The name "open theism" derives from the affirmation that God Himself allows free-will to mankind and is open to new experiences; including the experience of learning the progressive events of world history as the events unfold.

Throughout Christian history, orthodox believers expressed a common understanding of the nature of God labeled "classical theism." The last 15 years witnessed the development of a reformation of the evangelical understanding of the doctrine of God. This movement represents a major paradigm shift in the understanding of God by some evangelicals.

This paper is a summary of the writings of Gregory Boyd (God of the Possible), Richard Rice, John Sanders, Clark H. Pinnock, and William Hasker (The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God).

A Total View of God

- There are two categories of Scriptures in the Bible that apply to the topic of God’s foreknowledge and the nature of the future.

1. Most of us are familiar with the many passages that talk about God as foreknowing and/or predestining certain things about the future. This theme could be called “future determinism” (the doctrine or belief that everything, including every human act, is caused by something and that there is no real free will).

2. There is another category of Scriptures which talks about God as changing his mind, altering his plans, canceling prophecy in the light of changing circumstances, expressing uncertainty about the future, being disappointed in the way things turn out, and even occasionally regretting (being sorry) the outcome of his own decisions. This theme could be call “future openness”. This group of Scriptures depict God as facing a partly open future. He chooses, in these cases, to not control and/or foreknow exactly what is going to happen.

- There is really no difficulty in reconciling the two themes or groups of Scriptures as long as one doesn’t assume at the start that the group of Scriptures depicting “future determinism” tells the whole story about God’s nature and foreknowledge.

  - If we don’t assume that the future is entirely settled, there is an easy way to integrate the idea of future determinism with the idea of future openness.

  - Rather than it being “beneath” God, Scriptures describes the openness of God to the future as one of his attributes of greatness.

- This paper’s approach is that both themes are equally descriptive of the way God and the future actually are.

  - This is the “open view of God” or, “open view of the future.”

    - It does not hold that all of the future is solidly settled ahead of time. There are some settled realities and to whatever degree the future is yet open to be decided by free agents, it is an unsettled reality. God knows the total realities of both the settled and the unsettled.

    - To this extent. God knows it as a realm of possibilities, not certainties.

  - This view affirms God’s omniscience, but the issue is the content of the reality of the future? Some things are settled and some are open to the free will of man.

    - In other words the future contains possibilities rather than no possibilities.
The real issue is not about God’s omniscience, but about the nature of the future. Is it exhaustively settled from all eternity, or is it partly open?

**The Classical View of Divine Foreknowledge (Classical Theism)**

The classical view of God is what most theologians since the time of Augustine (4th to 5th century) have adopted and promoted in one form or another.

- **God is unchanging in every respect.**
  - His character, his will, his knowledge, and his experience never vary.
  - Therefore, God’s knowledge of the future must be un changed.
    - The future can never be adjusted.
    - There can be no “maybe”, “possibly this” or “possibly that”.
    - Thus, the future must take place exactly as God eternally foreknew it would take place.
    - The future is exhaustively settled and eternally known by God as such.

- Classical theologians do not agree how the future is eternally settled.
  - Followers of Augustine and Calvin maintain that the future will be a certain way *because God foreknows it this way.*
  - Others follow Arminius and argue that God foreknows the future a certain way *because the future simply will be that way.*
    - In other words, does God’s foreknowledge determine the future, or does the future determine God’s foreknowledge?
    - A shirt depicted this. On one side it had printed,
      - “CALVINISM: This shirt chose me.”
      
      On the other side it had printed,
      - “ARMINIANISM: I chose this shirt.”

- So, If God foreknows a future event, it must either be because he determined it or because it is an inevitable effect of past or present causes.

- However, if *all* future events are determined by God, then he must be ultimately responsible for everything about the future, including evil.

- The overall question is:
  - Do the Scriptures, *as a whole,* reveal that the future is exhaustively settled,
  - Or does God determine (and thus foreknows as settled) *some,* but not *all* of the future.

**Scriptures used to support the view that the future is completely settled.**

- **God is the Sovereign Lord of history.**
  - The Book of Isaiah contains some of the strongest statements regarding the foreknowledge of God.
    - God demonstrated his superiority over idols by showing that he can do what none of them can do—namely, declare the future.
      
