THINKING THROUGH THE NEW THEISM: A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Neu-theism is one of the most complex and controversial subjects in contemporary theology. The complexity and controversy surrounding neo-theism, also known as “openness theism,” are, at least in part, traceable to two main factors. First of all, it concerns the doctrine of God. Secondly, it is set against one of the oldest and fiercest debates in theology, the relation of God to creation or the world. As to the first, Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts that, “In doing theology, the concept of God can never be simply one issue among others. It is the central issue, around which everything else is organized.” As to the second, Pannenberg admits, “One of the greatest and continuing problems of Christian belief in God is presented by the difficulty of relating the concept of God to the world of nature and history.” Doctrinal debates concerning God and his relations to the world have involved such gigantic historic figures as Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, Jacobus Arminius, and John Wesley. Discussion involving such issues can be expected to take on a sense of intense, even ultimate importance.

Neu-theism, however, goes beyond the usual discussions. Neu-theism claims to correct a perceived problem in classical theism caused by an early error that subjugated the biblical revelation of God to Platonic philosophical categories and has since been promulgated through a deterministic Augustinian-Calvinistic system. The dynamic, relational God of Scripture has come to be caricatured as the static, impassible intellectual God of philosophy. Neu-theism seeks a revision of this distortion of classical theism. Further assertions include that in order for God to really relate to humanity in a dynamic fashion allowing for genuine human liberty divine omnipotence and especially omniscience need to be radically redefined. God’s power is self-limited and divine foreknowledge is non-

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exhaustive. God is said to know everything that can be known but not even God can know many things about the future. The suggestion is made that if God knows the future exhaustively then it is absolutely determined and humans are not really free to be or to act. Accordingly, the future is at least partly open and God has chosen to risk the results.

Several of today’s titular theologians, such as J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, and Clark Pinnock are involved in the current neo-theism crisis, Packer and Sproul as opponents and Pinnock as an advocate. Charges of heresy and claims of orthodoxy fill the Evangelical air. The Pentecostal-Charismatic movement is still discussing the openness issue, as the debate between Graham Old and Kenneth J. Archer and his readers indicates. Gordon L. Anderson, however, predicts in his review of openness theologian Gregory A. Boyd’s work, that while Pentecostals may appreciate elements of openness theism, such as its emphasis on spiritual warfare, Pentecostals will continue to affirm a view of God’s total omniscience along with human choice and free will. One may pray his prediction is prophetic.

So why address such a complex and controversial theological subject as neo-theism from a pastoral perspective? First, sound systematic theology can and should be effectively applied at the pastoral level. As Thomas Oden says, pastoral theology is where the theoretical and practical come together. Pastoral ministry and theology are “dependent upon and intrinsically connected with each of the disciplines of the wider theological curriculum.” Second, my own practice of ministry in the pastoral context requires me to “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Th 5:21-22). If openness theism is “sound doctrine” (“consonant with healthy teaching”), it will help pastors “model how to silence the impure” and “also mentor followers into becoming pure leaders for the future” (Titus 2:1), as Deborah Menken Gill says. If neo-theism is true it will enhance the effectiveness of pastoral ministry and leadership in spiritual, moral, and practical ways. Such an assertion does not imply a pragmatic criterion for Christian theology but it does indicate we may know a theological tree by its practical fruit (cf. Matt 12:33). As Paul S. Fiddes observes, the discipline of theology and ecclesial experience intersect and exist in a state of mutuality. Again, as Randy Maddox asserts, theology should be brought “into the service of nurturing contemporary Christian life and witness.” Importantly, a pastoral approach is also consistent with the ideology of openness theology. The leading proponent of neo-theism, Clark Pinnock, defines theologians as “the pastoral leadership team which is charged with giving good counsel to the churches.” Examining a position with such specific pastoral concerns from a pastoral perspective seems especially apropos.

In the following pages I will first look at some of the fruits of neo-theism as I perceive them at the pastoral and ecclesial levels of Christian faith and life. Then I will turn to the task of comparing neo- and classical theism’s main differences with a vision for affirming elements applicable to the pastoral and ecclesial context. Throughout both sections I will support my ideas and observations through dialogue where appropriate with an ecumenical range of scholars.

**Fruit of Neo-Theism in the Pastoral Context**

If preached and applied at the local church level what would be a few of the main
fruit produced? Three areas seem to me to be most obvious: the area of relationality, dependability, and authority.

