

How Pastoral is Open Theism?

A Critique from the Writings of George Swinnock and Stephen Charnock

Stephen Yuille received his PhD from London School of Theology for a thesis on the theology and spirituality of the English Puritan, George Swinnock. He is the pastor at Braidwood Bible Chapel in Peterborough, Ontario and also lectures part-time at Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College.

Introduction

According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 'There is but one only, living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute.'¹ This understanding of God has provided comfort to countless Christians in the midst of suffering. God is sovereign; therefore, his control is absolute. God is immutable; therefore, his will is certain. God is mighty; therefore, his power is limitless. God is most wise; therefore, his plan is perfect. God is incomprehensible; therefore, his providence is inscrutable.² With this God before them, Christians – whilst not always understanding

1 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (WCF), II:I.

2 Derek Thomas points to the 'God's incomprehensibility' as Calvin's interpretive key for understanding God's providence, *Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God: Calvin's Teaching on Job* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2004), 17. For Calvin, see *Institutes of the Christian Religion in The Library of Christian Classics: Vol. XX–XXI*, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I:V:1, I:XIII:21.

his ways – are certain he ‘causes all things to work together for good.’³ Recently, open theism has emerged to challenge this view of God and his providence, suggesting it is pastorally deficient.⁴ Bruce Ware, a critic of open theism, summarizes the movement’s disapproval of the traditional view as follows:

If any version of the traditional view is true, argues the open theist, then two things follow: (1) the future with its ‘foreknown’ suffering cannot be avoided, since God knows in advance exactly what will happen and his knowledge (including his foreknowledge), by definition, cannot be mistaken; and (2) God intentionally brings it about that every single horrific instance of suffering that he knows in advance will occur, *does occur*.⁵

To summarize – all that God foreknows must certainly occur, since it is impossible for anyone to choose anything other than what God foreknows. This makes God alone responsible for human suffering. For this reason, proponents of open theism affirm that it is necessary to modify the traditional view. In short, God is not absolutely sovereign; he is not immutable; he is not infinite in power and knowledge. On the contrary, he is limited. Among other things, this means God does not know the future, but reacts as events unfold. For open theists, this paradigm provides a more plausible explanation for the relationship between God and human suffering and, therefore, greater comfort in the midst of suffering.

The purpose of this article is to respond to open theism’s critique of the traditional view and to evaluate its claim to be more pastoral. To do this, we will turn to the writings of two seventeenth-century English Puritans: George Swinnock and Stephen Charnock.⁶

3 Rom. 8:28.

4 For full treatment of open theism, see Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); William Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

5 Bruce Ware, *Their God is Too Small: Open Theism and the Understanding of Confidence in God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 59–60, his italics.

6 See *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. S. Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1909).

Open theism

Before doing so, we must look in greater detail at the impetus behind open theism. Clark Pinnock, one of the movement's chief proponents, provides the following summary:

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 ... 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.⁷

Pinnock's assertion that God is open 'to the changing realities of history' rests upon three premises. (1) Human freedom only exists if the future is completely open. (2) The future is not completely open if God knows it. Why? People lack the freedom to do anything other than what God knows. (3) God cannot know the future. Why? It is contingent upon choices, which do not exist until they occur.⁸ As John Sanders indicates, 'Though God's knowledge is coextensive with reality in that God knows all

7 Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 103–104. Similarly, Hasker remarks: 'God is not remote, closed off and self-contained. Rather, God is open to us his creatures, to the world he has made, and to the future. We in turn need to be open toward God and toward the future he is creating for us. These are the central themes of "open theism"', *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God*, 97.

