

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM (Part IX)

Over the last decade or so, a Megashift<sup>1</sup> has taken place within the ranks of what is commonly designated as Evangelicalism. In fact, we are witnessing a massive shift in contemporary Evangelicalism away from the Reformation to an overt form of semi-Pelagianism or radical Arminianism. This began with what has been called, “Openness Theology,” and the discussion has been the catalyst for a large amount of division and denunciation on the part of the participants in the debate. The debate is growing and now involves many in evangelical college and seminary faculties, as well as many knowledgeable pastors and teachers in evangelical churches. Among the most active participants in the discussions and debates are Clark Pinnock (perhaps no surprise!), professor emeritus of theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario; Richard Rice, professor of theology at La Sierra University in Riverside, California; John Sanders, associate professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington College, Huntington, Indiana (Sanders was dismissed from his teaching position recently); William Hasker, professor of philosophy also at Huntington College; and David Basinger, professor of philosophy at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York. And now one of the major catalysts for the spreading discussion of the issues raised by “Openness Theology” is the relatively recent book being pushed by the evangelical Baker Book House, entitled God of the Possible, subtitled as A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God. Its author is Gregory A. Boyd, who served as professor of theology at Bethel College of the Baptist General Conference and also as pastor of Woodland Hills Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The theological ground of this theology is the centuries old theology of Jacobus Arminius (Jakob Hermandszoön), the Dutch theologian (1560-1609), educated at Leiden, Basel, and Geneva and who has become regarded as the head of a form of theology that has most fiercely challenged Calvinism for the accolade of the type of theology most representative of Christian event, and foresees it because He has foreordained it.”<sup>2</sup> They admitted that God knows all things that are knowable, but denied that future contingent events, including the future actions of responsible agents, are knowable by even an infinite divine being. Accordingly, as Cunningham says, “upon this ground, they allege that it is no derogation from the omniscience of God, that He does not, and cannot, know what is not knowable. They think that in this way, by denying the divine foreknowledge of future contingencies, they most effectually overturn the Calvinistic doctrine of God’s foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass; while they, at the same time, concede to the Calvinists, in opposition to the Arminian view, that God’s certain foreknowledge of the actions of men lays an immovable foundation for the position that He has foreordained them.”<sup>3</sup> The following paragraph from Boyd illustrates the link of open theism with the views of Socinus and Socinians. He writes, “If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It’s because there is, in this view, *nothing definite there for God to know!* His lack of definite foreknowledge of future free actions limits him no more than does the fact that, say, he does not know that there is a monkey sitting next to me right now. As a matter of fact there is no monkey sitting next to me, so it’s hardly ascribing ignorance to God to insist that he doesn’t know one is there. In just the same way, one is not ascribing ignorance to God by insisting that he doesn’t foreknow future free actions if indeed free actions do not exist to be known until free agents create them (his emphasis).”<sup>4</sup> The title of “Openness Theology” is the new window dressing

to do what window dressing is supposed to do, to create a deceptively attractive impression. It is simply the latest model of Arminianism and its doctrine of free will, coupled with Socinian ideas of God's foreknowledge, and with all the old errors hiding underneath its fresh shiny pleasant appearing hood, evoking telling memory of Israel's encounter with the Gibconites, who sought to deceive Joshua and the Israelites into thinking that they had come a long way to Joshua's camp in Gilgal, when in fact they lived, figuratively speaking just over the nearby mountain. The "Openness Theology" is not an entirely new theology. It contains much of historic Christianity, but unfortunately it has been amalgamated with error. It is, in effect, a "ruse" (cf. Josh. 9:4, NIV), the Socinian errors concerning the knowledge of God being coupled with the Arminian theology of human free will and wrapped in "old clothes" with "worn and patched sandals," offering us the "dry and moldy food" (v. 5) of a theology without a divine and omniscient and all-knowing Savior holding in His hands an accomplished substitutionary atonement for His body, the church of Jesus Christ. In almost all of the literature written by its defenders there are lists of biblical passages that are offered in defense of the theological claim that God "wants" all people to be saved. The "want" is not usually defined, but the clear sense implied is that God, the God of Scripture and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is seeking the salvation of all individuals and not of His elect alone. According to this understanding, He has not been successful to the present time. The position is manifestly that of Arminianism. Or, to put it another way, "Openness Theology" is clearly another instance of an attack on the Calvinistic understanding of the biblical teaching of God's sovereign grace in human salvation. One of the passages considered crucial to the propagators of this form of theology is Peter's statement in 2 Peter 3:9, where the apostle writes, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." For example, in Boyd's book, God of the Possible, this text, 2 Peter 3:9, is cited in at least ten places.<sup>5</sup> In the book edited by Clark H. Pinnock, entitled The Grace of God, The Will of Man, accompanied with the publisher's description of it, "The Case for Arminianism," in the index of scriptural references there are again ten references to 2 Peter 3:9.<sup>6</sup> There is little doubt that the adherents to "Openness Theology" consider this text to be a significant one for their theological viewpoint. I consider it to be one also, for it is a text that demands some exegetical and theological analysis. And in the debate over "Openness Theology" one of the things missing is careful consideration of the scriptural texts touching the debate. Is "Openness Theology" exegetically defensible? 2 Peter 3:9, the text that is so often appealed to by the advocates of "Openness Theology", a theology which I consider simply another attempt by individuals attracted to the theology of the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius, who was committed to universal atonement and opposed to the penal substitutionary atonement in an attempt to avoid the biblical teaching of our Lord's saving substitutionary death for His definite people, to advance the faulty theology of Arminianism. "For Arminianism," as Robert Letham contends, "since Christ was held to have suffered for everyone, He could not have paid the penalty for their sins, since all are not saved by Him. His death simply permits the Father to forgive all who repent and believe. It makes salvation possible but does not intrinsically atone for anyone in particular."<sup>7</sup> This author does not believe that this form of atonement teaching sufficiently honors the saving work of Jesus Christ.

