



Openness Theology

Part 6: The Golden Calf of Freewill Theism

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John 8:34 - “Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin’.”

Idolatry is at the heart of openness theology.¹ Openness theology is idolatrous in two ways:

First, it is the worship of a false god.² The limited, finite, flimsy god of open theism is not the true and living God of the Bible. Therefore, to worship that god is to worship an idol of your own making.

Second, openness theology is a belief system about God that is crafted around the idol of “free will.” You have probably already observed that the free will of man is the altar on which the omniscience of God is sacrificed. Let’s review the openness position.

Forging a Golden Calf

If God knows completely and perfectly all things that will come to pass, then whatever God knows will come to pass, must come to pass. That is to say, there is no possibility that something that God knows will happen, will not happen.

Here’s the dilemma for the open theist. If God knows what I will choose, then I will choose that and nothing else. If I cannot choose something else, and thus surprise God with my choice, then I have no true “freedom of choice.”

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, see the previous articles in this series. You can read archived columns on the website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

² More on this coming up in Part 7.

Something has to give. Either man is completely “free” (in a libertarian sense), or man’s freedom is limited by the sovereign providence and decree of God. What gives for the open theist?

You guessed it. Rather than come to a biblical understanding of God, His providence, and the will of man, open theists choose to bow to their idol of free will and fashion a god that would never do any harm to it.

They end up with a god who does not know the future, cannot foreknow even your existence, will never tamper with your decisions, will never stop you from doing something, cannot actually save anybody (but only desires that people will choose Him), cannot do anything about our suffering or work anything good out of it, and cannot answer prayer.

Is there another way to understand this difficult issue? Yes.

The Free Will Controversy

The subject of man’s will has been a topic of hot discussion for over 1500 years. Augustine debated Pelagius. Anselm debated Bernard. Luther debated Erasmus and called the will of man the “hinge” upon which the door of the Reformation turned.³ Calvin debated Arminius, and Jonathan Edwards stood

³ The question during the Reformation was whether man was able by an act of his own will to do good, improve grace, and thus be saved, or whether man is hopelessly lost and unable (apart from effective divine grace) to even believe the gospel. Luther was right, and the last 500 years of church history have shown that your view of the will of man will make you either a Catholic or a Protestant. In theological terms, it is the difference between *synergism* (Catholic belief that man contributes to his salvation and cooperates with God by believing) or *monergism* (Reformed belief that salvation is an act of God Who alone gets glory for redemption).

opposite Charles Finney on the issue. What does the Bible say about the will of man? It is no mystery.

First, man has a will. No one denies that. The debate over the will of man does not center on the *existence* of man's will, but on the *condition* of man's will. No classical theist or Reformed theologian denies the existence of the will of man. Man is not a robot. He is not coerced to do things against his will. The Bible everywhere assumes that man has a will.

Israel was commanded to choose which God they would serve (**Josh. 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21**). Men are eternally condemned because of what they choose. They will not come to Christ and thus have life (**John 5:40**). They will not obey the gospel (**2 Thess. 1:8**). Men will not come to the light because their deeds are evil (**John 3:19-20**).

The presentation of the gospel is an appeal to the will of man. The gospel commands men to choose Christ by repenting and placing faith in Him. For example, Paul commanded the Athenians to repent (**Acts 17:30-31**).

Experience tells us that man has a will. Men and women choose the words that they speak, the foods that they eat, and a myriad of other things on a daily basis. We select our own thoughts, words, and actions.

Second, man's will is not free. This does not mean that man is not free to choose. I freely choose and freely exercise my will. But that is not to say that the will is completely free. My will is restricted and limited by things which are beyond my control. My will is not autonomous. There are certain things which influence, direct, control, and sway it.

For instance, I was born at a certain time in history, to a certain family, of a certain race and sex, in a certain place, and in a certain economic strata. I didn't choose these things, nor can I. They are beyond my control and they influence my choices. In other words, my will is not free in the libertarian autonomous sense. It is influenced by a host of factors.

More importantly, Scripture says that my will is affected by sin. Not just my sin, but Adam's as well. When Adam fell in **Genesis 3**, he did not just wound himself, or break his little toe. Adam broke his neck (spiritually speaking) and destroyed his entire race. He

plunged the human race into sin, depravity, and hopelessness.

The result of the Fall is that fallen man is a "slave to sin." Jesus said, "He who sins is a slave to sin" (**John 8:34**). Paul agreed with Jesus. Using the same language, Paul said we were "slaves to sin" (**Romans 6:17, 20**). So is my will free, or is it a slave to sin? Or am I to believe that I can simply will myself free? In case the obvious has not struck you yet, slaves are not free.

Man's will is in bondage to sin and to Satan. He is not autonomous. He is not free to choose to do good. He cannot will himself to Christ. Man is dead in his trespasses and sins and is a child of wrath (**Eph. 2:1-3**). He cannot do good (**Rom. 3:1-10**), he cannot understand spiritual things (**1 Cor. 2:14**), he cannot submit his mind and life to God or be subject to the will of God because he is unable to do so (**Rom. 8:6-8**). In fact, man cannot even come to Christ unless the Father first draws him (**John 6:44, 65**).

How can we for one moment think that man's will operates completely free from outside influences? Why do you think that Scripture uses terms like "redemption" and "deliverance" and "salvation?"

The truth is that, apart from divine regenerating grace, you and I would live our lives choosing unrighteousness, sin, rebellion, idolatry, and wickedness. We would choose these things because we are sinful, depraved, wicked human beings who have been plunged into a state of sin by Adam's disobedience (**Rom. 5**). We love darkness rather than light.

