

# How to Teach Open Theism at Vacation Bible School:

Three Ways the Evangelical Church Could Lose the Doctrine of God

by Russell D. Moore

Will the next generation of evangelicals believe in God? This seems like a ridiculous question. After all, our evangelistic tracts begin by announcing that God loves the sinner, and has a wonderful plan for his life. Our evangelistic programs train us to ask others what they would say to God should He ask them why He should allow them into His heaven. Our discipleship materials offer to help us in the task of “Experiencing God.” Our theologians have contended against Protestant liberalism for the Bible as the very Word of God.

Some current rumblings in evangelicalism suggest, however, that the above question is not quite as baseless as it may appear. A new and growing cadre of evangelical theologians, is suggesting that the traditional view of God comes not from Scripture, but from repackaged Greek philosophy. The God of the Bible, they suggest, does not have exhaustive foreknowledge of the future, because the future does not exist to be known. God does not order all the events of history according to the outworking of His eternal plan, they argue. Such a “meticulous blueprint” model would render God responsible for sin and tragedy. Instead, some propose, God is locked in a cosmic battle with other “gods,” and He loses a battle here and there.<sup>1</sup> These “open theists” propose that God gains new information, changes His mind, and even wishes He had done some things differently. They say the Bible tells them so.

Initially, this debate was restricted to breakout sessions at the Evangelical Theological Society, or to competing paperbacks from InterVarsity Press. In recent years, however, the controversy over the knowledge and power of God has spilled over into controversy at the annual meetings of some evangelical denominations. Could it be that the local congregation will be the next great battleground over the doctrine of God? If so, will evangelicals be able to preserve biblical theism in our churches?

The “battle for the Bible,” after all, took many evangelicals by surprise. With biblical inerrancy once a near-consensus among evangelicals of all confessional traditions, many now lament half-jokingly that it is easier to find a creationist at Berkeley than an inerrantist at Fuller Seminary. Might it be that the future will see an entire wing of evangelical churches teaching that God changes His mind, that He can be wrong about the future, or that He stands practically helpless in the face of gratuitous evil? As evangelicals face the openness of God, there are at least three dangerous temptations, any one of which could imperil biblical theism in our congregations.

## ***1. Frame the openness of God debate as one of evangelicalism’s intramural discussions.***

A recent editorial in *Christianity Today* served as a warning signal to many biblical theists about parachurch evangelicalism’s openness to open theism. The *CT* editorial laid out the differing viewpoints provided by classical and open theism, along with the strengths and weaknesses of both, before concluding that both sides are responsible to present their respective cases with tough exegetical arguments. “Now, let’s go do our homework,” the editors urged both sides.<sup>2</sup>

The editorial might have gone unnoticed. It seemed all too typical of similar admonitions to other competing evangelical theological positions- old earth versus young earth creationism, covenant theology versus dispensationalism, cessationism versus Pentecostalism. This is precisely the problem. Does *Christianity Today* really believe that a doctrine as foundational as the omniscience and omnipotence of God can be treated along the same lines as the issue of whether the Rapture takes place before or after the tribulation?<sup>3</sup>

Even more recently, *Christianity Today* editorial page chastised the Southern Baptist Convention for, among other things, explicitly affirming the exhaustive foreknowledge of God in its confession of faith, the *Baptist Faith and Message*. “Though openness theism clearly runs counter to historic Christian theology,

it draws on aspects of the biblical witness that not all mainstream theologians have integrated into their teaching,” the editorial claims. “The ongoing debate gives these teachers a chance to make their theology more fully biblical while remaining true to the tradition.”<sup>4</sup> This critique left many confessional evangelicals incredulous. After all, *CT* could just as easily have noted that the SBC should not have included the deity of Christ explicitly in its confessional statement, since the debate with the “Jesus Seminar” has a great deal to teach evangelicals about the humanity of Christ.