## **I. THE CLAIMS OF THE SCOFFERS (2 Peter 3:1-4)**

- A. The Call to Remember the Prophets and Apostles (2 Peter 3:1-2).** The apostle at the beginning of the third chapter turns his attention to another of the "destructive heresies" to be brought by the false teachers (cf. 2:1). His attention is still directed to the libertines, for it is the natural result of a walk after the flesh to deny the second coming of Christ. The apostle, therefore, desires by his second epistle to stimulate his beloved fellow-believers to remember and reflect upon the "words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles" (v. 2). It is very evident from the following words of the chapter that Peter anticipates a considerable emphasis upon the preaching of future things, certainly enough to arouse the opposition of the scoffers, for it is they who will be saying, "Where is this 'coming' he

promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (v. 4). It is a precept for our times, for today, large segments of Christendom constantly repeat “Thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer and the “He shall come to judge the quick and the dead” of the Apostles’ Creed, and believe little of it. It may help to set out a brief survey of the apostle’s comments in chapter three that leads up to the text under consideration. He acknowledges in verses 1 and 2 that his letters to his readers, who are defined as believing recipients of God’s electing grace by the term “beloved,” are designed to stir up their minds by way of reminder of the things spoken by the prophets and of the Lord’s commandment through the apostles (2 Pet. 3:1-2).

**B. The Coming of the Scoffers (2 Peter 3:3-4).** The author considers it very important, in fact, one of the first things to keep in mind, that in the future there shall come mockers walking with their mockery according to their own lusts and denying, in direct contradiction of the prophets and the genuine apostles, the second coming of the Lord (vv. 3-4), evidently, as Nisbet suggests, “that they might sin more securely.”<sup>8</sup> Reduced to a syllogism, the reasoning of the scoffers would be something like this: Their major premise: since the time of creation the course of nature has remained unchanged. Their minor premise would follow as this: the second coming’s events would change this. The conclusion, thus, would be: the second coming, therefore, cannot come and consequently such a hope is a false one.<sup>9</sup> The scoffers really have two arguments: First, the believer cannot account for the elapsed time since the promise of the coming, and every day adds force to their view. The apostle will answer this contention in verses 8-10. Second, the believer cannot account for the undisturbed creation. Peter will deal with this problem in verses 5-7. There is no valid doctrine of uniformity according to him. “It is not necessary,” Richard Bauckham comments at this point, “to seek the background of the scoffers’ ideas in the Aristotelian belief in the imperishability of the world, which was denied by Epicureans and Stoics. They are not influenced by cosmology as much as by a rationalistic skepticism about divine intervention in the world, to which the Epicurean denial of providence seems the closest pagan parallel (Neyrey JBL, 99 [1980]; Polemic).”<sup>10</sup>

