

Review: DG237

GOD KNOWS?

a book review of
God of the Possible
by Gregory Boyd
(Baker Book House, 2000)

This review first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 22, number 4 (2000). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

The “open view of God” (OG) is a perspective on God’s nature that has emerged in theological circles over the past two decades. *God of the Possible*, authored by Bethel College (Minnesota) theology professor Gregory Boyd, is an attempt to defend OG for ordinary churchgoers and pastors.

In order to understand OG one must first understand the theological view against which OG proponents are reacting. They are challenging the “classic christian concept of God” (CCCG), the nearly unanimous view held throughout church history. CCCG asserts that God is the immaterial agent (i.e., spirit) and self-existent creator of the universe who is omnipotent (all-powerful), omnipresent (present everywhere), omnibenevolent (all-loving), eternal (always existing while not limited by time and space), immutable (unchanging and unchangeable), and omniscient (having exhaustive knowledge of past, present, and future).

OG proponents agree with much of CCCG, except for their understanding of the last three attributes listed. They believe that God is limited by time, undergoes some change as a result of His personal interaction with His creation (though He does not change in His nature), and is all-knowing but does not have knowledge of the future because the future does not yet exist and thus cannot be an object of knowledge. (Boyd, as we shall see, is ambivalent in his explanation of this point.) In other words, OG proponents agree with CCCG defenders that God has always existed, is unchangeable, and is omniscient, but they understand these terms differently.

Christian theologians have long debated the precise meaning of each of these attributes, with the understanding that the core attributes themselves should never be abandoned. The reason for this is simple: the starting point of Christian theology is God’s metaphysical uniqueness, grounded in both Scripture and the Judaism from which Christianity was born. God is the personal and historically active, self-existent, immaterial, Creator of all else that exists (Exod. 3:14). That truth joined with numerous passages of Scripture and philosophical reflection has led Christian theologians to conclude that God possesses the core attributes listed above.

How one understands these attributes in terms of other aspects of Christian theology (e.g., predestination vs. free will), has been a matter of controversy in church history. One solution that was not considered an option was to deny any of the attributes. To do so would be to deny the clear teaching of Scripture as well as the wisdom of the great minds of the church. This is precisely what Boyd does in *God of the Possible*, although he maintains OG is consistent with Scripture. He focuses his case on the logical impossibility of anyone, including God, knowing future free actions, and then goes on to argue that God changes in relation to how his creatures make choices.

Boyd's case is three-pronged: (1) CCCG is the result of Greek philosophy corrupting the biblical view of God; (2) OG best interprets the data of Scripture; and (3) OG is more practically relevant to our lives than is CCCG. The third prong can be quickly dismissed, for at least four reasons. First, it depends on the veracity of the first two prongs. That is, if Scripture teaches CCCG, and if CCCG is not the result of Greek corruption, then CCCG is by definition true, regardless of its practical relevancy. Second, practical relevance is a highly subjective criterion (e.g., some people find atheism and Satanism practically relevant). Third, the billions of conversions in the history of a church that held CCCG for nearly two millennia count against it. Fourth, the theologian Boyd blames most for CCCG, Augustine (354–430), authored what is perhaps the most compelling and theologically sophisticated autobiography of personal conversion, *The Confessions*, a text I have never heard described as impractical.

Let us examine the first two prongs of Boyd's case.

1. Boyd maintains that CCCG is the result of Greek philosophical thought significantly shaping the way in which Christian theologians interpreted the phenomenon of God found in Scripture. This is a deep issue that cannot be addressed comprehensively in this review. Yet, a few observations are relevant.