The postwar evangelical movement (and with it the early *Christianity Today*) did indeed allow for doctrinal diversity. Evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham, Carl F. H. Henry, E. J. Carnell, and Harold Ockenga were determined to avoid the theological shortsightedness of the older fundamentalism on such issues as millennialism and second-degree separation. Thus, they avoided making premillennialism a doctrinal test of fellowship, though most of them were indeed premillennialists. Likewise, they avoided focusing the movement on such questions as whether Christians should attend movie theaters. Similarly, the evangelical movement began with a commitment to transdenominational united evangelical action. Similarly, they were not going to divide over ecclesiological distinctives such as baptism or church government. Still, the evangelical movement began with a clear consensus on evangelical orthodoxy, including the classical doctrine of God. The knowledge, power, and changelessness of God were affirmed with unanimity in Billy Graham crusades, Fuller Seminary apologetics lectures, and *Christianity Today* editorial pages.

The suggestion that God’s knowledge or power is limited is not unknown to the evangelical tradition. Evangelical theologians such as Carl Henry, Francis Schaeffer, and E. J. Carnell actively engaged very similarly articulated arguments from Boston personalists, process philosophers, and liberation theologians. They did not see these issues as matters of minor significance. Indeed, Henry called such these ideas nothing less than the “Baalizing of God.”<sup>5</sup>

The argument has become more complicated in recent years, however, since the “open” view now comes from within. Indeed the underlying subtext of the openness of God discussion is the ongoing debate over evangelical identity. The open theists are part of a larger movement seeking to define evangelicalism in terms other than a shared commitment to orthodox theology. Clark Pinnock, the godfather of open theism, argues that what makes an individual “evangelical” is simply his decision to be one. “The identity of an evangelical theologian is defined more sociologically than precisely theologically,” he argues.<sup>6</sup> The postwar evangelical movement, however, was inherently theological. It defined itself on the basis of a clearly articulated ideological agenda, set against both the theological infidelity of Protestant liberalism and the theological reductionism of “five-point” fundamentalism.

In celebrating the “big tent,” open theists such as Pinnock have expressed sadness at traditionalist evangelicals who refer to their position as “heresy.” Clark Pinnock, for example, calls for “peaceful relations” between traditional and open theists, and expresses hurt that theologian R. C. Sproul has called the open model a departure from Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Roger Olson decries opposition to open theism as a loss of “tolerance with regard to non-essentials of the Christian faith.”<sup>8</sup> During the controversy over the issue in the Baptist General Conference, Gregory Boyd and his supporters defended his position by appealing to the denomination’s heritage of non-creedal pietism, as opposed to the confessionalism of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Do the open theists really believe that the doctrine of God is a “non-essential” issue that can be debated within the borders of a common evangelical identity? Their rhetoric betrays them here. Pinnock, for example, employs some fiery language of his own by suggesting that the debate will “force evangelicals to make a choice between the God of the Bible and the God of the Greek philosophers.”<sup>9</sup> If Pinnock believes the debate is about the worship of the true God versus a false god, then how can he ask for “peaceful relations” on this issue?

If acknowledging God’s power and wisdom is essential to worshiping God as He has revealed Himself, then evangelical churches have no room for latitude here. Evangelicals must ask themselves whether

evangelicalism means more than living in a subculture long enough to know that “Larry Boy” is a cucumber. There is abundant biblical evidence that this is dangerous territory. The Israelites learned that naming a god “Yahweh” does not make it the living God (Ex 32:8). The Old Testament prophets pointed to Yahweh’s exhaustive knowledge of future events to contrast him with the ignorance of idols that could not speak and could not save (Isa 40-45, for example). Jesus indicted the Sadducees for having an inadequate view of the power of God (Mark 12:24).

More and more open theists are demonstrating that their revisions are not simply a nip and tuck on an otherwise seamlessly evangelical theology. This battle is about more than omniscience and omnipotence, as if these were not enough. John Sanders, for instance, suggests, “God had thought Saul would be a good king, but in the end he had to turn to David.”<sup>10</sup> What does this do to God’s eternal purpose to set Jesus on the throne of David (Ps 89; Acts 2)? He also suggests that the cross was not planned from the foundation of the world, but is negotiated between Jesus and the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>11</sup> What does this do to the Old Testament sacrificial system as a pointer to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God? What does it do to the necessity of the shedding of Jesus’ blood for redemption from sin? As noted above, Greg Boyd pushes open theism to a rejection of monotheism itself as he affirms a “multiplicity of gods” able to at times thwart the will of the Creator.<sup>12</sup>

Evangelicals cannot refuse to face these questions. If evangelicals simply dismiss the open theists as quirky brethren with a slightly different view of God, the ramifications for generations to come are breathtaking. One can easily imagine an evangelical pastor before an open casket, reassuring the grieving family members that God was as shocked as they are by the fatal accident of their loved one. One can picture the cancer victim hearing the words of “comfort” that God’s will for her health was overcome by another being, a “god” intent on hurting her. Evangelicals must insist that biblical theism is indeed an “essential” not only of evangelical orthodoxy, but also for fidelity to the gospel of Christ.

