

GREGORY BOYD'S INFINITELY INTELLIGENT CHESS PLAYER



The Remaking of God in Man's Image

by G. Richard Fisher

Gregory Boyd, professor of theology at Bethel College in Minneapolis, writes: "We might imagine God as something like an infinitely intelligent chess player."¹

The Apostle Paul wrote: "They ... changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man."²

Is God really a lot like us? Is He growing, learning and unable to know all the future with any accuracy? Is God infinite or is He finite and limited in His knowing? Has the Christian Church really been wrong — or at least confused on these points — for 2000 years? Is God, after all, really just an infinitely intelligent chess player?

Are we no longer able to sing "Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness, there is no shadow of turning with thee"? Is the problem of evil really addressed if we make God less than perfectly and exhaustively all-knowing?

Is this "New Theism" better and more correct than the historic classic Theism of the last two millennia? Has the Church been wrong in believing that God's omniscience stretches into the future? Is omniscience just God knowing all there is to know *right now*?

Gregory Boyd's new book, *God of the Possible*, is a sad and frightening volume to read. A better title would be "The Death of the Orthodox God."

His views have been correctly labeled neotheism.

It would take a book-length treatment to handle and answer in-depth Boyd's many doctrinal errors in his book. In the interest of time and space we will deal with the most salient points.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL COMMITMENT OF NEOTHEISM

At certain points in his scheme, Boyd seems to make man much more than God and God much less than man. We all know the reality of our ability to plan and to plan definitely. We also can bring those plans to pass days, weeks or years later. Man can know ahead of time what he plans to do and carry that out and bring it to fruition. God has designed us that way.

However, in Boyd's view, God can't always do that because we might decide differently. Boyd states: "future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."³ Further, Boyd suggests: "God's mind is not permanently fixed ... some of what God knows regarding the future consists of things that *may* go one way or another."⁴

In fact, Boyd says that God gave confirmation to a lady that turned out

to be a disaster: "I suggested to her that God felt as much regret over the confirmation he had given Suzanne as he did about his decision to make Saul king of Israel."⁵ Yet Boyd couldn't be sure God gave her the confirmation. If that were certain, Suzanne couldn't trust God for any "confirmation" in the future.

If Boyd's philosophy is true, we have more freedom than our creator. In spite of all Boyd's nuancing and insisting that God will pull it all out in the end, he cannot be sure if God is in control right now.

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF NEOTHEISM

Boyd illustrates further his premise for his readers:

"...this motif of future determinism does not warrant the conclusion that God predestines and foreknows as settled *everything* about the future. ... there is a second major motif in Scripture that depicts the future as partly open. Balancing the determined aspects of the future is a realm composed of open possibilities that will be resolved only by the decisions of free agents."⁶

Boyd also believes "God's call to covenantal faithfulness has involved testing. God is seeking to *find out* whether or not the people he calls will lovingly choose him above all else."⁷ Note his comment: "God is *seeking to find out*."

Was God's test of Abraham for His own benefit? Was God taking a huge risk as Boyd suggests? Is it really true that: "In a cosmos populated by free agents, the outcome of things — even divine decisions — is often uncertain"?⁸ If this is true, what could be certain?

What Boyd looks at as risks on God's part⁹ can be understood in other ways. Bible expositor John Haley examines the testing of Abraham and concludes:

"The words addressed to Abraham, 'Now I know that,' etc., are equivalent to saying, Now I have established by actual experiment that which I previously knew. I have demonstrated, made manifest by evident proof, my knowledge of thy character."¹⁰

In the preface of his book, Boyd tells of his first experience of awakening some 17 years ago as he was reading 2 Kings 20. God said to Hezekiah, "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die: you shall not recover" (v. 1). Boyd's new insight is simply explained: "2 Kings 20 ... seemed to suggest the future is to some extent open and that God does not know every detail about what will come to pass. ... About three years later, I became convinced that the customary view — that the future is exhaustively settled and that God knows it as such — was mistaken."¹¹

Boyd describes a personal metamorphosis that I would describe as becoming almost god-like: "Among other things, I have found that parts of the Bible and certain aspects of life make much better sense to me now than they did before. I have discovered a new appreciation and excitement regarding my own responsibility in bringing about the future."¹² He mentions the positive result of a more passionate prayer life. Does this suggest that perceived benefit makes a thing right? Is it to suggest that those who do not hold his view have a shallower and otherwise less than a deep and exciting prayer life?