8 In other words, genuine freedom is libertarian freedom – 'freedom such that the agent who makes a choice is really able, under exactly the same circumstances, to choose something different than the thing that is in fact chosen. The choices in question, then, are not causally determined to occur as they do; libertarian freedom is inherently indeterministic', Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God*, 125–26. For a further definition of libertarian freedom, see Bruce Reichenbach, 'God Limits His Power' in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, eds D. Basinger and R. Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 102–104.

that can be known, the future actions of free creatures are not yet reality, and so there is nothing to be known.”⁹ Gregory Boyd agrees, ‘If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It’s because there is, in this view, *nothing definite there for God to know!*’¹⁰ William Hasker elucidates this philosophical argument as follows:

If God knows already what will happen in the future, then God’s knowing this is part of the past and is now fixed, impossible to change. And since God is infallible, it is completely impossible that things will turn out differently than God expects them to. But this means that the future event God knows is also fixed and unalterable, and it cannot be true of any human being that they are both able to perform a certain action and able not to perform that action. If God knows they are going to perform it, then it is impossible that they fail to perform it – so, they do not have a free choice whether or not to perform it ... What this argument shows is that it is logically impossible that God should have foreknowledge of a genuinely free action. It follows from this that if there are actions, which are free in the libertarian sense, it is logically impossible for God to know in advance how such actions will turn out.¹¹

To prove that God’s foreknowledge is limited, open theists turn to the Bible.¹² Their proof texts fall into two broad categories. (1) They maintain that the Bible teaches that God learns. By way of example, Sanders appeals to the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. God wants to know if

9 Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 198.

10 Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 16, his italics.

11 Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God*, 103–104. This conviction is at the root of open theism’s theodicy. John Feinberg provides a good overview of the main theodicies. As for open theism, he states: ‘God has gifted some of his creatures with libertarian free will, and God’s decisions concerning how he will respond to his creatures at each stage of the temporal process are based on what has occurred up until that stage of the process and not on knowledge of free choices which will occur subsequently’, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 117.

12 Calvin anticipates many of the proof texts put forward by open theists. In terms of those passages in which God repents, he responds: ‘We ought not to understand anything else under the word “repentance” than change of action ... neither God’s plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered; but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved, and decreed, he pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear in men’s eyes.’ *Institutes*, I:XVII:13. In

Abraham fears him, so he commands Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. According to Sanders, 'God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count for collaboration toward the fulfilment of the divine project. Will he be faithful? Or must God find someone else through whom to achieve his purpose?'¹³ Abraham demonstrates his faithfulness. In response, God declares, 'Now I know that you fear God'.¹⁴ For Sanders, this sort of 'divine' learning experience occurs throughout Scripture, thus proving that God has no foreknowledge of human decisions. (2) They maintain that the Bible teaches that God repents.¹⁵ Sanders points his readers to the example of the flood. When God created humanity, he had no idea people were going to sin so grievously. When he saw what had happened, he was 'sorry that he had made man on the earth'.¹⁶ Consequently, he was forced to make the best of a situation that he never foresaw. Sanders remarks, 'It may be the case that although human evil caused God great pain, the destruction of what he had made caused him

other words, God never views his decisions as mistakes that he would change if he had known what was going to happen. Rather, he foreknows the results of his decisions. When they are sorrowful, he grieves over them. Stephen Charnock views the idea of God's repentance as repugnant, because, 'all repentance of a fact is grounded upon a mistake in the event which was not foreseen, or upon an after knowledge of the evil of the thing which was acted by the person repenting', *Discourses Upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (London: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853; rpt, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), I:341. He adds: 'Repentance in God is only a change of his outward conduct, according to his infallible foresight and immutable will. He changes the way of his providential proceeding according to the carriage of the creature, without changing his will, which is the rule of his providence', *Institutes*, I:341–42. For a contemporary response to open theism's proof texts, in line with Calvin and Charnock, see Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000).

13 Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 52–53; also see Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 63–66.

