that Christ's crucifixion was predestined. Those who freely carried out this deed carried out what God "had predestined to take place," but they were not individually predestined to act in a certain way. God could have easily used other people to carry out his predestined plan.

In a similar fashion, the New Testament sometimes refers to the church as being predestined by God (Eph. 1:4–5, 11; 2 Tim. 1:9). This does not mean that the individuals who comprise the church were predestined to believe (while others were predestined not to believe). God wants everyone to believe in Christ and be saved (2 Peter 3:9). Rather, it means that God decided ahead of time that he would have a group of people ("the church") who would believe in him. Whether an individual becomes part of this predestined group is up to him or her.

Calvinists sometimes argue that God cannot control anything if he does not control everything. God could not have ensured that Christ would be crucified, for example, unless he could ensure that certain individuals would carry out the crucifixion. The argument does not work, however. God can foreknow the decisions of people without determining them. He can, therefore, determine that an event take place without determining who will carry out the event.

Further Reading


The Center and Its Contrasts

Christians have always agreed that God is omniscient (all-knowing). And though some do not believe the future is entirely settled in God's mind, all have always agreed that God knows "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10). The future is not a "wide open sea" to him. The ship has a captain, and the captain has a map.

This view agrees with what Jews, Muslims, and most other theists believe about God, but it contrasts sharply with what many other non-Christians believe. Many today believe that the future is entirely up to them. Humans have the sole power and sole responsibility to determine the future for themselves and for life on the earth. Secular humanists are an example of people who hold this view. Others believe in fate. "Whatever will be will be." Some of these people think that the future is settled on the grounds that everything is physically determined. These people are usually identified as materialists, for they believe that every event, including human actions, is the result of material cause and effect. Hence, the last event of the universe was already determined by the first cause, if there was one. Others today believe that fate is the result of spiritual laws that have always been in operation. For example, some Eastern teachers and advocates of New Age philosophies think that every event is part of one single, timeless, divine reality. Nothing could be different than it is. This view is often labeled monism.

The Christian view disagrees with these beliefs. Christians hold that humans are responsible for their actions but deny that the future is entirely up to humans to settle. God knows where history is leading, but he does not know this because everything is determined by physical laws, nor because everything is part of one timeless, divine reality. He knows it because he is the sovereign Lord and Creator of the world.

Most Christians throughout history have believed that God knows everything that is to come. This is often referred to as the classical view of divine foreknowledge, and it is still what the majority of evangelicals believe. There are many variations within the classical view. For example, some believe that God foreknows all that shall come to pass because he has predestined it (Calvinists), while others believe he foreknows it simply because it shall come to pass, though humans to some extent determine it (Arminians). Some affirm that God knows not only what will happen but what would have happened under different circumstances. Others deny this. But all who hold to the classical view agree that God knows all that shall come to pass.

Some have questioned this belief on both biblical and philosophical grounds, however. They believe that while God knows the broad outlines of world history as well as whatever he has predestined to take place, some of the future is left open for humans to decide with their free will. This theology, which has recently been labeled the open view of God, had few representatives in church history but became more prevalent in the nineteenth century. Today an increasing number of evangelicals have embraced it, making the debate over foreknowledge one of the liveliest debates within evangelicalism.

The two essays that follow present arguments in favor of the classical view and the open view of divine foreknowledge.

God Foreknows All That Shall Come to Pass
(The Classical View)

With very few exceptions, Christians throughout history have affirmed that God possesses eternal and exhaustive foreknowledge of all that shall come to pass. They have disputed how God possesses this knowledge—Calvinists hold that it is due to God's predestinating will, while Arminians hold that it is simply due to his eternal perspective—but all have agreed that God knows all that shall come to pass, including the decisions of free agents. The best explanation for this virtually unanimous agreement is that the Bible clearly teaches this doctrine.

The Biblical Argument

Undoubtedly, the strongest statements in all of Scripture regarding the foreknowledge of God come from Isaiah. Here the Lord repeatedly demonstrates that he is the Lord of history and distinct from the idols many Jews were tempted to follow by showing that he can do what none of them can do—namely, declare the future. In Isaiah 46:3–5 we read:

The former things I declared long ago,  
they went out from my mouth and I made them known;  
them suddenly I did them and they came to pass.  
Because I know that you are obstinate,  
and your neck is an iron sinew  
and your forehead brass,  
I declared them to you from long ago,  
before they came to pass I announced them to you,  
so that you would say, "My idol did them,  
my carved image and my cast image commanded them."

