



Openness Theology

Part 7: Living With A Mystery

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Isaiah 55:8-9 - “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Are you willing to live with the reality that God’s ways are not yours and His thoughts are not like yours? I suggest that unless you want to be an idolater, you better get used to worshipping, loving, and adoring a God you cannot completely explain or understand.

We better learn to live with the incomprehensibility of God’s nature and His ways.

One of the traits of openness theology which makes it appealing is its ability to resolve all conflict, explain every antinomy, and make God completely explainable and understandable.¹ Of course the problem is that it makes God just like us.

Openness claims to answer it all and remove the incomprehensible. They say that there are no apparent contradictions that we must live with. What about divine sovereignty and human responsibility? No problem. God isn’t sovereign and doesn’t know the future. There is no conflict between man making choices and God directing every event toward His ultimate goal.

What about the mystery of the providence of God and human suffering? No problem says the open theist, God didn’t see it coming, isn’t using it, and wishes He could stop it. He just can’t.

What about prayer? God is much more relatable when

He doesn’t know what we are going to pray for or how we will respond to Him.

Where is the mystery? What is left to explain? Nothing. Open theism *seems* to answer the problem. *Seems*. In actuality it falls miserably short, and God’s glory and person are attacked in the process.

This is the final article on openness theology and I think it is appropriate in light of all we have learned in previous months to talk about living with divine mysteries.

The Appeal to Our Flesh

The customer is supreme in our culture. The same philosophy is dominant within the church. Christians actually “church shop.” They are looking not for sound doctrine, good teaching, and a place where they can serve others. Instead, Christians move freely from one church to the next looking for “a place for my teens,” “where my needs are met,” or “where we enjoy the music.” First things become secondary, and secondary things begin to reign supreme.

You can “have it your way.” Do you want a God that fits your preconceived notions, doesn’t offend and isn’t difficult to live with? “Give me an order of openness theology, a small side of God, and a latte.”

In openness theology God waits on us to hear our opinions and requests, our wants and desires, and then moves accordingly. We are significant in shaping the future and just imagine what a pickle God is in without us. Just notice how significant we are to the whole purpose and plan of God.

Our Christian churches are saturated with “self esteem” theology and a mindset that demands that we have our own say in the eternal plan and purpose of God. Along comes the open theist who says, “God respects you and your free

¹ For a description of the beliefs and proponents of open theism, their attack on the atonement of Christ, and a discussion of open theism and its relation to suffering and prayer, and the subject of free will, see previous articles in this series. You can read archived columns on the website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

will so much that He would never decide the course of your life or make decisions without your input. He waits to hear what you want before He makes His decisions.” Our fleshly natural ears hear this and we reply, “Well, of course. What would God ever do without me?”

As Bruce Ware writes, “*Open theism has gained a hearing, it seems clear to me, only because of the immensely low view of God and the unrealistically high view of self held in our churches and reinforced everywhere in our culture.*”²

God the Incomprehensible

Contrary to what we are told by open theists, God is not small enough to understand. He cannot be fully known. His ways cannot be fully explained. He cannot be grasped or completely understood.

Why should we have a problem with that? He cannot be comprehended, but He can be apprehended. We can understand enough to worship, love, and adore Him. We can understand enough to relate to God and obey Him and commune with Him. We will never understand it all. We better get used to living with that reality.

A.W. Tozer writes, “*When we try to imagine what God is like we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. If we insist upon trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts; and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand.*”³

Yet we long to know Him. The yearning to know what cannot be known, to comprehend the Incomprehensible, to touch and taste the Unapproachable, arises from the image of God in the nature of man. Deep calleth unto deep, and though polluted and landlocked by the mighty disaster theologians call the Fall, the soul senses its origin and longs to return to its Source.⁴

God can be known in the heart while He is infinitely aloof from our minds. It is a paradox best expressed by Frederick W. Faber when he wrote that God is “darkness to

the intellect but sunshine to the heart.”⁵

In their attempt to make God manageable, the open theist has constructed an idol. It is an idol that sheds light on the intellect, but cannot touch the heart.

Ways Above Ours

Not only is God’s nature above us, but His ways are not ours. We are forced to live with things we cannot understand or explain. God has not answered all our questions or concerns.

Any time that the finite encounters the infinite, the limited crosses the limitless, the creature bumps into the creator, or time intersects with eternity, there will inevitably be mystery.

We must live with mystery in every area. How did God conceive in Mary a child without human seed? How can you explain the virgin birth? Can you understand that? A mystery.

How can God create everything out of nothing? What holds an atom together? How does God uphold it all by His Word?

How can God be infinite in every capacity? Infinite knowledge? Can we conceive of such a thing? Can we conceive of perfection? Can we understand a being that is dependent upon nothing and no one for His existence? Can you understand how God can have no beginning and no end? How is it that He can exist eternally and NEVER change?