## ***2. Contrast the open god with “God in general,” not the God and Father of Jesus Christ.***

Open theists have consistently complained that the classical vision of God is rehashed Greek philosophy rather than biblical revelation.<sup>13</sup> Clark Pinnock ridicules the “timeless block” of classical theism, warning that “unless the portrait of God is compelling, the credibility of belief in God is bound to decline.”<sup>14</sup>

Evangelicals must not be afraid to point out, however, that the open theists are hardly the philosophical virgins they pretend to be. “Sooner or later we will have to join modern experience,” Pinnock writes. “The fact is that we need a resource which can help us put love in the center of theology. Plato cannot help us—maybe Whitehead can.”<sup>15</sup> Despite earlier protests that traditionalists were unfairly tying open theism to the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, some open theists are now more willing than ever to discuss their dependence on process theology. “Any honest person on either side will acknowledge that we share many convictions and find much to appreciate in the other,” Pinnock writes of process theology. “The fact is that process and openness theists share important convictions.”<sup>16</sup> These commonalities are explored in a book, co-edited by Pinnock and process thinker John Cobb, disturbingly titled *Searching for an Adequate God*.

Evangelical theologians have provided strong refutations to the contention that classical theism is a Greek corruption of Hebrew thought.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, evangelical theology has never held to the static, unblinking God-concept of Greek philosophy. This is precisely because evangelicals believe in the *evangel*-God so loves the world that He gave His only begotten Son. Against the impersonal “ground of being” of theologians such as Paul Tillich, evangelicals have consistently put forward the biblical picture of the God who acts, who loves, who answers prayer, and who has spoken in Scripture. Francis Schaeffer, for instance, took on the icy deadness of existential philosophy by proclaiming to the Vietnam-era youth culture that God is there, and He is not silent.<sup>18</sup> No open theist could show more contempt for the speculative natural theology of the medieval theologians than did Carl Henry, who constantly called attention to the God who stands

and speaks and stoops and stays.

The surest way for traditionalists to lose biblical theism would be to appear to concede to the open theists the Bible's personal, living God revealed in Jesus Christ. This means traditionalists must take on the arguments of open theists exegetically, verse by verse. Demonstrating the philosophical self-contradictions of open theism is a worthy endeavor, but it must not sidetrack our commitment to the revealed truth about God in Scripture. Theologian Norman Geisler, for instance, seems to fit the caricature of a classical theist steeped in the medieval synthesis. An evangelical Thomist, Geisler builds a philosophical case for an all-knowing, all-powerful, unchanging God from the concept of *dignum deo*, what kind of God is worthy to be worshipped.<sup>19</sup> Instead of turning to Thomas Aquinas' analogy of being, evangelicals should meet open theists on the pages of Scripture to argue for, again in the words of Schaeffer, the God who is *there*.

This means that evangelical conservatives are right to speak often, as the Bible does, of the glory of God. But, we must not speak of God's glory as a bloodless abstraction. God is not Aristotle's deity, blindly contemplating His own perfection. Nor is He setting history in motion ultimately to glorify Himself merely in the redemption of some individual humans and the damnation of others. Rather, the purposes of God in creation, providence, and history focus on the glory of God *in Christ* (Eph 1:9-10; 19-23; Phil 2:11; Col 1:13-20; Rev 5:9-10). We see the glory of God most fully when we understand that He has purposed to glorify Christ Jesus as the firstborn of many brothers (Heb 2:9-18). We see the warmly relational character of God not by rejecting the attributes He has revealed about Himself, but by seeing that He loves His Son above all things, and loves us because we are in Him (John 17:24-26).