Isaiah 46:9–10 is even more emphatic.

For I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is no one like me,  
declaring the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done.

If God can declare "the end from the beginning," one wonders what could possibly be uncertain to him. This ability of God, we should note, is one of the attributes that sets him apart from false gods. This alone is enough to demonstrate that any view that denies God the ability to know the whole of the future is misguided.
common criminal but buried in the wealthy tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea (Matt. 27:57–60). Several times Jesus also foretold what would happen to him throughout his own ministry. He would suffer “at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt. 16:21; cf. 20:17–19). When this actually happened, Scripture says it was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

Open theists at times challenge the foreknowledge of Christ’s crucifixion by claiming that God foreordained and foreknew that Jesus would be crucified without foreordaining or foreknowing who specifically would do it. But consider the vast number of free decisions that were involved in the crucifixion of Christ. Had any of the people involved chosen differently, the entire event might have turned out differently, thus thwarting God’s plan. Life is such an interwoven tapestry that for God to have certainty about anything in the future, he must have certainty about everything.

Scripture also demonstrates that God foreknew who his “elect” will be. Paul teaches that “those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). In Ephesians, he tells believers that “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (1:4). Believers were given grace “in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9). If they were “chosen” and “given grace” before the world began, God must also have foreknown before the world began that they would believe. This is contrary to the open view.

Finally, we must mention end-time prophecies in the Bible. While too much is made of these on a popular level, it cannot be denied that scriptural authors made predictions about things that shall take place at the end of history. For example, Paul says that “in future times some will denounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” Among other things, these people will “forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods” (1 Tim. 4:1, 3). He also informs his readers at Thessalonica that before the final day, a great “rebellion” will come and a certain “lawless one” will “[suet] himself above every so-called god or object of worship” and will “[take] his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God” (2 Thess. 2:3–4).

Supporting Arguments

1. Foreknowledge is implied in omniscience. If God is omniscient, he knows all true propositions as true and all false propositions as false. Future propositions are either true or false. For example, it is either true or false that Hillary Clinton will be elected in the 2008 presidential election. Hence, God knows whether the sentence “Hillary Clinton will be elected president in 2008” is true or false. To deny that God knows the truth value of this proposition is to deny God’s omniscience.

2. Foreknowledge is implied in divine sovereignty. If God faces an open future, he cannot guarantee that his will shall be accomplished in any given instance
or for world history as a whole. Yet the Bible clearly asserts that God can guarantee the accomplishment of his will (Job 42:5; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11). Only a God who knows with certainty all that the future shall bring can remain sovereign over creation.

3. The believer’s confidence depends on foreknowledge. If God does not know some of what the future may bring, then believers cannot have the assurance that God has a purpose for their lives. Tragedies may occur that God did not specifically ordain or allow, for he did not even know for certain that they would come about. Against such a notion, Scripture encourages believers to look for the hand of God in the midst of their suffering (Exod. 4:11; Heb. 12:3–13). Consequently, Christians throughout the ages have found comfort in the awareness that nothing can come their way that God does not foreknow and allow. The open view undermines this confidence.

Responding to Objections

1. Scripture does not teach exhaustive foreknowledge. Open theists object to the classical view, stating that none of the passages classical theologists cite in support of their view explicitly say that God foreknows all that shall come to pass.

Two considerations refute this objection, however. First, the Lord specifies in Isaiah that he declares “the end from the beginning.” It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this concept encompasses the whole of the future. Second, as we have already argued, it is difficult to see how God could foreknow what he says he foreknows in Scripture without foreknowing everything. The world is an interwoven tapestry of decisions. To know with certainty any part of it is to know with certainty the whole of it.

