



The Foreknowledge of God Part 1

A Critique of Dr. Greg Boyd's Open Theism

by Bob DeWaay

“Remember the former things long past, 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 which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’” (Isaiah 46:9)

“[A]lso we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.” (Ephesians 1:11)

In recent years, some evangelicals have rekindled an old controversy by asserting that God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge. That is to say that He does not know everything that is going to happen. Jonathan Edwards devoted many pages of his famous 1754 book, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* (commonly known as *Freedom of the Will* for obvious reasons). Edwards wrote:

First, I am to prove, that God has an absolute and certain foreknowledge of the free actions of moral agents. One would think it should be wholly needless to enter on such an argument with any that profess themselves Christians: but so it is, God's certain foreknowledge of the free acts of moral agents is denied by some that pretend to believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God; especially of late.^[i]

This was the situation in Edwards' day, and his work on this issue is profound and timeless. He supplies page after page of Scriptural proof that God foreknows the future choices of free moral agents.^[ii]

In this article I shall respond to a challenge issued in the book *God of the Possible* by Gregory A. Boyd. He writes: “What is particularly sad about the current state of this debate is that Scripture seems to be playing a small role in it. Most published criticisms raised against the open view have largely ignored the biblical grounds on which open theists base their position.”^[iii] If it is so that published criticisms do not interact with the specific Scriptures put forth to support the “open” position, then I shall make a contribution toward rectifying this. In this essay I will interact with several of Dr. Boyd's key proof texts, though space does not permit dealing with all of them. I shall show that the passages cited, if taken in their Biblical context, do not prove Dr. Boyd's assertion that God lacks knowledge of some of the future.

Defining the Open View

Evangelicals like Dr. Boyd calling themselves “free will theists” or their view “the open view of God” assert that God does not know all of the future. Typically, the specific

aspect of the future supposedly unknown by God is the future choices of free moral agents. This was the claim being made in Edwards' day, and was commonly called Socinianism.^[iv] Dr. Boyd makes this same claim.^[v] He asserts that a limitation on God's foreknowledge does not detract from God's omniscience, since God knows everything that is "knowable." However, the future choices of free moral agents are by nature not knowable. He writes: "So God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions."^[vi] This is in keeping with the claims of others who have denied God's exhaustive foreknowledge.

In his latest book, Dr. Boyd states his position this way: "God determines whatever he sees fit and leaves as much of the future open to possibilities as he sees fit. The God of the possible creates the 'Choose Your Own Adventure' structure of world history and of our lives within which the possibilities of human free choice are actualized."^[vii] He states this position again in another section of his book: "God predestines and foreknows as settled whatever he sees fit to predestine and foreknow as settled."^[viii] In this view, some of the future is predetermined and some of it is not. I, for one, cannot understand how God can decide what aspect of the future He chooses to foreknow unless the future is already laid open before His eyes (in which case all is foreknown). I will leave that conundrum for others to grapple with. According to the "open" view, future choices of free moral agents are in the category of being unknowable to God and not determined by God.^[ix] The rest of this article will examine some of the texts that are used to support the open view of God.

WHEN GOD EXPRESSES REGRET

In order for us to determine whether or not God's regret is due to a lack of knowledge about the future we shall look at two passages where He does express regret. The first is **Genesis 6:6**: "*And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.*" This grief was due to mankind's continual wickedness (**Genesis 6:5**). Dr. Boyd sees this as evidence that God did not foreknow this situation: "Doesn't the fact that God regretted the way things turned out — to the point of starting over — suggest that is *wasn't* a foregone conclusion at the time God created human beings that they would fall into this state of wickedness?"^[x]

There are two important points to be discussed here: 1) Did God foreknow the wickedness and rebellion of mankind, and 2) Does this language of regret require that God could not have foreknown? On the first point, we need only refer to the fact that the Scriptures teach a plan of salvation that is eternal as proof that God foreknew human rebellion. For example: "*And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain*" (**Revelation 13:8**). Whether the phrase "from the foundation of the world" modifies the names written in the book or the lamb who was slain (see KJV), the passage still shows that the need for a savior was foreknown before mankind rebelled. Other passages express the same thought (**1Peter 1:20**; **Hebrews: 4:3**; et. al.). Concerning the **Genesis 6:6** passage, it could be argued that God did not know things would get as bad as they did (which is doubtful) but it cannot be said that God did not know the human race would rebel and fall into sin.

On the second point, the language used in **Genesis 6:6** is completely understandable without assuming a lack of foreknowledge on God's part. Allow me to make an analogy. Suppose a man has a teenage son who is prone to wildness and indiscretion. This son desires a sports car. The father warns him saying, "Son, you are only going to get into trouble; you will get tickets and will probably wreck the car, injure yourself and injure others." Yet the son persists and is unrelenting in his demands for the car. Finally the son has nagged his dad for the car for an entire year and has reached age 17. The father, against his better judgment yet feeling the son needs to learn his own lessons in life, buys the car for him. Sure enough, the young man gets tickets and eventually gets into a serious accident with multiple injuries. The father, visiting him in the hospital says, "Son, I regret that I bought you that car."