      Isaiah 46:9-10 *I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done.*
Isaiah 48:3-5  *The former things I declared long ago, they went out from my mouth and I made them known; then suddenly I did them and they came to pass. Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, I declared them to you from long ago, before they came to pass I announced them to you, so that you would not say, “My idol did them, my carved image and my cast image commanded them.”*

- These are proof texts of the defenders of the classical view of foreknowledge who contend that these verses show that God is certain of all that is to come. They reason that if God can declare the end from the beginning, what could possibly be uncertain to him?
- Does this statement imply that everything about the future is settled in God’s mind?
  - God announced and then proved his ability to bring about events which the idols could not do, thus, proving his superiority over idols.
  - There is no doubt that God had plans and intentions and that he is able to do all he has planned.
  - And that the future is settled to whatever extent the Creator decides to settle it.
  - The question is has God planned every detail of all the future.

**Examples of God predicting future events throughout Scripture are interpreted as confirmations of the classical view of God’s foreknowledge. For our present purposes, these can be broken down into five categories.**

- **Foreknowledge of the chosen people.**
  - In Genesis 15:13-14 the Lord told Abraham that his offspring would be slaves in a foreign land for four hundred years but, afterward they shall come out with great possessions.
  - In Jeremiah 29:10-11, similarly, when Israel was in Babylonian captivity the Lord promised them After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place [Jerusalem]. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.
  - Does God deciding to have his chosen people remain in captivity for four hundred years in one instance and for seventy years in another demand that God have control and/or foreknow every future decision the Israelites would make or every future decision of every person of the future?

- **Foreknowledge of individuals.**
  - Twice the Lord names individuals before they are born and provides some detail about their lives.
    - Josiah was to tear down the pagan altars and destroy the pagan priesthood that plagued Israel (1 Kings 13:2-3 and 2 Kings22:1, 23:15-15).
    - Cyrus was to help rebuild Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28).
  - Jesus tells Peter ahead of time that he would deny Him three times (Matthew 26:34)
  - The Lord appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations when he was still in the womb (Jer. 1:5)
  - And set Paul apart before he was born (Galatians 1:15-16).
  - Defenders of the classical view of foreknowledge consider this evidence that God foreknows everything that every individual will do before he or she is born.
As a supernatural sign to his people, God named Josiah and Cyrus and declared their accomplishments before they were born.

- This decree obviously set strict parameters around the freedom of the parents in naming these individuals.
- It also restricted the scope of freedom these individuals could exercise as it pertained to particular foreordained activities.
- However, these two individuals and their parents remained self-determining individuals in other matters.
- Do these examples necessitate that no parent has a freedom to choose their children’s names?
- Does the Lord’s understanding of how Peter would react under pressure necessitate that the future is totally settled for everyone of every age?
- Even though God had a life plan for Jeremiah and Paul before they were born, Paul suggested to King Agrippa that he could have chosen to be disobedient to the heavenly vision by which he was called (Acts 26:19). This suggests that God’s call on a person’s life isn’t a guarantee that the person will follow the call.

- **Foreknowledge of Christ’s ministry.**
  - Scriptures tells us that [Christ] was destined before the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20).
  - The Old Testaments contains many passages that anticipate Christ’s coming such as:
    - Zechariah 12:10 where the Lord says the Jews would someday look on the one whom they have pierced [and] . . . mourn for him.
    - And Isaiah 53:9 with Matt. 27:57-60 where the suffering servant would die with the wicked though he would be buried with the rich.
  - Jesus also foretold what would happen to him several times throughout his own ministry. He would suffer at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16:21).
    - When this actually happened, Scriptures says it was according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23, 4:28).
  - Defenders of the classical view take this as confirmation that all of the future is foreknown by God as settled.

- **Foreknowledge of the elect.**
  - Defenders of the classical view of foreknowledge argue that Scripture demonstrates that God foreknows, if not predestines, who his “elect” will be.
    - Paul teaches us that those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son (Romans 8:29).
    - In Ephesians he tells believers that [God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love (1:4).
    - We were given grace in Christ Jesus before the ages began (2 Timothy 1:9).
  - Defenders of the classical view argue that if we were chosen and given grace before the world began, God must have foreknown (if not foreordained) that we would believe before the world began as well.
Foreknowledge of end times.