2. Scripture teaches an open future. Open theists argue that while some passages show that God foreknows the future as settled, other passages suggest that the future is purely open. They point out, for example, that God speaks about the future in conditional terms (“if,” “perhaps,” “maybe”), that he sometimes regret decisions he’s made, that he expresses surprise or disappointment over what happens, that he “tests” his covenant partners to find out what is in their hearts, and that he sometimes changes his mind in response to new circumstances.

These passages require that the future is partly open only if we take them literally. As classical theologists (e.g., Augustine, Calvin) have always argued, however, there is no reason we should take these passages literally. The Bible often depicts God in human terms (anthropomorphism) and/or describes him as he appears to us (phenomenologically; see phenomenology), not as he truly is. If we were to take these anthropomorphic or phenomenological concepts literally, we would have to conclude not only that God does not know the future perfectly but also that God does not know the present perfectly. Several times the Bible depicts God as needing to “go down” to a city (e.g., Sodom and Gomorrah) to find out what is going on (Gen. 11:7; 18:20–21). Indeed, we would have to conclude that God literally “remembers” (Gen. 8:1)

and has eyes (2 Chron. 16:9) and arms (Ps. 44:3). Open theists, of course, do not want to go too far with their literal reading of the Bible, but their hesitancy undermines their literalistic reading of the "openness passages."

3. Foreknown decisions cannot be free. Finally, open theists argue that if God foreknows our decisions before the creation of the world, our decisions cannot be free. For decisions to be free, they argue, a person must be self-determining. That is, the self—nothing else (including God)—must be the ultimate decider between options. According to open theists, if the certainty of what a person shall choose eternally precedes his choosing, then the person is not deciding for himself—which option to choose.

Some classical theists (Calvinists) concede the open theists’ point that exhaustive divine foreknowledge rules out self-determination. Rather than deny exhaustive foreknowledge, they deny self-determining freedom. Other classical theists (Arminians) reject the open theists’ argument and insist that exhaustive divine foreknowledge is compatible with self-determination. Knowing something and determining it are two different things, they argue. God knows what I shall freely do, but this does not mean that he determines what I do.

God Knows All That Shall Be and All That May Be (The Open View)

The Biblical Argument

The classical view of God’s foreknowledge is that God foreknows everything that shall ever come to pass, including future free decisions. By contrast, the open view holds that some of what shall eventually come to pass is not yet settled, so God knows it as unsettled. The open view affirms that God is omniscient (knows everything) but disagrees with the classical view over what there is for God to know. The debate thus boils down to one question: Is the future partly open (as the open view holds), or is it eternally and exhaustively settled (as the classical view holds)?

The primary reason open theists deny that the future is eternally and exhaustively settled is because they do not see this view taught in Scripture. Since the only one who knows the nature of the future is God, we must pay close attention to the way God speaks about the future in Scripture. Open theists concede that God sometimes predetermines and/or predicts aspects of the future (Isa. 46:11; 48:3–5). The future is partly settled, either by God’s will or as a consequence of present circumstances. This is a crucial aspect of God’s involvement in human history. But it is not the only aspect. We must just as seriously consider passages in which God speaks about the future as unsettled.

For example, the Lord often speaks about the future in terms of what may or may not occur. Since God speaks truthfully, this is a sure indication that the future is to some degree a "maybe." To illustrate, the Lord told Moses that the leaders of Israel may believe that he sent Moses after the first or second or third
it could not have been a settled fact that the Lord would not find an interces-
sor before he went about searching for one. And if it is not a settled fact for
God, it is not a settled fact in reality, for God knows reality perfectly. Thus,
open theists conclude that the future must be partly composed of possibilities,
not just settled facts.

Further, Scripture describes God as testing people to find out what they will
do (e.g., Gen. 22:12; Deut. 8:22; 13:1–3; Judg. 3:4; 2 Chron. 32:31).
Moreover, God frequently changes his mind in response to new circum-
stances or the prayers of his people (Exod. 32:14; Num. 11:1–2; 14:12–20; 16:20–35,
41–48; Deut. 9:13–14, 18–20; Judg. 10:13–16; 2 Sam. 24:17–25; 1 Kings
Indeed, God’s willingness to adjust his plans in the light of new circum-
stances is described as one of God’s attributes of greatness (Joel 2:12–13; Jonah 4:2).