**Relationality**

One of the primary projects of pastors is to help parishioners develop real and enduring relationships with God. Helping laity relate to a God they cannot see or touch in a personal way can be quite a challenge for clergy. Neo-theists desire to lead people to “the more biblical view of God as a dynamic personal agent” that is “deeply and vulnerably involved in human joys and sorrows.” What Pinnock prefers to call “classical free-will theism,” seeks to maintain “the mutuality and reciprocity” of God “within the framework of divine transcendence.” Herein is the appeal of neo-theism, deliverance from a deterministic God so transcendent as to be absent for a personal, freedom-loving-God-with-us who truly loves and feels. In its affirmation of free will “classical free-will theism” can be helpful to the pastor and his/her congregation. No other than C. S. Lewis adamantly insists that only a divine-human relationship based on freedom can foster the genuine happiness and love God purposes for those united to him. Fortunately, as Clark Pinnock admits, a relational model of God does not require adoption of other, more extreme features of neo-theism such as rejection of classical theism’s views of divine omniscience. Stressing the God of personal relationships can be fruitful in a positive sense in the pastoral context.

**Dependability**

Pastors are constantly called upon to lead people in worship. The biblical theme of divine worthiness is an ally in the attempt to motivate modern people to lift their hearts above their daily concerns to the point of praise (Ps 18:3, Rev 4:11). On the other hand, neo-theism implies that a God who is genuinely relational must also be ever changing. Emil Brunner points out that a God who is constantly changing is not worthy of our worship but rather of our pity. The liturgical life of the local church is accordingly seriously undermined by neo-theism. In the midst of the vicissitudes of life people are inspired to praise and worship the God who is reliable and dependable, not the God who is always changing and never the same. Furthermore, pastors are constantly called upon to reassure their parishioners that in spite of their problems an all-knowing God will be able to comfort and assist them. Neo-theism’s stance on omniscience is a barrier to confidence in God. In other words, the pastoral duty of building up the faith and confidence of their people is made more difficult by neo-theism’s limitation of divine knowledge. Donald Bloesch believes an affirmation of the omniscience of God is an expression of confidence in “an overarching providence that sustains the world.” The neo-theist limitation of God’s foreknowledge strikes at the root of confidence in God and his ability to accomplish his purposes toward his people. Such a position cannot be sustained in effective fruitful pastoral ministry.

**Authority**

As a pastor who preaches and teaches each week, a primary question for my congregation and me concerning neo-theism is whether it is based on Scripture. When
I actually study texts given to authenticate the more controversial aspects of openness theology, namely, the denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, I find less than satisfactory clarity. For example, “Now I know that you fear God” (Gen 22:12) is cited as evidence against exhaustive omniscience. But when I read the context I find that it was an angel of the Lord that spoke these words and not the Lord himself. Though some interpreters have speculated about the angel’s identity as a possible pre- incarnate manifestation of Christ, the issue is by no means settled and is certainly no proof text for altering the doctrine of divine omniscience. I find a similar pattern in other texts purporting to prove omniscience is not exhaustive. Let’s note God saying of Israel’s wickedness, “nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination” (Jer 32:35). When the context is examined, it is not at all clear that God is saying he did not know they would do this wickedness. Rather, it appears God is actually saying it was not in his mind, that is, according to his purpose or will, for them to do it. Other texts are used by openness advocates to make much of apparent vicissitudes in God’s mind or disposition, especially toward sinners or penitents (cf. Gen 6:6; Judges 10, 12). But recognition of God’s ability to interact with people according to their choices without altering his own ultimate purpose immediately dispels such openness doubts. Neo-theists also tend to ignore the anthropomorphic elements of many such OT depictions of God. Biblical scholars point out that God is sometimes spoken of in human terms as an accommodation to human perspective and language, not as a literal description of God’s nature. As a preaching pastor, I simply find such so-called biblical evidence limiting God’s knowledge unconvincing. Without clear biblical support neo-theism cannot bring forth good fruit in pastoral ministry.