Evangelical churches know that they can trust their Bibles to tell them about God. If they (falsely) believe that open theists are the simple biblicists in this debate, the doctrine of God will be eclipsed. For instance, evangelicals know that Greg Boyd is right when he says that Bible presents a "warfare worldview." The Bible does not present evil and sin dispassionately, as simply more steps in the blueprint. Open theists such as Boyd and John Sanders skillfully paint pictures of horrifying examples of evil- a young man killed by a drunk driver, a young girl whose eyes are gouged out by Nazi soldiers in front of her watching mother. Biblical theists must not concede the complete sovereignty of God over such things, but neither must we stop seeing them as enemies of God to be destroyed (I Cor 15:26; Rom 8:19-23). As Schaeffer noted, "What Jesus did at the tomb of Lazarus sets the world on fire- it becomes a great shout into the morass of the twentieth century." Jesus' cry of anger at the abnormality of death means that the Christian "can fight evil without fighting God," Schaeffer contended.<sup>20</sup> If evangelicals are going to preserve a biblical worldview, we must simultaneously affirm the "warfare worldview" (evil and tragedy are proof that something has gone dreadfully awry) *and* the "meticulous blueprint worldview" (there is no suffering that is "meaningless"; God will triumph over evil in the end). We must not unwittingly allow classical theism to be tied to an impersonal abstraction of God or to a Stoic resignation in the face of evil. If this happens, not only will the biblical doctrine of God be endangered, it will already be gone.

### ***3. Present God as a means to the goals of Christian values and congregational mission.***

An evangelical publisher recently released a new Bible study curriculum based on *The Andy Griffith Show*. The new material allows evangelical Sunday School classes and small groups to draw the New Testament meaning from reruns of the television program. Despite the fact that most of the writers for the show were actually Jewish and so did not intentionally infuse Christian teachings into the episodes, many are enthusiastic about the prospects for Christian education. "Mayberry was a good town with good people," commented Jim Clark, founder of *The Andy Griffith Show* Rerun Watchers Club. "It's easy to find parallels with Christian teaching and the story of Mayberry."<sup>21</sup>

One will probably not find much about the omniscience or omnipotence of God in *The Andy Griffith* lessons. One will undoubtedly find little about the coming judgment and God's provision for redemption in Christ Jesus. But the materials might teach us good old-fashioned values, like the ones they

had in Mayberry. After all, isn't that what Christianity is all about? According to turn-of-the-century Social Gospel Protestant liberals, yes. According to Bible-believing evangelicals, no.

Philosopher Francis Fukuyama suggests that American religion is often less a truth claim about God than a strategy to enforce the values of the community. "Religion is frequently not so much the product of dogmatic belief as it is the provider of a convenient language that allows communities to express moral beliefs that they would hold on entirely secular grounds," he writes.<sup>22</sup> In this Fukuyama is consistent with an entire lineage of Christianity's cultured despisers. Christians do not really believe that their God-talk is objectively true, they say, but the idea of an all-glorious, all-seeing God of love and judgment keeps the morals and manners of the masses in check.

Many evangelicals would have a hard time proving Fukuyama wrong. Try to find a children's Sunday School lesson on the conquest of Canaan, the destruction of Sodom, or the sinlessness of Christ. Generations past catechized their children on the entire sweep of the biblical record, including the attributes of God. A father might teach his daughter, for example to memorize the answer to the question, "Can God do all things?" Her answer would be, "Yes. God can do all His holy will."<sup>23</sup> This was because the father believed it was important that she understand what God had revealed about Himself. Knowing God was a worthy goal, not simply a means to an end.

Today's Sunday School and Bible study lessons, for adults as well as for children, often seem to use God as a prop for what is seen as the higher pursuit of "Christian values." The story of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes is taught not primarily as highlighting the identity of Jesus, but as a lesson on sharing. The calling of the twelve apostles is not communicated as Christ sending forth His appointed messengers to the ends of the earth with the gospel of grace. Rather it is reduced to a moral example, "Jesus had friends."

There is much in Scripture about Christian morality and life in the Spirit. But this behavior is contingent upon the people of God knowing the attributes of their God. Solomon understood that God's command for Israel to reflect righteousness and justice was "so all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God: there is none else" (I Kin 8:60). Likewise, the New Testament asserts that the makeup of the church dramatically pictures to the watching world the moral attributes of the God who called the assembly together by His Spirit (I Pet 2:9-12).