14 Gen. 22:12.

15 By way of support, Boyd appeals to the example of Saul in 1 Sam. 13:13 and 15:11, 35; *God of the Possible*, 56. In the first text, Samuel declares: 'The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever.' God had a plan for Saul. By his conduct, Saul changed that plan. This means God has plans, but there is no guarantee that they will come to fruition. Why? God never knows what he will do next, because he never knows what we will do next. In the second text, we read that God 'regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel'. God made a decision, based upon the information available to him at the time. He did not know what Saul was going to do. If he could go back and do it again, he would not have made Saul king. This means God does things, based upon his knowledge of the present. Yet, he does not know how these decisions are going to turn out. Often times, he ends up regretting what he has done.

16 Gen. 6:6.

even greater suffering. Although his judgment was righteous, God decides to try different courses of action in the future.¹⁷ For Sanders, this happens all the time, because God is not privy to what people are going to do until they decide to do it.

As far as open theists are concerned, this biblical evidence supports their contention that God's foreknowledge is limited. The future depends upon human choices. Consequently, there is nothing definite for God to know until those choices are made. They consider this to be a reasonable explanation for the relationship between God and human suffering. If the traditional view is true, then God's foreknowledge means suffering necessarily occurs and, therefore, God is responsible for it. God's openness frees him from this charge. He has no control over human suffering, because he is as much a part of unfolding events as we are. For open theists, this realization supposedly provides comfort in the midst of suffering.

George Swinnock and Stephen Charnock

Is an open God a greater source of comfort in the midst of suffering than a sovereign God? Is open theism more pastorally adequate? Is open theism's critique of the traditional view of God and his providence valid? For answers to these questions, we turn to George Swinnock and Stephen Charnock. According to Swinnock, 'life is a mixture of mercies and miseries ... a house of mourning or mirth'.¹⁸ Simply put, it is marked by prosperity and adversity. The first is 'the fruition of outward good things, as health, strength, friends, riches, honours, and the like'¹⁹ whereas the second is 'the want of outward good things, and presence of outward evil things, as sickness, disgrace, poverty, imprisonment, and the like'.²⁰

Swinnock believes adversity has four causes. The efficient is God.²¹ The meritorious is sin.²² The formal is the 'absence of something necessary' or the 'presence of something troublesome'.²³ The final is 'either to prove or

17 Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 50.

18 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling; or, A treatise of making religion ones business in The Works of George Swinnock*, ed. J. Nichol (London, 1868; rpt., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), II:46.

19 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:47.

20 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:82.

21 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*

22 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:83.

23 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*.

purify'.²⁴ Charnock also points to God as the 'efficient cause' of adversity. From this, he concludes, 'If it be "good for us to be afflicted", for which we have the psalmist's vote (Psalm 119:71), then goodness in God is the principal cause and orderer of the afflictions'.²⁵ God's goodness is seen in the fact that by adversity he 'snaps asunder those chains which fettered us', 'quells those passions which ravaged us', 'sharpens our faith', and 'quickens our prayers'.²⁶ With that in view, Charnock asks, 'What can we fear from the conduct of Infinite Goodness?'²⁷ Swinnock also wants his readers to see God's hand in adversity so that they might submit to his will, wait for his deliverance, rejoice in him, and contemplate his purpose²⁸ – the last being 'the first and chiefest of all'.²⁹

Contemplation of God's purpose in adversity raises a popular Puritan motif – the mystery of God's providence. For Swinnock, God is 'incomparable' in his providence, namely, in his works of 'preservation' and 'gubernation' (governance).³⁰ Swinnock's understanding of the latter rests upon his concept of Christ's kingdom. There is his 'spiritual' kingdom 'whereby he ruleth by his Spirit and word in the hearts of his people. In this respect he is called King of saints.' There, too, is his 'providential' kingdom 'whereby he ruleth in the world, disposing of all things therein; in this respect he is called King of nations'.³¹ As for the link between the two, Christ 'ordereth his providential kingdom for the advancement of his spiritual kingdom ... as may be most for the welfare of his people'.³² Similarly, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states: 'As the providence of

24 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*.