The theology of neo-theism fails at precisely the point of its greatest assumed applicability: the point of people. Neo-theism seeks to make God more relational, a laudable endeavor in itself, but succeeds only in reducing his reliability. Pastors who preach a God who is changing and limited will have difficulty leading people in worship or comforting them in sorrow. When I told my congregation about neo- theism they seemed shocked. When I told them our own Pentecostal-Charismatic movement had been affected and influenced they were frightened. When I told them their pastor remains a classical theist they were relieved. The men and women of faith on the pews and seats of our churches do not relate to a God who is limited and changing. The God they believe they truly encounter in the Bible is the God who really knows everything and never changes (Ps 139:1-6; Mal 3:6).

VISION OF NEO-THEISM FOR THE PASTORAL CONTEXT

Even as neo-theism seeks to revise classical theism, it needs revision itself in order to achieve an adequate theology for the pastoral context. Openness theology confesses both its indebtedness to and distinctiveness from the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and the derivative process theology, which stresses the fluidity of reality, including divine reality. Donald Bloesch suggests neo-theists are rather closer to than farther from process thought categories. Pannenberg, however, exposes the inadequacy of process theology on biblical and rational grounds precisely at the point of its doctrine of God for its denial of “a concept of creation.” He
concludes that, “the Whiteheadian God cannot be the biblical creator God.” Furthermore, process thought insists “all actual reality is finite, even God,” leading to a universe that is “a pluralism of finite realities.” But Pannenbring points out that “the very notion of a finite reality seems to presuppose infinity.” He therefore, contra both process theology and neo-theism, affirms the classical Christian teaching since Gregory of Nyssa concerning God’s infinite nature.30 Even though Pinnock et al distance themselves from direct dependence on process philosophy and theology, the extent neo-theism has been indirectly derivative of process thought is significant and it has been adversely affected by the association. That neo-theism critiques classical theism’s relationship with Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy while being dependent on Whiteheadian process philosophy seems ironic at best. A revision of the neo-theist revision of classical theism is required, ridding it of its process thought trappings to render it effective at the pastoral level. Four areas of interest call for focused attention: issues of human liberty, God’s relationship to time (simultaneity), divine immutability, and divine sovereignty.

**Liberty**

Neo-theism and openness theology insist that classical theism and theology diminish any real human freedom by their dogmas of exhaustive divine omniscience and foreknowledge.31 The charge is not an altogether inappropriate reaction as applied to the radical determinism of the Augustinian and Calvinist systems of theology. Roger Olson narrates how in the fourth and fifth centuries Augustine introduced the novelty of monergism, the belief that God alone acts to determine all things, into Christian theology effectively destroying human liberty or free will. In the sixteenth century the Reformer John Calvin accepted and extended Augustinian theology making it even more radical and inimical to human freedom.32 Augustine and Calvin have been extremely influential in the history of Christian thought. As Olson also narrates, however, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Jacobus Arminius successfully challenged the fatalistic determinism of Augustine and Calvin, favoring a return to the pristine doctrine of synergism, that God allows human beings to freely cooperate with or resist his grace, restoring genuine human freedom of choice. In the eighteenth century John Wesley was able to popularize “Arminianism” as a champion of real interaction with God vis-à-vis Calvinistic coercion.33 Yet both Arminius and Wesley are classical theists who affirm exhaustive divine foreknowledge as compatible with human liberty and moral accountability.34 Apparently, neo-theists are neither Calvinists nor Wesleyan-Arminians.35 Also, the covert charge that classical theism is synonymous with determinism is obviously incorrect.

**Simultaneity**

Doubtless open theists have been driven to deny exhaustive divine foreknowledge by the contorted claims of determinists concerning omniscience. C. Samuel Storms says that, “if EDF [exhaustive divine foreknowledge] exists, contingency or libertarian freedom does not.”36 Such a position pushes people into choosing between exhaustive divine foreknowledge and human liberty. A great deal of devout Christian thought,
however, has not agreed that the two are actually incompatible. Laurence W. Wood ably refutes neo-theism’s limitation of God’s knowledge and abundantly demonstrates the compatibility of his exhaustive foreknowledge with true human liberty. Wood appeals to Boethius and the early Greek Fathers in support of divine simultaneity, the doctrine that God sees all time from the perspective of eternity in the immediate present. Therefore, God sees all future events but not before they actually occur. Accordingly, human beings act with real freedom and choice consistently with divine foreknowledge. Wood shows that divine simultaneity is consistent with the biblical revelation (Ex 3:14; Rev 4:8) and the nature of predictive prophecy, as well as the patristic teaching of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, and Gregory of Nyssa. Significantly, John Wesley affirms simultaneity also. Wood even demonstrates the congruity of divine simultaneity with the view of time in modern scientific relativity theory!37