In the light of the biblical evidence, open theists conclude that while much of
the future is settled ahead of time, some of it is not. God alone knows
the nature of the future with certainty, and as shown, he often speaks about it in
ways that suggest it is partly open.

Supporting Arguments

1. The nature of freedom. How can we be free and morally responsible for
what we do if our future has been settled in God’s mind from all eternity, as
the classical view teaches? No one holds that we are morally responsible for
events that occurred before we were born, for we have no power to influence
the past, and we cannot be morally responsible for events we cannot influence.
If God has known from all eternity everything I shall do in the future, however,
then the fact that I shall choose something in the future is actually part of the
settled past! Indeed, my decisions have been settled in the mind of God at every
moment in the past. Hence, it seems I can exercise no more power over a pres-
ent decision than I can over any past fact. And from this it follows that I can be
no more free or morally responsible regarding my future decisions than I am
about events that took place before I was born.

Conversely, if people believe they are free to determine their futures, and if
they believe they are morally responsible for how they determine their futures,
they should reject the doctrine that every detail of their futures has been set-
tled in God’s mind an eternity before they were born.

2. The problem of evil. Why would God create beings such as Satan and
Adolf Hitler if he was certain they would turn out as evil as they did? And
why does God create people he knows will go to hell if he is truly all-loving,
and does not want anyone to perish (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; John 3:16;
1 Tim. 2:4; 6:10; 2 Peter 3:9)? We can easily understand why God must allow
free agents to do evil and eventually go to hell once he gives them free will, for
to revoke a gift once given is dishonorable. But why give the gift in the first

44
place if God were certain ahead of time that the agents would do what they did and end up suffering eternally?

3. The urgency of prayer. Because the future is not exhaustively settled, prayer and godly living are extremely important. We are not just waiting for the future to be revealed. We are helping determine what the future will be. Indeed, the open view allows us to affirm the scriptural teaching that prayer can change God’s mind and affect what happens in the world (e.g., Exod. 32:14; Num. 11:1–2; 2 Kings 20:1–6; Jer. 18:7–10; 26:2–3, 19). Prayer is part of our moral responsibility, for the welfare of individuals and even nations hangs in the balance as to whether we choose to pray (e.g., Ezek. 22:20–31).

4. Practical living. The open view of the future is the most plausible view because it squares with everyday life. Whatever philosophy we might embrace, we all live as though the open view were true. With every decision we make we assume that much of our immediate future is unsettled (e.g., we take for granted the ongoing reality of our world and the laws of physics) but that some of it is up to us to decide. How could we deliberate between choices in a way that would illustrate the conviction that the choice is already settled? It is impossible. Rather, every act of deliberation reveals a fundamental conviction that our future is at least partly up to us to determine. The open view simply says that this commonsense perspective is accurate.

Responding to Objections

1. The open view denies omniscience. It is often argued that the open view denies the omniscience of God. This is a misunderstanding. With classical theists, open theists affirm that God knows the truth or falsity of all true or false propositions. But against much of the classical tradition, open theists usually hold that the truth value of propositions about unsettled realities is unsettled. For example, if it is not yet a settled reality that Hillary Clinton will be elected president in 2008, then there is no definite truth value that can be assigned to the proposition “Hillary Clinton will be elected president in 2008.” Hence, denying that God knows for certain whether Hillary will be elected president in 2008 in no way undermines God’s omniscience. God knows it is a “maybe” for it is a “maybe” (unless, of course, God has decided to predetermine the matter one way or another).

2. God cannot foreknow only some of the future. It is often argued that for God to be certain of anything about the future, he must be certain of everything about the future. This is an unfounded assumption. Sociologists, biologists, advertisers, and insurance agents accurately predict group behavior without predicting what specific individuals are going to do. Indeed, a great deal of contemporary science tells us that all of reality is structured as an interplay between determinism and spontaneity. For example, quantum physicists tell us that the predictable structure of all solid objects is statistical, for we cannot predict precisely the behavior of any of their subatomic constituents. Similarly, chaos theory tells us that all order in creation involves an element of disorder (chaos, randomness, unpredictability), and vice versa. Our own experience reveals that we assume with every decision we make that some of the future is settled while some of it is unsettled, left up to us to decide. In short, scientifically and experientially we know that the assumption that everything is certain if anything is uncertain is incorrect.