25 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:309; also see II:451–52.

26 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:310.

27 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:342.

28 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:92–111.

29 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:111.

30 Swinnock, *Treatise of the incomparableness of God in his being, attributes, works and word: opened and applied, Works*, IV:427–28.

31 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:133.

32 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling, Works*, II:134. At times, this concept of providence leads people to view history as part of God's special revelation. Gerrit Berkouwer warns: 'It is often forgotten that we have not been given a norm for explaining the facts of history, and that in the absence of a norm only an untrustworthy plausibility remains. Otherwise one must take refuge in religious intuition or divination, which, it has been claimed, is capable of discerning God's finger in the panorama of history. This would introduce a second source of Divine information', *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 171–72. Ronald VanderMolen considers this tendency among the Puritans in 'Providence as Mystery, Providence as Revelation: Puritan and Anglican Modifications of John Calvin's Doctrine of Providence', *Church History* 47 (1978), 27–47.

God doth, in general, reach to all creatures, so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.³³ Two major tenets emerge from this view of God's providence.

1. God controls all things

The first is this: Christ's 'kingdom ... ruleth over all'. This means there is nothing that falls outside the parameters of his control.³⁴ Christ confirms this in Matthew 10:29–30, asking, "'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?' And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.' Based on these words, Swinnock remarks: 'Sparrows seem to fly at liberty, and to fall casually; but even their flight is directed by God, and their fall ordered by him: they neither fly nor fall accidentally, but providentially.'³⁵ This all-encompassing view of providence normally produces three objections.

a. It makes God the author of sin

If nothing falls outside the parameters of God's control, then he must be responsible for sin and suffering. Swinnock's answer to this charge is the doctrine of concurrence. As Charles Hodge explains, two theories of providence were popular among the Reformers. The first is 'Entire Dependence'.³⁶ Proponents maintain that God, as an absolute and infinite being, is the only efficient cause. Therefore, second causes are without efficiency. The second is 'Concursus'.³⁷ Adherents propose that in the

33 WCF, V:VI. This is also reminiscent of Calvin. *Institutes*, I:XVII:1.

34 Swinnock, *Incomparableness of God*, Works, IV: 428–37.

35 Swinnock, *Incomparableness of God*, Works, IV: 429.

36 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), I:592–93.

37 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I:593–605. Berkouwer believes the doctrine of concurrence provides a defence against pantheism whereby 'second causes are identified with God' and deism whereby 'the second cause is divorced from the first cause, that is, God', *The Providence of God*, 125. Don Carson also argues that the 'concept of second causes cannot simply be abandoned, because the resulting model would be either pantheistic, in which case God becomes part of the causal system; or mechanistic, with God a sovereign puppeteer', *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 211. There is some difference of opinion, however, as to the mechanics of concurrence. Hodge dislikes any suggestion that the creature is incapable of originating action because, 'this is an inference from the assumed nature of the dependence of the creature upon the Creator'. Furthermore, 'It attempts to explain

production of every effect there is an efficiency of two causes: first and second.³⁸ According to Paul Helm, Zwingli is representative of the first theory whereas Calvin is representative of the second. Helm writes:

This difference can be starkly illustrated from the perspective attitudes of Calvin and Zwingli to the distinction between primary and secondary causes ... Calvin (with the aid of the scholastics) strives to preserve that distinction because it is the way in which the biblical testimony that God is both holy and the author of sinful actions can be preserved. In Zwingli's case, God's power is, for *a priori* reasons, so supreme that the idea of there being any distinct causal agency apart from God disappears.³⁹

The Westminster divines adopt the doctrine of concurrence, stating: 'Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.'⁴⁰ Swinnock stands in this tradition, affirming: 'It is impossible for the creation, or any part of it, to bear up a moment, if God should forget it, and deny his actual concurrence to it ... God is to the world as the soul to the body, which alone can actuate and move it, without which it cannot stir at all, but is as a dead corpse.'⁴¹ Swinnock affirms the free acts of second causes while insisting that God actuates and moves them to act. This is God's 'overruling providence'.⁴² God decrees all that comes to pass, including evil. However, he is not responsible for evil, because he actuates and moves second causes to act in accordance with their desires.