Larry Wood sympathetically notes that openness theologians are mainly concerned with pastoral and devotional issues in their innovative approach, that is, “they want to preserve the human freedom that has been vitiated by Calvinism.” He suggests nonetheless they would be better served to, “take their cues from Barth and Pannenberg on divine omniscience,” and to “look to Boethius and the early Greek Fathers” for reconciliation of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.38 As C. S. Lewis, who also subscribed to Boethius’ understanding of time, eternity, and divine foreknowledge, has Screwtape say, God “does not foresee the humans making their free contributions in a future, but he sees them doing so in His unbounded Now. And obviously to watch a man doing something is not to make him do it.”39 Thomas C. Oden agrees. Long ago Origen “definitely demolished” the “oversimplified scheme of divine foreknowledge” that is comparable to both that of contemporary Calvinism and openness theism. Oden argues that divine simultaneity enables God to view all time as eternal now while nevertheless relating to the world according to the process of temporal succession. Accordingly, total divine foreknowledge and real human freedom are completely compatible.40 Divine simultaneity therefore, is a satisfying biblical, historical, theological, and pastoral alternative to both determinism and openness theism that affirms both God’s exhaustive foreknowledge and genuine human liberty.

Immutability

The caricature of the God of classical theism as static and non-relational may not be altogether correct. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. summarizes classical theism in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” Notably, however, he insists that divine unchangeableness “indicates a dynamic, not a static immutability.” He specifically censures “certain philosophical back eddies” suggesting otherwise. Rather, divine immutability includes divine interaction with the world “in time and space.” The consistency of God’s character, nature, and works are affirmed.41 Thomas C. Oden points out that classical thought advocates “appropriate balance” concerning the attributes of God. He admits that, “The history of theism is plagued by errors
caused by overemphasizing a single one or set of attributes while neglecting others.” For example, Aristotle (and Christian thinkers influenced by him) stressed such concepts as “God’s absolute essence, self-contemplation, transcendence, and immutability, yet failed to grasp God’s relationality, closeness, and covenant love toward humanity.” The antidote for such imbalance is “a healthy equilibrium” embracing all the attributes of God as inseparable.42 Affirming the dynamic relationality of God and refuting static determinism does not require a rejection of classical theism. Pinnock himself admits that adopting a relational model of God does not require a rejection of classical theism’s views of divine omniscience.43 Clearly, enjoying a dynamic relationship with God does not require adopting openness theism.

Sovereignty

Classical theists less controlled by the Augustinian-Calvinist paradigm are able to affirm divine sovereignty and immutability in conjunction with a model of God that allows for dynamic change and relationships. Donald G. Bloesch argues that, “God’s sovereignty means that he is immutable.” He defines immutability carefully as indicating God “does not change in his innermost being and in his ultimate vision and purpose for the world.” He further insists that God is not the unchangeable God of the philosophers, for whom immutability means immobility. In such a case “we no longer have a truly sovereign God.” In Scripture, however, Bloesch argues, “God has the freedom to change his mind or the ways in which he deals his people, though he remains inflexible in his ultimate purpose” (cf. Ex 32:14; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chron 21:15; Jer 26:19; Jon 3:10). God’s immutability, therefore, may be best understood in terms of “constancy.” Most importantly, “the living God of the Bible is not to be confounded with” either “the immobile God of Hellenistic philosophy” or “the modern idea of a God who is ever changing.”44 The balance is best kept by maintenance of the twin truths of divine sovereignty and immutability and divine relationality as completely compatible.

Perennial problems connected with the subject of divine sovereignty are the ideas of divine predestination and omniscience or foreknowledge in terms of their impact upon human liberty. Bloesch suggests predestination involves the working out of God’s purpose in history and humanity in a sense that “does not override the freedom of man” or “deny the free movement of history.” Accordingly, he rejects “the determinist view.” Similarly, he affirms that, “The meaning of God’s omniscience is that there is no concealment from God.” He argues that “although God knows the future before it happens, he does not literally know the concrete event until it happens.” In his affirmation of “the reality of God’s foreknowledge and also his sovereignty” he does not “hold to a rigid foreordination that excludes the free movement of history.”45 A sovereign God working out his ultimate and eternal purpose in history and humanity is completely consistent with his gracious and generous gift of human liberty.