## II. THE CAUSE OF THE ERROR (2 Peter 3:5-7)

**A. Neglect of the flood (2 Peter 3:5-6).** The “but” of verse five is the NIV’s rendering of a Greek particle that means for, as in the ESV, and I prefer that rendering here. The result is that the opening words of the verse are better rendered - *for this deliberately<sup>11</sup> escapes them* - followed then by the remainder of the verse, “that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water.”<sup>12</sup> Very simply stated, the apostle’s argument against the scoffers’ contention that the believers cannot account for the elapsed time since the promise of the coming of the Lord nor for the undisturbed creation is given in verses 5-10. His answer to the claim by the scoffers of an undisturbed creation since the promises, is given in verses 5-7. The mockers’ doctrine of uniformity is erroneous. They have forgotten the flood. As for the second argument, that the believers cannot account for the elapsed time since the promise of a cataclysmic change in the natural order of things, the apostle points his readers to the prophecies of the destruction of the present heavens and earth by fire in the day of God<sup>13</sup> (cf. vv. 10-13). Thus, not only has the past suffered change, but the present shall, too. Bauckham comments at this point, “The world which now permits human life to flourish is far from guaranteed against a destructive reversion to chaos. But in the biblical perspective, human history is not at the mercy of chance and meaningless catastrophe. The God who created the cosmos out of chaos is in sovereign control of the forces of destruction. The threat is the threat of God’s moral judgment, and even that judgment is not an end in itself, but for the sake of a new world of righteousness which he will once again create out of chaos.”<sup>14</sup>

### III. THE CALL TO THE READERS (2 Peter 3:8-9)

- A. **To remember a relationship (2 Peter 3:8).** The second of the apostle's replies to the scoffers is given in verse 8. As Cranfield puts it, "The faithful—it is they who are addressed—are to remember God's eternity and not try to calculate his times by human measurements."<sup>15</sup> It is a wise word for the faithful, the ones Peter calls "beloved," today. Time with God is not the same as time with man. "God's clock," Robertson points out, "does not run by our timepieces. The scoffers scoff ignorantly."<sup>16</sup>
- B. **To remember a reason (9).** The critical test for this paper comes before us in verse 9, where the apostle writes, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (NIV). Bauckham renders the text in this way, "The Lord is not late in fulfilling the promise, according to some people's idea of lateness, but he is forbearing toward you, because it is not his will that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."<sup>17</sup> The scholars who have accepted "Openness Theology" and who, therefore, are almost all Arminians, contend that 2 Peter 3:9 is a text that supports the universal extent of the atonement but deny that the atonement is universal in saving effect. They teach generally that our Lord intended to make salvation possible for all, but the saving effect is realized only when a condition is met, such as faith and/or obedience. Calvinists, on the other hand, contend that the atonement has been accomplished for a definite people for whom Christ died and to each of whom its benefits are applied in God's due time. "This view," Godfrey has stated, "emerged clearly among the followers of Augustine as a consequence of his teaching on sovereign, particular grace in salvation."<sup>18</sup>

TO BE CONTINUED -

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Brow, "Evangelical Megashift: Why You May Not Have Heard About Wrath, Sin and Hell Recently," *Christianity Today*, February 19, 1990. I addressed this in some detail in the Doctrine of God series (March 4, - April 8, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 11, 173.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 173-74.

<sup>4</sup> Boyd is adamant in his insistence that the open view theists affirm God's omniscience as emphatically as anybody does (*Ibid.*, 16). Boyd, however, is engaged in more than a little question begging on this point, since he says over and over, again and again throughout this book, that there are certain things that God does *not* know. He does not possess omniscience (i.e., having all knowledge and being all-knowing).

<sup>5</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Zondervan, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, *op. cit.* The references are found in the book's Scripture index.

<sup>7</sup> R. W. A. Letham, "Arminianism," *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. By Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright. Consulting editor: J. I. Packer. (InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Nisbet, *An Exposition of 1 & 2 Peter* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982 [orig. ed., 1658]), p. 277.

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 50. Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Books, 1983) p. 294.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>11</sup> "Deliberately" is the rendering of the participle *thelontas*, literally meaning *willing*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gen. 1:9.

<sup>13</sup> Mayor comments, "'The Day of God' is an unusual expression for the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:11; Matt. 4:5, v. 10 above): we find it however in Jer. 46:10 'the Day of the Lord God of hosts,' and in Apoc. 16:14." Cf. Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (Macmillan, 1907), p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> Bauckham, p. 302.

<sup>15</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude: Introduction and Commentary* (SCM Press, 1960), p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Broadmans, 1933), VI, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Bauckham, pp. 310-12.

<sup>18</sup> W. R. Godfrey, "Atonement, Extent of," *NDOT*, p. 57. "If Christ truly bore all the wrath of God for all sin as a substitute for the sinner, then the extent of the atonement and the effect of the atonement must be the same." Godfrey was one of my professors at WTS, Phila. And now serves as president of Westminster Seminary, Calif.