- In several instances, scriptural authors seem to make predictions about things that will take place at the end of history.
  - Paul says that . . . in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons (1 Timothy 4:1).
  - Among other things, these people forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods (1 Timothy 4:3).
  - He informs the Thessalonica church that before the final day, a great rebellion would come and a certain lawless one would exalt himself above every so-called God or object of worship and would take his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).
  - Finally, we should mention the Book of Revelation, since in the mind of many contemporary readers this book is about events that will occur at the very end of history.
    - Some defenders of classical foreknowledge consider this further confirmation of the exhaustive settledness of the future in the mind of God.

- It can be agreed my most that from the afore mentioned Scriptures that God knows what he wants to know, decrees whatever he wishes to decree, and controls whatever he chooses to control.
  - It is easy to read our beliefs into the evidence rather than allowing all the evidence to speak for itself.
  - If we have an all-or-nothing concept that either the future is totally settled or totally open, then there are Scriptures describing God which must be avoided or dismissed as non-literal.

The God Who Faces a Partially Open Future.

There is a second category of Scriptures that depicts the future as partly open. Balancing God’s intentions for the future with the decisions of free agents brings us to the full picture. Scripture does not contradict itself and we must deal with the fact that the future cannot be both partially open and totally settled!

Scriptures that seem to support the view that the future is partially open.

Because of the dominance of the classical view of foreknowledge with its overemphasis on the theme that the future is already determined, much of this material may be unfamiliar to you. However, this material is just as much a part of the inspired Word of God and needs to be taken just as seriously, and as literally, as the more familiar passages. It seems that these passages strongly suggest that the future is partly open and that God knows it as such.

We will break down the theme of future openness into several sections.

- God’s Regret Regarding Pre-flood Humanity.
  - Genesis 6:6 says: And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.
    - The genuineness of his regret is evidenced by the fact that the Lord immediately took measures to destroy humanity and start over.
    - If everything about world history were totally settled and know by God before he created the world, God would have know with absolute certainty that humans would come to this wicked state, at this time, before he created them.
    - Doesn’t the fact that God regretted having made humankind, to the point of destroying it, suggest that it wasn’t a foregone conclusion at the time God created human beings that they would fall into this state of wickedness?
• God’s Regret over Saul’s Kingship.
  o Having an earthly king was not God’s choice, but the appointment of Saul could have worked out well. Scripture tells us that God had intended to bless him and his household for many generations. 1 Samuel 13:13 says: “How foolish!” Samuel exclaimed. “You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you. Had you kept it, the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever.
  o Unfortunately when Saul’s heart changed and he chose to forsake God’s ways, the Lord said, “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me” (1 Samuel 15:10).
  o This is reiterated several verses later, the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel (1 Samuel 15:35).
  o How could the Lord truly experience regret for making Saul king if he was already absolutely certain that Saul would act the way he did.
  o Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than what we expected or hoped for when the decision was made.
  o When we understand that the future is partly open and that humans are genuinely free to make decisions, this removes the mystery about God regretting decisions he made.
  o God made a wise decision about Saul because it had the greatest possibility of yielding the best results. Saul’s will was a variable in the final outcome. God did not make an unwise decision, he left the result open to Saul’s will.

• God is Willing to Take Risks.
  o We normally regard a person who refuses to take risks as being insecure. Don’t we ordinarily regard a compulsion to micro-manage as evidence of weakness, not strength?
  o The only way to deny that God takes risks is to maintain that everything that occurs in world history is exactly what God wanted to occur. If anything is other than what God wanted, he risked not getting what he wanted at some point.
  o If we insist that God doesn’t take risks, then we must accept that things such as sin, child molestation, and people going to hell are all in accordance with God’s will.
  o But, God is not willing any to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). By leaving the sinners personal decision to repent open, God, many times, doesn’t get his way and took risks.

• God Asks Questions About the Future.
  o God sometimes expresses uncertainty about the future. Then the LORD said to Moses: “How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? (Numbers 14:11).
  o Similarly, we later read of God asking Hosea concerning Israel, I hate the calf-shaped idol of Israel! I am very angry with the people. How long will they remain unclean? Hosea 8:5:
  o In 1 Kings 22:20-21 The LORD said, ‘Who can entice Ahab to go into battle against Ramoth-gilead so he can be killed?’ There were many suggestions, and finally a spirit approached the LORD and said, ‘I can do it!’
  o The fact that the Lord continued for centuries, with much frustration, to try to get the Israelites not to “despise” him and to be “innocent” suggests that the wonder expressed in these above questions was genuine. The duration of the Israelites’ stubbornness was truly an open issue.
• **God Confronts the Unexpected**

Sometimes God tells us that things turn out differently than he expected.