Thomas Oden defines omniscience as “the infinite consciousness of God in relation to all possible objects of knowledge.” Yet he also insists that God’s foreknowledge does not determine events but that “what God foreknows is determined by what happens, part of which is affected by free will.” In other words, omniscience is not
omnicausality. Divine foreknowledge is total or exhaustive. God understands not only what will actually happen but also all possible contingencies that may occur but still leaves humans free to make their own choices regarding their personal moral actions.46 Oddly enough, the basic premise of Calvinist determinism and its extreme opposite (openness theology) is the same: exhaustive divine foreknowledge and actual human liberty are incompatible. A strong tradition within Christianity from the earliest time to the present disagrees with that premise. Classical theism and Calvinism or determinism are not synonymous terms, neither are Arminianism or libertarianism and openness or neo-theism. According to a strong stream within classical theism, divine omniscience and total foreknowledge and human liberty and accountability are clearly compatible.

**Conclusion**

Neo- or openness theism is an obvious and arduous attempt to come to grips with the twin realities of divine sovereignty and human liberty in a pastoral context. Unfortunately, neo-theists apparently became convinced that the two are ultimately incompatible and opted to affirm the latter at the expense of the former. A survey of leading neo-theist Clark Pinnock’s intellectual journey indicates he has an inherent tendency toward extremism.47 Whether he is battling modernist attempts to undermine biblical inerrancy or hammering out a new and radical political theory of Christian social action, he tends to push an idea beyond the limits. Fortunately, he is often also humbly willing to adjust or even alter his views when intellectual equilibrium necessitates. One hopes the case eventually may be the same regarding his final conclusions on neo-theism. Pinnock’s pneumatology has had a profound, provocative, and primarily positive impact on Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism.48 Pinnock and other openness theologians are valuable allies in the maturation of the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. An appreciation for admitted assets of Pinnock and other neo-theists, however, must not induce us to appropriate the extreme elements of openness theology, namely the diminishment of divine omniscience. Pentecostals need to exercise some equilibrium ourselves on this point.49

Although an unhealthy strain of systematic determinism has been introduced into Christian thought from foreign philosophical sources by means of Augustinianism and Calvinism, Arminian-Wesleyan classical theism has been successful in affirming both divine sovereignty and human liberty without resorting to reducing the divine nature and character. As G. K. Chesterton said so well, “But granted we all have to keep a balance, the real interest comes in with the question of how that balance can be kept.” He believes balance is best kept by paradoxically keeping “apparently opposite” passions and convictions in just the right tension doing justice to both without allowing either to dominate. In many areas of pastoral ministry and theology paradoxes are important. Preaching and teaching on the unity and plurality of the Trinity, the divine and human natures of Christ, general and special revelation—and yes, divine sovereignty and human liberty, all involve the principle of paradoxical balance. An intrinsic element of mystery is an invaluable aid in theology and ministry. We must finally conclude that, though we consider many of its advocates exemplary
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Christians and theologians, neo-theism is out of balance and off center. One indicator of the inadequacy of openness theism is its overall inapplicability at the pastoral and ecclesial levels of Christian faith and life.

Notes
1. I deeply appreciate Larry Wood’s encouragement and dialogue on this project, a revision of my presentation at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI: March 11-13, 2004).
15. The SPS group to which this article was originally presented (Group Leader Ed Decker) discussed whether pressures of the problem of evil may drive some toward an openness position. I have to agree, however, with my wife (!), who argued during that session that our circumstances should not shape our theology though our theology should inform our experience.
21. Openness advocates insist their theology does not undermine confidence in God but
arguments such as comfort drawn from divine ignorance during tragedy are not at all convincing. Cf. Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum*, 47.


26. Other examples include references that God speaks (Gen. 1:3), hears (Ex. 16:12), sees (Gen. 6:12), smells (I Sam 26:19), laughs (Ps. 2:4), whistles (Isa. 7:18), has eyes (Amos 9:4), hands (Ps. 139:5), arms (Isa 51:9), ears (Isa. 22:14), and feet (Nahum 1:3). Cf. *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* by William Sanford La Sor, David, Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 172.

27. The following represents an attempt to articulate theological issues underlying the openness position with a view toward pastoral application.


46. See Oden, *The Living God*, 70-72.

47. Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal*.