Swinnock provides no defence for this position; however, Charnock does.⁴³ He argues that people are dependent upon God for their 'creation' and 'action'.⁴⁴ As for the latter, there is a distinction between 'substance' and 'viciousness'. Simply put, 'No act, in regard of the substance of it, is

agents by his power and controls the use they make of their ability, *Systematic Theology*, 614.

38 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I:600.

39 Paul Helm, 'Calvin (and Zwingli), on Divine Providence,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994), 404.

40 WCF, V:II.

41 Swinnock, *Incomparableness of God*, Works, IV:428.

42 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works, II:85.

43 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:139–71.

44 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:156.

evil', because it is merely 'the efficacy of the faculty, extending itself to some outward object'.⁴⁵ It only becomes evil when it 'consists in a privation of that comeliness and righteousness which ought to be in an action'.⁴⁶ Thus, Charnock concludes that an action's substance and viciousness 'have two distinct causes ... Though the action be from God as a concurrent cause, yet the ill quality of the action is solely from the creature with whom God concurs'.⁴⁷ This is the case, because: 'God doth no more when he leaves a man to sin ... but leave him to his natural inclination'.⁴⁸ This 'is not an action, but a denial of action, and therefore cannot be the cause of the evil actions of men'.⁴⁹ In brief, God simply permits evil.⁵⁰ William Perkins is helpful on this point, distinguishing between God's 'permission' and 'operative permission'.⁵¹ By the first, God effectually produces all good things. By the second, God willingly permits evil things. Charnock agrees: 'This act of permission is not a mere and naked permission, but such an one as is attended with a certainty of the event'.⁵²

45 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:157.

46 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:158.

47 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:159.

48 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:168.

49 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:147.

50 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:150. Berkouwer rejects the idea of divine permission, because it: 'suggests that God allows the sinner to decide in freedom against God's command. God is, then, in His Providence, a balcony observer of a context whose outcome is never certain', *The Providence of God*, 137. Hodge, on the other hand, sees no problem with divine permission, writing: 'All events embraced in the purpose of God are equally certain, whether He has determined to bring them to pass by His own power, or simply to permit their occurrence through the agency of His creatures ... He effects good, He permits evil.' Again, 'Whatever He does, He certainly purposed to do. Whatever He permits to occur, He certainly purposed to permit', *Systematic Theology*, I:540-43. The Bible abounds with examples of this. God used the Assyrian invasion (Is. 10:12-16), Joseph's enslavement (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20), Samson's sin (Judg. 14:4), the Babylonian invasion (Hab. 3:17-19), Judas's betrayal (Matt. 27:15-26), and Christ's crucifixion (Acts 2:23-24) to accomplish his will. In each instance, he permitted second causes (free agents) to act according to their desires. For Charnock's use of these examples, see *Existence and Attributes of God*, I:447, II:145-46, 161, 167-68.

51 William Perkins, *Armillæ Aurea (A Golden Chaine; or, The Description of Theologie Containing the Order and the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, According to Gods Word) in The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), I:15.

52 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:149.

b. It destroys human liberty

Second, if nothing falls outside the parameters of God's control, then there is no such thing as freewill. Swinnock affirms that God commands people's 'hearts' and 'hands',⁵³ furthermore, 'No man is master of himself, so much as of his thoughts.'⁵⁴ Such statements seem irreconcilable with human liberty. By way of a solution, it is important to note that Swinnock does not believe that the will is free to act contrary to all motives. Rather, it is determined by whatever the understanding and affections (rightly or wrongly) view as good. This does not undermine self-determination, because it maintains a difference between 'constraining' and 'non-constraining' causes. Simply put, people are free when their choices are their own. Swinnock's position does, however, undermine the notion that the will itself possesses self-determination (or arbitrary power).