In this case, the father's regret does not indicate a lack of foreknowledge about what would happen. He was quite sure of what would happen but still had reasons for buying the car for his son. In God's case the difference is that His foreknowledge is absolute, while that of the earthly father is merely a very strong assumption based on present knowledge. However, the point of the analogy is that expressions of regret, as human languages are commonly used, do not always imply a lack of foreknowledge. We regret many things that are very much predictable or even inevitable.^[xi] So why do we assume God cannot regret what He foreknows will happen? Such an assumption is contrary to Biblical teaching: "*And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind*" (**1Samuel 15:29**). It is also contrary to the ordinary use of language.

Greg Boyd's next example is that of Saul's kingship. Ironically, the verses he cites come from the same chapter (**1Samuel 15**) that teaches God does not change His mind. The key text is **1Samuel 15:11**: "*I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands.*" Dr. Boyd explains why he thinks this is important:

"Could God genuinely confess, 'I regret that I made Saul king' if he could in the same breath also proclaim, 'I was certain of what Saul would do when I made him king'? I do not see how." There is even stronger evidence in this case that God's regret does not imply a lack of foreknowledge. **God predicted Saul's wickedness before he became king!**

In **1Samuel 8**, the people of Israel, having bad motives, demanded a king. God told Samuel they had rejected God in their demand for a king (**1Samuel 8:7**). God told Samuel this: "*Now then, listen to their voice; however, you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them*" (**1Samuel 8:9**). Then verses 11-17 predict the king's abusive behavior. That the king would be so evil that the people would want to be rid of him is also predicted: "*Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day*" (**1Samuel 8:18**). God knew what Saul would be like yet gave him to Israel partially in order to bring judgment upon her for rejecting God.^[xii]

Since the Bible predicts Saul's evil, self-centered ways, this example actually serves as a clarification for other passages where God expresses regret. God knew that the king Israel received would be evil, yet He regretted making Saul king. How does this make sense? The apparent problem is resolved with the simple fact that God had a greater purpose in mind in the larger scheme of things. Yet God's holy nature is such that He

cannot but abhor evil. Therefore God expresses genuine regret. God knew what Saul would do, could have stopped it, but chose not to in order to accomplish a greater good in the long term. Part of this greater good was the calling and anointing of David in the midst of Saul's wicked reign. A Messianic plan existed from all eternity, and it included a king that would arise from Israel. Yet on the scene of history it was Israel's rebellion that first brought about a monarchy.

This is a key point, so further clarification is in order. Consider the outcome of God's Messianic purposes: “[T]his Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.” (Acts 2:23,24). The act of rejecting and killing Messiah was morally reprehensible and thus repugnant to God's holy nature. Yet it happened by God's plan and foreknowledge. So it must be possible for God to will in one sense (His eternal purposes) what is against His will in another. [\[xiii\]](#) God grieves over the moral wickedness that led to the crucifixion of Messiah, yet He willed it from all eternity.

This explanation of God's expressions of regret is far more Biblical. It takes into account the whole counsel of God rather than assume that God cannot have foreknown whatever He regrets. This is just as it was with Saul — God knew Saul would do what was against His moral will (compare **Deuteronomy 17:14-17** and **1Samuel 8:13-18**), yet He had righteous and holy purposes for giving Saul to Israel as her first king, nevertheless. Even the fact that the people would demand a king was predicted in **Deuteronomy 17:14**, which was a free moral choice foreknown by God.

Conclusion to Part 1

The evidence that we have examined thus far indicates that Open Theism is a philosophical position that appeals to some people for various reasons, but it is a position not derived from careful Biblical exegesis. What we know certainly about God is known because God chose to reveal it to use through inerrant Scripture. In part two of this series we shall continue to examine various passages cited by Dr. Boyd in support of Open Theism and see if any of them lead to the conclusion that God lacks comprehensive knowledge of the future. If they do not, then we must reject Open Theism and build our theology on what the Bible does tell us about God.

End Notes Part 1

[\[i\]](#) Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, 96 from Ages Digital Library, Ages Software, version 7 [CD-ROM] (Rio, WI: The Master Christian Library, 1999).

[\[ii\]](#) Ibid. 96-114.

[iii] Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible — A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 12.

[iv] Socinianism departed from orthodoxy in other ways that open theism has not, at least at this point in history. For example, Socinianism became unitarian, whereas contemporary open theism is Trinitarian.

[v] Gregory A. Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic*, (Victor Books: Wheaton, 1994) 30.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Boyd, *Possible*, 44.

[viii] Ibid. 53.

[ix] “If we are truly free — if this is in fact part of the way reality really is — there can be nothing beyond possibilities to be recorded until we choose to act on one of those possibilities. We freely create the fact and then God records it.” Boyd *Possible* 123.

[x] Ibid. 55.

[xi] Humans also regret the outcome of things they would do again if given the opportunity. This generally happens when there are only less than desirable choices but a choice must be made, such as how to handle a rebellious teenager.

[xii] see Bob DeWaay, “Saul the Choice of the Carnal Minded,” *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue 47; Nov./Dec. 1997 for a fuller treatment of Saul’s kingship.

[xiii] See John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved” in *The Grace of God The Bondage of the Will*, Vol. 1, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware ed.; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) for a tremendously enlightening treatment of this matter.

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