- In Isaiah 5 the Lord describes Israel as his vineyard and himself as its loving owner. He explains that, as the owner of the vineyard, he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes? (v. 2). He then asks, *What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?* (v. 4). Because it unexpectedly failed to yield grapes, the Lord sadly concludes, *I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured* (v. 5).

  - If everything is eternally known and certain to God, how could the Lord twice say that he expected one thing to occur, only to have something different occur? How could the Lord expect, hope for, and even strive (*what more was there to do?*) for something he knew from all eternity would never happen? Does this passage not imply that the future of Israel, the vineyard, was not certain until they settled it by choosing to yield wild grapes?

- I thought you’d return, but you did not.

  - The Lord said, concerning Israel’s remarkable stubbornness, *“I thought, ‘After she has done all this, she will return to me.’ But she did not return”* (Jer. 3:7). NLT

  - Several verses later, *I thought: How I long to make you My sons . . . I thought: You will call Me, my Father, and never turn away from Me. However, as a woman may betray her lover, so you have betrayed Me, house of Israel. This is the LORD’s declaration* (Jer. 3:19-29).

- It “Never entered My mind”

  - Three times the Lord expresses shock over Israel’s ungodly behavior by saying that they were doing things *which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind*” (Jer. 19:5; 7:31; 32:35).

- God gets frustrated.

  - Several times the Lord tried to convince Moses that he could use him despite his speech impediment. Moses repeatedly refused to accept this. Finally *the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses.* . . . (Exod. 4:10-15).

  - If God already knew how Moses would react or if it was already predestined how Moses would have to act, God’s anger against Moses would not be justified.

- Another example of the Lord’s frustration is found in Ezekiel where the Lord says: *“And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them;”* (Ezekiel 22:30-31).

  - It is difficult to understand how God could have sincerely sought someone to intercede if he as eternally certain that there would be no one.

• **God Tests People to Know Their Character.**

- God frequently tests his people to see if they will choose to follow him or not. He creates us free, for his goal is love, and love must be chosen. It cannot be preprogrammed. And so from the very beginning (Genesis 3), God’s call to faithfulness has involved testing. God is seeking to find out whether or not the people he calls will lovingly choose him above all else.

- Deut. 8:2 says: *And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.*
In Judges 2:22 the Lord withheld assistance to Israel in battle so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the LORD, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not.” These testings were for God to know what was in their hearts, not for the Israelites to know their own hearts.

Many times the outcomes of these tests were not what God hoped for.

- Psalms 95:10-11 says: *For forty years I was grieved with that generation, And said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, And they do not know My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’”*

- Hebrews 3:7-10 says: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.’”

The examples above describe God’s frustration with Israel regarding their hardness toward him in the day of trial (Heb. 3:8). If the future of the Israelites was already totally settled why test someone you already know will flunk the test? Why did God go ahead and test them, be grieved for forty years and then be angry with them if he already knew the outcome before they started?

WHAT PRACTICAL DIFFERENCE DOES THE BALANCED OPEN VIEW MAKE?

- First, this view makes it possible to come to an agreement based on facts, clear rational and sensible reasoning, and to consistently hold together the entirety of the Scriptures which otherwise stand in tension with each other.

  - The doctrine of the Trinity was plausible by the early church largely on the grounds that it was able to reconcile the otherwise different teachings that there was only one God and yet that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each fully God.

  - The incarnation was plausible by the early church mostly because it brought together the seemingly contradictory teachings that Jesus is fully human, on one hand and the teaching that he is fully God, on the other hand.

  - Not on the same level as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, this open view reconciles other seemingly contradictory passages of the Word.

- Secondly, the openness issue affects a person’s view of God in significant ways. A person’s mental view of God determines how we relate to God, for better or for worse.

  - It seems that the doctrine that the future is eternally settled in the mind of God sometimes contributes to a harmful picture of God.