Broadly speaking, there are two main schools of thought on this issue: indeterminism⁵⁵ and determinism. The first (the position of open theists) maintains that the will is free from internal motives and desires. In other words, it is free from the mind's thoughts and the heart's affections. It possesses arbitrary power. This means we do not know why the will chooses what it chooses. The second maintains that the will is not free from internal motives and desires. In other words, it is not free from the mind's thoughts and the heart's affections. It does not possess arbitrary power. This means we do know why the will chooses what it chooses. Swinnock believes people are free in the choices they make, because they

53 Swinnock, *Incomparableness of God, Works*, IV:428.

54 Swinnock, *Incomparableness of God, Works*, IV:429.

55 Indeterminism is the notion that choices are free if they are not causally determined. John Feinberg explains: 'Despite the direction in which the causes appear to incline the agent's will, he or she can still choose contrary to those causes, since they do not decisively incline the agent in one direction or another', 'God Ordains All Things' in *Predestination and Free Will*, 21. In other words, choices are uncertain, because the will is free to act contrary to all motives (external and internal). In a similar vein, Bruce Reichenbach affirms: 'Freedom is not the absence of influences, either external or internal ... Rather, to be free means that the causal influences do not determine my choice or action', 'God Limits His Power' in *Predestination and Free Will*, 103. This view is also known as 'the liberty of indifference' or 'the power of contrary choice' or 'contra-causal freedom' or 'the self-determining power of the will'. Indeterminism is essentially Pelagianism. It insists that liberty is the power to choose between good and evil without any inclination either way. If people are born with a corrupt nature by which they are inclined to sin, then they do not possess this liberty.

possess understanding, affections, and will. He also believes these faculties are corrupt, and the will – without any external constraint – chooses accordingly.

Augustine anticipates open theism's main objection to this paradigm, stating: 'If God foreknows that man will sin, then you will say that he must sin, and if this has to happen, there is no freedom of the will in the act of sinning, but rather an inevitable and unbending necessity.'⁵⁶ He calls such reasoning 'sheer folly',⁵⁷ adding:

Since God has foreknowledge of our will, its future will be such as He foreknows it. It will be a will precisely because He foreknows it as a will, and it could not be a will if it were not in our power. Hence God also has foreknowledge of our power over it. The power, then, is not taken from me because of His foreknowledge, since this power will be mine all the more certainly because of the infallible foreknowledge of Him who foreknew that I would have it.⁵⁸

Perkins agrees: 'Gods foreknowledge in it selfe, is not a cause why things are, but as it is conjoynd with his decree. For things do not therefore come to passe, because that God did foreknow them; but because he decreed and willed them, therefore they come to passe.'⁵⁹ Charnock also adopts Augustine's position, affirming: 'God's foreknowledge of man's voluntary actions doth not necessitate the will of man.'⁶⁰ This is so, because there is a distinction between a necessity of compulsion and a necessity of immutability (or infallibility). The former takes away free will whereas the latter does not.⁶¹ Charnock acknowledges: 'The will cannot be compelled, for then it would cease to be the will.'⁶² The point is: God's foreknowledge does not compel. It is not 'the cause of anything'.⁶³ Charnock affirms: 'Though the foreknowledge of God be infallible, yet it doth not necessitate the creature in acting ... they voluntarily run into such courses, not by any impulsion'.⁶⁴ By way of

56 Augustine, *The Free Choice of the Will in The Fathers of the Church*, ed. R.J. Deferrari (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1968), Vol. LIX, 170 (III:III).

57 Augustine, *The Free Choice of the Will*, 172 (III:III).

58 Augustine, *The Free Choice of the Will*, 173 (III:III).

59 Perkins, *Golden Chain, Works*, I:15.

60 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, I:446.