First, it is not clear how Boyd's charge challenges the church's traditional teaching on omniscience, for that teaching seems to be both a reasonable inference from Scripture (see below) as well as a belief that can be found in the works of nearly every Christian thinker from the second century onward, even before Augustine. Moreover, it is Greek philosophy, namely, Aristotle's view on the truth-value of future-tense statements, that furnishes the philosophical basis for the Open view of God's omniscience.¹

Boyd may reply that this does not address the problems he sees with the CCCG attributes of immutability and eternity. But an Open view of these attributes is more difficult to sustain if the traditional view of omniscience holds, for if God's knowledge, including his knowledge of his interaction with His creatures (e.g., miracles, answers to prayers), has never changed, then it seems that something like the CCCG version of these attributes must be true of the biblical God. At what point is the classical theologian using "Greek philosophy" in his analysis of these attributes? Surely, he is philosophizing from the text of Scripture (as does Boyd). Yet, the OG proponent must show that this philosophizing is flawed. Merely calling it "Greek philosophizing" will not do.

Second, although Christian scholars through the centuries have used philosophical terminology and concepts to convey biblical and theological truths, the real question is whether these truths are being *accurately* conveyed by the terminology and concepts.

Consider the following example. I am a Christian who believes that there exist objective moral laws that apply to all persons in all times and places. I also believe this is clearly taught in Scripture, and I want to develop a convincing case that would persuade others. In the process of developing my case I come across the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato, a non-Christian who nevertheless shared my belief in objective morality as well as an aversion to relativism. Although I recognize that Plato held many views inconsistent with my Christian worldview, his ethical reasoning is quite impressive and helpful in supporting my case.² Suppose I develop a sophisticated case against moral relativism, using arguments, rhetorical techniques, and terminology employed by Plato. For instance, when confronted with the claim that pleasure is identical to the Good, I point out that there are many things, such as murder and robbery, that are not good even though they may bring pleasure to people who engage in them.

Now suppose that members of an idiosyncratic religious sect of Christian relativists dismiss my case by maintaining that it is a corrupted view of ethics that is not biblical because it apparently relies on Platonic philosophy. Does such an objection really have any serious bearing on the plausibility of the case I have made?

Third, Boyd presents an inaccurate picture of how contemporary scholarship sees Christian thinkers' interaction with pagan philosophy. He does not inform his reader that numerous Christian thinkers differ with him in their assessment of Greek philosophical influence.³ In fact, in one place he attributes classical theology's rejection of the open view as being entirely the result of "philosophical preconceptions of what God must be like," though he cites no historical sources to establish this point. In addition, Boyd does not mention that some liberal scholars, such as Adolf von Harnack, argue for Greek

philosophical influence on the formation of the New Testament as well as subsequent Christian theology. Why are these scholars not cited so that the reader may be able to evaluate Boyd's position better and understand why he rejects both the liberal application and the CCCG?

2. Boyd claims OG is more consistent with a plain reading of Scripture than is CCCG. Yet, it seems from a general reading of Scripture that God's all-knowingness encompasses the *past*, *present*, and *future*. Psalm 147:5 tells us that God's "understanding is infinite," and, as E. Calvin Beisner points out, "what is infinite cannot grow, for if it did, it would be greater after its growth than before, which would prove that it was not infinite before."⁴ Perhaps this is why the Scripture tells us that God's knowledge cannot increase (Isa. 40:13–14).

Concerning the future, God says, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please'" (Isa. 46:10). Elsewhere God says that *knowledge* of the future is essential for deity, something that distinguished Him from the many false gods of Isaiah's day (41:21–24). Moreover, the New Testament teaches that God foreknows who will be saved (see Rom. 8:29 and 1 Pet. 1:1–2). One can infer God's absolute knowledge of the future from His test of a true prophet (Deut. 18:22). Numerous other passages imply or affirm God's knowledge of the future.⁵