How did God write His Word through human authors so that they used the very words and even punctuation exactly as He wanted? Who wrote Romans? Paul or the Holy Spirit? Both? How did that work? It’s a mystery.

Election is a mystery. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (**Eph. 1:3-5**). He predestined us to adoption as sons. He did this without looking to see what you would do with the offer of salvation. He chose you. You did not choose Him. Why did He choose me over someone else? That is mystery. He has not revealed it. It is in the counsel of His will and we can’t know that. You have nothing to do with it. You don’t have *you* to thank for your election, but God (**2 Thess. 2:13**).

Prayer, suffering, divine sovereignty, human choice, infinitude of God; all of these are beyond us. They are mysteries. You have to live with them.

2 Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003) 102.

3 A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), 8.

4 Ibid, 9.

5 Ibid.

The Offense of the Mystery

It is offensive to our pride and our flesh to be told that we have to live with the mystery. Rather than humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and be content to be the creature, man attempts to climb to the heights of heaven and be like God.

You and I are the creatures. We are the clay not the Potter. God is the Sovereign Creator who creates, redeems, judges, saves, elects, disposes, purposes and executes His purposes without consulting you. I'm sorry if that offends you, but it is true.

To be quite frank, God does not care how you feel about His will, His purposes, or His plans. He did not consult you when he predestined the time of your birth, place of your birth and the number of your days (**Psalm 139:16**). I'm sorry if that offends you, but it is true.

God knows what you are going to do before you do it. He knows everything there is to know. He knows the future, not because He is a good fortuneteller, but *because He wrote history before one atom was placed in motion*. There is no choice you can make, no purpose you can propose, no word you can say or deed you can do which will surprise Him. You cannot change the future any more than you can change the past.

God does not sit around heaven discovering moment by moment what you will do. He is not a cosmic bellhop who comes running to meet your every need. I'm sorry if that offends you, but it is true.

My God is in the heavens and He does whatever He pleases (**Psalm 115:3**). His purpose will be established and He will accomplish all His good pleasure (**Isa. 46:8-11**). To quote Nebuchadnezzar, "*His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?'*" (**Daniel 4:34-35**)

Mystery offends us. We don't want to be left out of the loop. We think we should be in on the secret counsel of God's will. "How dare He move and not consult me? How dare He determine something without giving me the final say?" Do we actually believe that? We won't say it, but our thinking betrays us.

Consider the doctrine of election for a moment. People stumble over the doctrine of election not because it is incomprehensible, but because it assaults our pride. We

want something to do with our salvation. We don't like having to admit that we are dead sinners who can contribute nothing to our salvation. We don't like being reminded that if it weren't for the grace of God in His sovereign choice of us, we would perish for all eternity.

Certainly, God saw in me something worthy of His choice. Certainly, God saw that I would improve upon the grace that He would offer and that I would be bright enough, enlightened enough, and smart enough to choose to follow Christ if offered salvation. Certainly, God from the vantage point of heaven could see what I would choose to do and so He went along with it and chose me. **WRONG! A THOUSAND TIMES WRONG!** God chose you. You had nothing to do with it. You get no glory or credit.

A God like Us

Don't you think it is possible that God could be bigger than the three pounds of cells resting between your ears? Offended or not, let's give God permission to be bigger than us. Let's just admit that God is beyond our understanding. Let's stop insisting on being little sovereigns running around on earth.

The open theist has fashioned a god that is much like us. He wonders about the future, second guesses His decisions, doubts the wisdom of past actions, does his best to offer advice without any guarantees, and stands by and watches suffering without any ability to stop it. God condemns the wicked in **Psalm 50:21** for presuming that He is like men saying, "You thought that I was just like you." How wrong they were. How wrong the open theist is.

The open theist has also done his best to make us a little more godlike. The future is ours to choose. We shape our destinies. Our choices direct history. God learns what we think. Our wills shape the future. We tell God what we like in prayer and He does His best to accommodate us.

God is humanized. Man is deified. That is the result of openness theology. God's glory is diminished, man's pride is pampered.

In the Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis presents Christ as the Lion, Aslan. He is a fierce, but loving Lion. His paws are frighteningly terrible, sharp as knives with the claws extended, but soft and velvety when the claws are drawn in. He is both good and fearsome.

At one point, Mr. Beaver is asked by a child, "Is He safe?" He replies, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course He isn't safe. But He is good."⁶ At another point

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Trophy,

Mr. Beaver says, "He's wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion."

C.S. Lewis as narrator says, "People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time."

In the final book of the series an evil ape drapes a lion skin over a senseless ass. The ass pretends to be a lion. It is an evil and disastrous pretense that leads many Narnians astray.

Such is the "god" of openness theology. He is stripped of His "fearsomeness" and we end up with a senseless ass dressed up in the Lion's skin who pretends to be God. However, He is a sinister imposter who leads many astray.

Live with the mystery!

Without Wax -



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1978), 86.