govern that over which one has absolute control." As a political aside, what would we think of those who contend that total control is praiseworthy as a mode of governance?

Conclusion

The God whom we love and worship is the living God who is metaphysically social and desires relationship with us. God is One whose ways are marked by flexibility and dynamism, who acts and reacts on behalf of his people, who does not exist in splendid isolation from a world of change, but relates to his creatures and shares life with them. God not only directs but interacts. No unmoved mover, God responds sensitively to what happens on earth and relates to us. God is the omnipotent Creator but exercises his power subtly and carefully in the world. By bringing other free agents into being and entering into their lives in love, God is open.

We are seeking to correct the tradition without overcorrecting the error. God is high above all yet fills all things. God is unchanging yet relates to us in a changing world. God cannot be perplexed but suffers with his people. God's power is limitless but is deployed in ways that may appear weak. God is not subject to change or decay but can relate to temporal passage. God knows everything but is still learning what the world is becoming.

The open view of God stresses qualities of generosity, sensitivity and vulnerability more than power and control. It allows us to think of God as taking risks. Instead of locating God above and beyond history, it stresses God's activity in history, responding to events as they happen, in order to accomplish his purposes. Rather than deciding the future all by himself, God made creatures with the capacity to surprise and delight him. Like a loving parent, he rejoices with them when they are happy and suffers with them when they are in pain. In and through everything, God is committed to their welfare and continually works to achieve what is best for them.

The picture of God that I receive from the Bible is of One who takes risks and jeopardizes his own sovereignty in order to engage in historical interactions with created reality. The triune God pursues this path out of the love that is fundamental to his very being. This does not make history the author of God. It portrays God as the author of history who delights in meaningful interaction with creatures as his purposes for the world are realized.