If you have been saved by God, it is because God in His grace reached down to you and made Christ and His sacrifice a thing of beauty and not a thing to scorn. It is because God has drawn you to Himself, and by His grace you believed. Was that the choice you made? Yes. Was it made apart from divine grace? No.

It is all a gift. We are given by the Father to the Son (**John 6:35-40**). The Father draws us to the Son (**John 6:44, 65**). Repentance is granted as a gift (**Acts 3:26**).⁴ Belief in Christ is a gift which is granted to us (**Phil. 1:29**) and the faith to believe is a gift as well (**Eph. 2:8-**

⁴ See also Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

10). It is all to the glory of God alone; *sola deo gloria*.

Resolving the Dilemma

So does man choose? Yes. Are our choices real and significant? Yes. Moreover, God holds us accountable for how we choose and judges us on the basis of our choice. Man is responsible for what and how he chooses. Does man have real choice? Yes.

Does this mean, as the open theist asserts, that God cannot know these choices? The answer is no. God's knowledge is certain (He knows absolutely what will come to pass), and our actions are free. Those two concepts are not incompatible.

God is sovereign, and man is a free moral agent. That is the mystery of providence. God knows and ordains all that comes to pass, yet does so without doing violence to the will of the creature. God ordains future events through the free choices of His creatures. God directs the means as well as the ends by His providence, and does so through the free choices of men and women.

The god of open theism is a puny god who cannot know the future, direct the future, or do so through the choices of people he creates. The God of classic theism is able to ordain the means, the ends, and the choices, to know them perfectly, and to do so without coercing the will of the creature.

Implications of Openness Freedom

The open theist's commitment to the autonomous free will of the creature raises a multitude of problems.

First, Scripture does not say that God will not influence or tamper with our wills. Where did we ever get the notion that God is a gentleman who will not make a man will one thing over another? After all, aren't you glad that God made you willing to come to the light? Aren't you glad that God made you willing to repent of your sin and trust Christ? Or do you have **yourself** to thank for those things?

Look at Nebuchadnezzar. Because he was not willing to give God glory, God made him live in the field and crawl around on his hands and feet, eating grass. After seven years his reason returned, and he gave

God glory (**Daniel 4:28-37**). Was God tampering with Neb's free will? At the end, Nebuchadnezzar was willing to give God glory, but God's actions had everything to do with that.

How about Paul? Saul of Tarsus was a Christ-hating, rebellious, self-righteous persecutor on his way to Damascus to persecute the church. God knocked him off his horse, shone a brilliant light in his face, blinded him and said, "I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness and I am sending you to the Gentiles" (**Acts 26:12-18**).

Do you want to pause a moment here to debate with Paul the subject of "free will?" Is God tampering with Paul's will? Did God stop to ask Paul what Paul wanted? Did God take care not to "tamper" with Paul's will? Shall I continue with other examples, like Isaiah, Moses, Joshua, David, and Abraham?

Second, this commitment to exalting the autonomous free will of man inevitably makes man sovereign.

In openness theology, everyone is free but God. Man is free, man can choose, man can create, ordain and determine the future. God cannot. Supposedly, He has to sit on the sidelines as a spectator and find out what we will do and then react to that.

They assert that man is free. If there is any major doctrine that threatens that premise, it is immediately jettisoned. That is why I call it the "golden calf" of openness theology. They worship the free will of man, and will redefine God to fit their new idol.

But what about God's freedom? Is He not free to do as He pleases? Is He not free to rule and reign and predetermine and command? Is He not free to do with His creatures what He chooses? Not in the world of open theism. In their thinking, it is man who is sovereignly directing the future, and it is God who must learn from us what we choose and then act accordingly.

For the open theist, nothing is certain in the future (other than that God will ultimately win), because God can't predestine or predetermine anything. This leads openness leaders like John Sanders to assert that the

cross could have been avoided.⁵

However, the fact is that God does predestine. He predestines us to adoption as His sons (**Eph. 1:5**), to our inheritance (**Eph. 1:11**), and to be conformed to the image of His Son (**Rom. 8:28-30**).

Is it possible that man, by his free will, could have thwarted the plan and purpose of God in delivering Christ up for our sins?

What if Judas had chosen not to betray Christ? What if Pilate had determined to release Jesus and crucify Barabbas? What if the mob had chosen not to cry out for crucifixion? Such a scenario is almost unthinkable.

God does not leave the accomplishment of His plans or the course of the future up to the free-will whims of His creatures. We are not sovereign, He is!

The crucifixion of Christ was not some capricious event that unfolded at the hands of men, unforeseen and unexpected by God. It was His predetermined plan (**Acts 2:23**) and was predestined to occur (**Acts 4:28**). Nothing could stop it. It was to happen exactly as God knew it would. Judas would freely choose betrayal, and Pilate would freely choose crucifixion rather than release. Aren't you glad that God is calling the shots and not Pilate? Aren't you glad that God is calling the shots and not you?

Man's freedom is limited by God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is never limited by man's freedom. With their worship of "free will," open theists make the mistake of humanizing God while they seek to deify mere men. That is a mistake with eternal consequences.

Without Wax -



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Quotable Quote

"God is glorious, in part, because He reigns over all. What folly to imagine we may clothe ourselves with the robe of His glory by thinking that it is we, not Him, whose will stands inviolable."

- Bruce A. Ware, *Whatever Happened to the Reformation*

⁵ John Sanders, *The God who Risks* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 92-133.