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Does God Give Bad Advice? The “Open” View of God Stakes its Ground

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What does God know, and when does He know it? This startling question lies at the heart of what may well become the hottest theological debate among evangelicals. The outcome will determine whether evangelicals remain committed to what the church has always believed about God, or veer off in favor of a more user-friendly deity.

The current debate swirls around the arguments of Gregory A. Boyd, a theology professor at Bethel College and pastor of a large church in St. Paul, MN. A popular lecturer and a provocative writer, Boyd has become the focus of intense debate within the Baptist General Conference (with which Bethel College is affiliated), Baker Book House (his publisher), and the larger evangelical world.

Boyd’s theological argument comes down to this: The Christian church has adopted a doctrine of God that is deeply rooted in Greek philosophy, is hopelessly irrelevant to contemporary life, and conflicts with biblical passages indicating that God changes his mind, and fails to know the future decisions of his free creatures.

Joining the argument on behalf of the “openness of God,” Boyd insists that God simply cannot know what his creatures will decide to do in the future, for these decisions do not yet exist. There are some things God knows definitely, but He knows some aspects of the future “as *possibly* this way and *possibly* not that way.”

Confused? Boyd’s proposal strikes at the heart of the omniscience of God, the affirmation that God perfectly knows all things—past, present, and future. The classical form of this doctrine, held by all branches of the church throughout the centuries, holds that God possesses exhaustive foreknowledge. Quite simply, there is nothing God does not know, and know perfectly. This understanding has been held by Roman Catholics and Protestants, and both Calvinists and Arminians.

Boyd holds that this is incompatible with modern science and philosophy, as well as those passages of Scripture that present God as changing his mind. In *God of the Possible*, the recently-released summary of his argument, Boyd claims that his view—rather than the majority view—is faithful to the Bible and to the real needs of modern Christians.

Most modern philosophers agree with the majority position of the church in affirming that if God perfectly knows the future, the future is settled and certain. The Bible certainly presents God as knowing the future, and in control of events as well as the final end of all things.

This is precisely what Boyd rejects. He holds that “the future consists partly of settled realities and partly of unsettled realities.” God’s chosen future will eventually come to pass, at least in the big picture. Nevertheless, God does not “micromanage” the universe and control every aspect of reality.

In order to make his argument, Boyd must redefine key theological terms. God’s omnipotence is now “flexible.” God must be ready with Plan B when Plan A fails. Claiming to be orthodox, Boyd must affirm both God’s omniscience and omnipotence. In order to do so, however, he must turn the words on their heads. God perfectly knows what He can know—which is a great deal, but not everything. Future decisions do not yet exist, so they cannot be known. God is omnipotent, but not in the sense that He controls everything. He is sovereign, but not in a comprehensive sense. Boyd

argues that God is so sovereign He doesn't have to be sovereign.

Boyd's challenge cannot be ignored. Has the church really misunderstood the Bible's revelation about God's power and attributes? Has the church followed Plato rather than Moses?

Not hardly. Boyd emphasizes biblical passages that speak of God changing his mind as He works with his creatures. Most theologians, past and present, understand those passages as pictorial and metaphorical, like passages that speak of God's hand or arm. Boyd insists that they be taken literally.

To do so, he must ignore or reinterpret the overwhelming witness of the Bible to God's unconditional sovereignty, absolute power, and perfectly exhaustive foreknowledge. What is left is a God more easily explained to modern Americans—who works with us “to truly change what *might* have been into what *should* be.”

Boyd writes as a pastor, and his illustrations reveal the emptiness and danger of his proposal. He tells of Suzanne, a woman committed to missions in Taiwan, who felt God was leading her to marry a fine young man following the same call. Later, the man turned out to be an abusive adulterer who abandoned her, extinguishing her ministry to Taiwan. How can this be explained? Boyd told the woman that God was surprised and grieved by how this young man turned out.

This is God cut down to size—a God who is well intended, but does not micromanage. He is ready with Plan B when Plan A fails. But, in the end, Boyd believes that God sometimes gives bad advice. Contrast that with the confession of Job: “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.” The God of the Bible needs no Plan B.