Too often in our preaching and teaching, we fail to communicate to our people the preciousness of knowing the God who has redeemed us in Christ. Instead, we seem to refer to Him in order to move on to the "more important" priorities of seeing our children share their Play-Doh, our teenagers sign their "True Love Waits" cards, and our adults support the building fund.

If we reduce God to a means to these ends, then His sovereignty and wisdom are negotiable after all. If we market the biblical God merely as the answer to life's questions, then the day may come when the "open god" answers a few questions of his own. The open view might seem psychologically beneficial to the grieving divorcee. "Free will theism" might seem to answer the questions the visiting college student keeps asking. We might move on to build the new "Family Life Center" and start the new divorce recovery workshop, but we will no longer believe in God.

### *Conclusion*

There is great reason for optimism in the midst of the openness of God debate. The Southern Baptist Convention has added exhaustive foreknowledge to its confession of faith, without so much as one voice of dissent from the convention floor. Even as the Baptist General Conference failed to adopt a similar plank, it revealed that it has some very capable defenders of classical theism in John Piper, Justin Taylor, and the concerned pastors of the Edgren Fellowship. Evangelical theologians such as Millard Erickson, Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, and R. Albert Mohler continue the evangelical tradition of setting forth a compelling biblical vision of an all-knowing, all-powerful, unchangeable God.

Still, evangelical theology is ultimately not about denominational floor votes or theological arguments. It is about Vacation Bible School. It is about the health of our churches and the heritage we pass on to the next generation. Evangelicals have long had a consensus on the doctrine of the almighty, all-knowing Triune God. Open theism might seem to be a temporary theological fad for evangelicals on their way out the door, and it very well may be. But, it might also be a harbinger of great downgrade in our evangelical churches. Not only must we take it seriously and engage it biblically. We must also build congregations that are energized by the God-focused words of our risen King: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> “God vs. God,” *Christianity Today*, 7 February 2000, 34-5.

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of the *Christianity Today* editorial, see Thomas R. Schreiner, “Editorial: Sovereignty, Suffering, and Open Theism,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 4 (Summer 2000), 2-4.

<sup>4</sup> “Do Good Fences Make Good Baptists?” *Christianity Today*, 7 August 2000, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 6 (reprint, Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 74.

<sup>6</sup> Clark Pinnock, “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future: An Ancient and a Future Paradigm,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33 (Fall 1998), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Clark Pinnock, “A Pilgrim on the Way,” *Christianity Today*, 9 February 1998, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Olson, “The Irenic Evangelicalism Personified in the Late Dr. Carl Lundquist is in Danger of Being Replaced” at [www.bgc.bethel.edu/4know/irenic.htm](http://www.bgc.bethel.edu/4know/irenic.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Pinnock, “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future,” 26.

<sup>10</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 119.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-6.

<sup>12</sup> Boyd writes “the birth and rapid growth of Christianity on Jewish soil becomes intelligible only when we free ourselves from the standard caricature of ‘pure monotheism’ as entailing the belief that no other gods exist. That Jesus could from the start be portrayed in terms of deity and worshiped in some sense alongside God the Father demonstrates how flexible the Jewish monotheism of the time was.” *God at War*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Roger Olson, “Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy? A Forum on Free-Will Theism, a New Paradigm for Understanding God,” *Christianity Today*, 9 January 1995, 30-32.

<sup>14</sup> Clark Pinnock, et al, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 101.

<sup>15</sup> Pinnock, “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future,” 27.

<sup>16</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, “Introduction” 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), ix.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Richard A. Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983), 22-40, and Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1, *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill. Crossway, 1985), 275-354.

<sup>19</sup> Norman Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man: The New 'Open' View of God- Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>21</sup> Corrie Cutrer, "What Would Andy Do?" *Christianity Today*, 4 September 2000, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "How to Re-Moralize America," *Wilson Quarterly* 23 (Summer 1999), 44.

<sup>23</sup> See the "Catechism for Boys and Girls," in Tom J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life* (Amityville, N. Y.: Calvary Press, 1998), 86.