61 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, I:446.

62 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, I:447.

63 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, I:448.

64 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:145.

example, Charnock appeals to Christ's death as described in Acts 4:27–28,⁶⁵ stating: 'God did not only foreknow, but determined the suffering of Christ ... It did infallibly secure the event, but did not annihilate the liberty of the action, either in Christ's willingness to suffer, or the crime of the Jews that made him suffer.'⁶⁶

c. It makes God in favour of evil

Finally, if nothing falls outside the parameters of God's control, then he necessarily wills sin. Swinnock dispels this notion by upholding the distinction between God's secret and revealed wills.⁶⁷ The first refers to the rule of God's actions (decrees), whereas the second refers to the rule of man's actions (precepts).⁶⁸ Scripture appears to support such a distinction. Joseph's brothers sinned when they sold him as a slave. This was not God's revealed will (disposition). However, it was his secret will (decree), for Joseph says to his brothers: 'It was not you who sent me here, but God.'⁶⁹ The Jews sinned when they crucified Christ. Again, this was not God's revealed will (disposition). However, it was his secret will (decree), for the

65 'For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.'

66 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:146.

67 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works, I:79. For Charnock, see *Essence and Attributes of God*, II:147–55.

68 According to Hodge: 'The decretive will of God concerns his purposes, and relates to the futurity of events. The perceptive will relates to the rule of duty for his rational creatures. He decrees whatever He purposes to effect or permit. He prescribes, according to his own will, what his creatures should do, or abstain from doing. The decretive and perceptive will of God can never be in conflict. God never decrees to do, or to cause others to do, what He forbids. He may, as we see He does, decree to permit what He forbids', *Systematic Theology*, I:403–404. Carson challenges the merits of this distinction, because: 'it is inadequate as a total explanation of the relation between the divine will and reality, because in too many instances the hidden will appears to make a mockery of the revealed will. Since the hidden will is always effective, it appears to be the actual will of God; while the revealed will is little more than precept. In that case, man does not know anything of God's actual will, except by what actually happens; and conversely, everything that happens is exactly what God really wills to happen', *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 213–14. Nevertheless, Carson immediately qualifies his opposition, acknowledging, 'We cannot do without some distinctions concerning the "will(s)" of God.' He proceeds to distinguish between God's 'disposition' and 'decree.'

69 Gen. 45:5–8; 50:20.

apostle Peter declares: 'This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death'.⁷⁰

Calvin recognizes such a distinction, writing: 'Moses proclaims that the will of God is to be sought not far off in the clouds or in the abyss, because it has been set forth familiarly in the law (Deut. 30:11–14), it follows that he has another hidden will which may be compared to a deep abyss.'⁷¹ Calvin anticipates an objection to this dichotomy, namely: 'There are in him two contrary wills, because by his secret plan he decrees what he has openly forbidden by his law.'⁷² He responds: 'But even though his will is one and simple in him, it appears manifold to us because, on account of our mental incapacity, we do not grasp how in divers ways it wills and does not will something to take place ... For it would not be done if he did not permit it; yet he does not unwillingly permit it, but willingly.'⁷³ Charnock builds on this: 'To say God doth will sin as he doth other things, is to deny his holiness; to say it entered without anything of his will, is to deny his omnipotence.'⁷⁴ By way of solution, he affirms: 'God wills good by a positive decree, because he hath decreed to effect it. He wills evil by a private decree, because he hath decreed not to give that grace which would certainly prevent it,'⁷⁵ adding: 'That which is permitted by him, is in itself, and in regard of the evil of it, hateful to him: but as the prospect of that good which he aims at in the permission of it is pleasing to him, so that act of his will, whereby he permits it, is ushered in by an approving act of his understanding.'⁷⁶ By an act of his will, therefore, God effects good and permits evil. This is his secret will (decree). When he willingly permits evil, he does not contradict his revealed will (i.e., his disposition toward evil), for he does not approve of it, but approves of 'that good which he aims at in the permission of it'.