In this light, we should conclude that the sovereign God would be able to foreordain and foreknow that Jesus will be crucified, for example, without having to foreordain or foreknow exactly who would carry this out (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). And he is able to foreordain and foreknow that he will have a church without foreordaining and foreknowing who would or would not be in this church (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4–5).

3. The open view undermines divine truth. Some object to the open view, stating that it undermines believers’ confidence in God. It is true that according to the open view people cannot assume that everything that happens to them was specifically allowed or ordained for a divine reason, but there is an advantage to this view. When a person’s daughter has been brutally raped and murdered, reassuring her that it happened for a higher divine reason may not be very comforting. The open view is able to offer believers the same comfort the classical view offers. We do not have to hold that God foreknew and specifically allowed a tragedy to occur in order to affirm that suffering is not meaningless, for God can bring good out of evil (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). Nor do we need to hold to the classical view of foreknowledge for assurance that God wins in the end and that all our sufferings will have been worth it (Rom. 8:18–21).

4. The openness passages are anthropomorphic. The most important objection against the open view is that the passages open theists use to support their view are actually anthropomorphic. The case for the classical view, against the open view, largely hangs on this argument. There are four reasons open theists remain unconvinced.

First, nothing in any of these passages suggests that they are anthropomorphic. None of the texts suggests that it is as though God changes his mind, regrets previous decisions, is surprised or disappointed, and so on. Rather, they teach in a straightforward manner that God “may change [his] mind” (Jer. 26:3), regrets previous decisions, and so on. If these passages were not meant to be taken in a straightforward manner, what would passages that did teach this in a straightforward manner say? If God cannot convince us by explicitly saying he can and does change his mind, experience regret, and so on, how could he convince us if he wanted to?

Second, nothing in Scripture requires or even warrants that we interpret all passages that depict a partly open future as anthropomorphic. Scripture describes God’s character as unchanging (Mal. 3:6), but it never teaches that God is unable to change in any respect (e.g., his intentions, experiences). It teaches that the future is settled to the extent God wills it, but it never teaches that the future is exhaustively settled. And it teaches that God sometimes chooses
not to change his mind (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14) but never that he cannot change his mind.

Third, the passages cited in support of the open view do not readily lend themselves to an anthropomorphic interpretation. As with all figures of speech, anthropomorphisms must connect with reality at some point if they are to communicate anything truthful. Expressions such as "the hand of God" or "the eyes of the Lord," for example, communicate something true about God's strength and knowledge. But what does the concept of God changing his mind communicate if indeed it is merely an anthropomorphism? If God in fact never changes his mind, saying he does so does not communicate anything truthful. It is simply inaccurate. This observation is especially important when we recall several passages that expressly encourage us to think of God as being capable of changing his mind (Jer. 18:1–10; 26:2–3, 13) and depict God's willingness to change as one of his praiseworthy attributes (Job 2:13–14; Jonah 4:2).

Finally, we cannot interpret openness passages as anthropomorphisms without undermining the integrity of Scripture. For example, Scripture says that because of Moses' intercession, "the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Exod. 32:14, emphasis added; cf. Deut. 9:13–14, 18–20, 25; Ps. 106:23). If the Lord did not really change his mind, then neither did he really plan to bring disaster on his people. Scripture thus misleads us when it explicitly tells us what the Lord was planning before he changed his mind. Similarly, 1 Chronicles 21:15 tells us that the Lord in righteous anger dispatched "an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it" (emphasis added). But "when he was about to destroy it, the Lord . . . relented." If God never really changes his mind, the explanation Scripture explicitly offers as to why the Lord sent the angel cannot be correct, for God never really intended to destroy Jerusalem.

In conclusion, while expressions such as "the right hand of God" are rightly considered anthropomorphisms to preserve the integrity of Scripture, interpreting the portrayals of God facing an open future in this fashion has the opposite effect. Out of fidelity to Scripture, open theists argue, we must abandon the classical interpretation and affirm that God faces a future that is partly open.

Further Reading