    - This picture says that God experiences no possibilities, and that possibilities are not real, for God’s knowledge, not ours, determines what reality is.

    - If we believe that possibilities are not real, we will be more inclined to accept things that we could, and should, revolt against.

      - Examples of this are: Christians reflecting an attitude of resignation toward sin and evil in their own lives and in the world around them.

      - Others become despondent in their troubles with an attitude that God will not change the present reality.
If we believe that what transpires in the future is not a foregone conclusion, but is significantly up to us to decide, we will be more inclined to be more proactive, believing and expecting better things in the future and exercising our authority given to us by Jesus Christ.

Third, if Christians don’t see how praying can make any difference, they are inclined to pray less passionately.

- If one believes that God’s plans cannot truly be changed, and the future is already settled, the urgency of prayer simply doesn’t make much sense. They interpret the cliché “God is in control” to mean that “God controls everything.”
- What real difference could prayer possibly make? Maybe that is where the common saying that “prayer changes us, not God” came from.
- The open view holds that the future is not entirely settled and that God’s plans can change.
  - This view makes the urgency of prayer understandable in a way that neither classical Arminianism nor classical Calvinism can. (James Arminius, for example, wrote, “God knows all things from eternity. He knows all things immeasurably. He knows all things immutable, his knowledge not being varied.”)
  - The open view declares that some of the future genuinely depends on our prayer and faith.
  - On a practical level, this translates into people who are more hopeful and less despondent and depressed.

Fourth, the open view harmonizes with God’s goal of creation in the participation of humans in their relationship with God throughout eternity.

- He wanted a creation that consisted of personal, morally responsible, free beings.
- He thus ordained that we have a “say-so” in how things transpire, in contrast to being robots.
- Because God wants us to be empowered, because he desires us to communicate with him, and because he wants us to learn dependency on him, he graciously grants us the ability to significantly affect him. This is the power of petitioning through prayer.
- He desires to have an authentic, dynamic relationship with us as real, empowered persons.
- Like a loving father, he wants not only to influence us but to be influenced by us.
- In the open view, God has sovereignly ordained that prayer be one of our central means of influencing what transpires in history. It is our means of influencing God’s decisions about the future—sometimes.

Fifth, the open view affects our view concerning our understanding and response to the problem of evil.

- If God is all good and thus always does what is best, and if God knew before Adolf Hitler was born, exactly that he would massacre the Jews, why did he give allow him life?
  - If one rejects the open view, and accepts that God possesses exhaustively settled foreknowledge, one must conclude that God believed that allowing Hitler’s massacre of the Jews and many others was preferable to his not allowing it.
- It is difficult to suppose that God allows all temporal suffering because he foresees a higher purpose behind it.
- It is more difficult to suppose that God has a higher purpose for allowing the birth of individuals he is certain will be damned to eternal suffering in hell.
  - Yet, God’s Word says that God takes no delight in the destruction of the wicked but wants everyone to be saved (Ezek. 18:23; 1 Tim. 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9).
Sixth, in a practical way the open view of the future makes a difference concerning our approach to understanding certain troublesome situations.

- Most things that trouble us are the result of decisions—ours or someone else’s.
- If we hold God responsible because that troubled part of our human history was already totally settled in God’s predestination and foreknowledge, we tend to become very angry with God.
- But, if we understand that these troubles occurred because someone had the freedom to make a decision that was a bad decision, we can then, in trust, turn to God to help us out of it.

Last, God created a world that is a balance of structure and freedom.

- From the interaction within and between atoms to the interaction of gravity and galaxies, God displays a balance of structure and freedom. The insect and animal kingdoms manifest it. Weather patterns and all complex physical processes manifest this balance of structure and freedom.
- Science confirms what the Bible declares: The future is partly open as well as partly settled.
- And God invites his human creation to join him in the freedom within structure that characterized our lives.

Conclusion:

- On the basis of the seven points covered above, I am led to believe that the concept that the future is to some extent open-ended and that God knows it as such has some important, beneficial, and practical implications for our lives.
- We live as if the future is partly open. Our experience of ourselves confirms this in every self-conscious thought we think and every free decision we make.
- It’s all part of the marvelous dance of God’s creation. You can recognize an element of freedom and spontaneity at every level of existence—if you haven’t been blinded by a philosophy that tells you it is an illusion.