70 Acts 2:23.

71 Calvin, *Institutes*, I:XVII:2. Calvin refers to this 'hidden will' as God's 'secret plan', 'secret providence', 'secret judgments', 'incomprehensible plans', 'secret command', and 'secret direction' *Institutes*, I:XVI:2,3,6,9, I:XVII:1,2, I:XVIII:1,2,4. It is 'a certain and deliberate will', *Institutes*, I:XVI:3.

72 *Institutes*, I:XVIII:3.

73 *Institutes*, at times, it appears Calvin rejects the notion of God's permissive will – 'They babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission – as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will', *Institutes*, I:XVIII:1, III:XXIII:8. However, he is here referring to 'unwilling' permission as opposed to 'willing' permission. For Calvin, the former implies that whatever is happening is not in full accord with God's will.

74 Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, II:148.

75 *Institutes*.

76 *Institutes*, II:149.

2. God controls all things for the good of his people

The second major tenet in Swinnock's understanding of God's providence is this: Christ's 'kingdom, which ruleth over all, shall be disposed as may be most for the welfare of his people'.⁷⁷ Swinnock sees a clear difference between 'the punishments God inflicts on sinners' and 'the afflictions he brings on saints'.⁷⁸ First, they differ in 'manner'.⁷⁹ God punishes his enemies with joy whereas he afflicts his children with compassion. Second, they differ in 'measure'.⁸⁰ God punishes his enemies with no regard for what they can endure whereas he afflicts his children according to what they are able to suffer. Third, they differ in 'end'.⁸¹ God punishes his enemies to satisfy his offended judgement whereas he afflicts his children to sanctify their polluted hearts. In a word, God governs all things (including suffering) for the welfare of his people.

For support, Swinnock gravitates to the apostle Paul's words in Romans 8:28: 'And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose'.⁸² This means they are never in the grip of blind forces. Rather, everything that happens to them is divinely planned. As Calvin puts it, the Christian's 'solace is to know his Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it'.⁸³ According to Swinnock, this includes 'all things, not only thy comforts, but also thy crosses; not only the love of God, but also the hatred of the world, and the malice of hell'.⁸⁴ God causes all of these things to work together for the Christian's good. For Swinnock and Charnock, the good in view is not material ease and prosperity, but God's purpose to conform his people to the likeness of his Son.⁸⁵ The Christian's awareness of God's purpose provides comfort and produces contentment in the midst of suffering.

77 For excellent treatments of this subject, see Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good; or, A Divine Cordial* (1663; rpt., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994); and John Flavel, *Divine Conduct; or, The Mystery of Providence: A Treatise upon Psalm 57:2 in The Works of John Flavel* (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820; rpt, London: Banner of Truth, 1968), IV:339–497.

78 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works, II:127.

79 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works.

80 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works, II:128.

81 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works, II:129.

82 For Bruce Ware's exposition of this verse, see *God's Lesser Glory*, 192–93.

83 Calvin, *Institutes*, I:XVII:11. Also see I:XVI:3.

84 Swinnock, *Christian Man's Calling*, Works, II:122.

85 Rom. 8:29

Conclusion

Open theism provides no such encouragement. In relation to Romans 8:28, John Sanders remarks: 'God is working to accomplish good in all things', yet 'the purposes of God meet with resistance, and even God does not always get what he wants.'⁸⁶ Ironically, this makes open theism weakest where it claims to be strongest – pastorally. As Bruce Ware asks:

How pastorally, spiritually, and existentially adequate is the counsel offered by openness proponents? At the heart of the pastoral counsel offered to suffering people by open theists is this claim: God did not bring about your suffering, so don't blame God for it; instead, be encouraged because he feels as badly about the suffering you are enduring as you do.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 127–28.

⁸⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 207.