Boyd responds in several ways to such an argument, three of which I will briefly cover. First, he points to passages in which God is said to regret, forget, and repent. CCCG proponents interpret these passages as metaphors and/or anthropomorphisms. Although Boyd ridicules this, he does not answer adequately why he does not take anthropomorphisms and metaphors as literal when they seem to teach that God is physical (e.g., God has eyes, ears, mouth). Yet he accepts them when they seem to teach that God does not know the future. He writes that "the way you recognize" the difference is when "what is said about God is either ridiculous if taken literally (e.g., God has an outstretched arm, Deut. 4:34; God is our husband, Hos. 2) and/or...the genre of the passage is poetic (e.g. God has protecting wings, Ps. 17:8)" (118). How would the "ridiculous test" convince a Latter-day Saint who believes it is not ridiculous that God has a physical human-like body because He is described as such in the Bible? Moreover, the classical theologian can take this test and reject OG on the grounds that any interpretation of Scripture such as Boyd's that claims that God does not know the future exhaustively is ridiculous: we have overwhelming evidence from Scripture that God in fact knows the future; the Greek-corruption argument fails; and OG leads to the belief that God is a physical being.

Second, according to Boyd, "God knows the future as consisting of both unsettled possibilities and settled certainties. In this sense, Open theists could (and should) affirm that God knows the future perfectly. It's just that they understand the future *now* to include genuine possibilities." God partially knows the future insofar as "he decrees what he wishes to decree. He controls whatever he chooses to control" (16).

It is difficult to know what Boyd is saying here. He may be saying that God only knows the part of the future that does not involve human free actions and that He does know all the possible results of every possible combination of free actions and how He would respond to them in order to fulfill His purposes. Boyd, however, writes that "by logical necessity God cannot foreknow as settled [people's] future freely chosen actions" (120). Boyd seems to think that knowledge of future free actions is as logically impossible as square circles or married bachelors. But, also according to Boyd, God, a free agent, knows of some actions He will do in the future (His decrees) despite what human beings may choose to freely do. So, God does know future free actions, namely, some of His own. Thus, knowledge of future free actions seems to be logically possible.

The only way around this is for Boyd to take a more radical approach, one embraced by other defenders of OG: since the future does not yet exist it is not an object of knowledge, and thus, God's future free actions are not literally known, but rather, decreed based on His power. This would mean that biblical claims about God's knowledge of future actions should be taken metaphorically and not literally, since God can not really have knowledge of what does not yet exist. Boyd, apparently, does not want to take that route.

Third, Boyd proposes dubious alternative interpretations of Scripture. So, for example, concerning Romans 8:29, he writes:

Many interpret this verse to mean that God foreknew certain individuals would believe and then predestined them to be conformed to the image of his Son. But we must notice that Paul doesn't specify that God foreknew that certain individuals would believe...In customary Semitic fashion Paul rather seems to be using the word 'know' to mean 'intimately love'...Paul is saying that the Church as a corporate whole was in God's heart long before the Church was birthed. (47-48)

It is not clear how this gets Boyd what he wants; in order for something to be a real object of God's love, God would have to know it. (How can one love what one does not know?) But since God, according to the open view, could not know for sure prior to any conversions to Christianity if anyone would ever become a Christian (let alone who would even be born as the result of human free choices to marry, etc.), He had no knowledge of any church, corporate or individual.

There are many more issues related to this book,⁶ for it contains scores of biblical references as well as provocative answers to some common questions. Although I have great respect for much of what Professor Boyd has accomplished as a pastor and apologist, I am unconvinced his open view God is the God of Scripture.

-- reviewed by Francis J. Beckwith

NOTES

1. *De Interpretatione*, chapter 9.
2. See, e.g., two of Plato's dialogues, *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*.
3. See, e.g., Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), chaps. 1-2; and Richard A. Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983), 22-40.
4. E. Calvin Beisner, *Evangelical Heathenism? Examining Contemporary Revivalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1996), 31.
5. See, e.g., the numerous passages cited in Beisner, *Evangelical Heathenism*; William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); and Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1971; reprint of 1797 ed.), 181-260.
6. E.g., Boyd's claim that OG better explains the problem of evil than CCCG could have been dealt with in this review.