Boyd calls those who do not hold his view "misguided" and suggests that those who believe the future is

settled may contribute to evil and sin in their lives.¹³

When Satan said to Eve: "has God said?" (Genesis 3:1), he was implying and having Eve assume that God was almost as limited as she was and actually did not know much more than she could figure out herself. Eve was led to believe she controlled her own future. Satan was suggesting that Eve could bring about her own future — a future that God did not totally control or know. Her biggest temptation was believing she was autonomous and that God could not predict her future for her.

Boyd's view is that people "Through God's grace and power, they help *create* the future."¹⁴

Scripture nowhere states that the purpose of grace is to help us create the future. Through God's grace new life is created in us but we do not create anything by or through grace. Through the empowerment of grace we may change some things but how can we be said to create anything since only God creates.

Any lexicon or book on word studies will define grace (Greek: *charis*) as lovingkindness, bounty or goodwill. It is God's unmerited favor in the face of our demerit. It has an objective and subjective aspect.¹⁵ Grace is not something we do (Romans 11:6). *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* explains it this way: "the predominant sense of favor, with an undertone of meaning that the favor is undeserved" and that "The essence of the doctrine of grace is that God is for us."¹⁶ Jesus is the grace of God toward us.

Boyd describes his new view as "an intriguing — and in my [i.e., Boyd's] estimation, wonderful — way of thinking about God and the future."¹⁷ He also says that "God '[declares] the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done'"¹⁸ which for Boyd means only the end of some things and not all things.

To accept Boyd's view of things, we would have to live under this frightening prospect:

"It is true that according to the open view things can happen in our lives that God didn't plan or

even foreknow with certainty (though he always foreknew they were possible). This means that in the open view things can happen to us that have no overarching divine purpose. In this view, 'trusting in God' provides no assurance that everything that happens to us will reflect his divine purposes, for there are other agents who also have power to affect us, just as we have power to affect others. This, it must be admitted, can for some be a scary thought."¹⁹

This assertion is made apparently without regard to Romans 8:28.

It is evident early on that Boyd very deftly rigs the game and suggests that to divide over this issue would be unloving:

"It certainly is not a doctrine Christians should ever divide over. ... With each of you I pray that our Baptist fellowship, and evangelicalism in general, will come to see more clearly that the love with which believers debate issues is more important to God than the sides we take. To all, I offer this humble perspective for your consideration in love."²⁰

Boyd says he knows what is really important to God but offers no scriptural backing for the statement.

Consider rather the Apostle Paul's words:

"I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of many" (Romans 16:17-18).

Paul is at least saying we *must* speak the truth in love, even if it divides.

Boyd then tells us that compared to the central doctrines of our faith, this issue of the future being only partially open to God or "exhaustively settled" is "relatively unimportant." If it is "relatively unimportant" why write a book on it? Somehow his words do

not ring true. A teaching that radically affects our view of God, man, the Bible and the future is very important.

Let's revisit briefly the primary scriptural element of Boyd's great "awakening" — 2 Kings 20. If we adopt the view that God's statement to Hezekiah was absolute, we have God either lying or confused. God said that Hezekiah should set his house in order "for thou shalt die and not live." Viewing this as an absolute only increases the dilemma for Boyd. The statement was that Hezekiah would "die and not live." If Hezekiah lived, God lied or at least could not follow His own absolute statements and is totally wrong at times.

In the past, commentators have not viewed this statement as absolute but as conditional, that is, it had an implied condition that the king apart from repenting would certainly die. That makes sense and will agree with another important Scripture, as we'll see.

Adam Clarke, whom Boyd himself describes as "the great Bible commentator,"²¹ explains the conditional nature of God's words:

"Hezekiah knew that, although the words of Isaiah were delivered to him in an *absolute* form, yet they were to be *conditionally* understood; else he could not have prayed to God to reverse a purpose which he knew to be irrevocable. Even this passage is a key to many prophecies and divine declarations."²²

Comparing Scripture to Scripture bolsters the conditional view. In Hezekiah's psalm of praise, after his healing, he acknowledges that "The Lord was ready to save me" (Isaiah 39:20), not "God did not know what He or I would do and I had to just pray hard enough to change His mind and create my own future." Hezekiah understood the conditional nature of God's words. Neotheists make the same mistake with other conditional passages.

Boyd is so bold to say "some of what God knows regarding the future consists of things that *may* go one

way or another. He adjusts his plans — changes his mind — depending on what does or does not take place."²³ It surely sounds like God is time-bound and scurrying to process billions of bits of information as things unfold and He learns what is going on. Suggesting that God at least knows all the varied possibilities does not help much. Boyd even suggests that some prophecies "did not *have* to take place"²⁴ and that some are "*illustrative*, not *predictive*."²⁵

PASSAGES DISPROVING NEOTHEISM

Orthodox theologians (also called Classical Theists) for centuries have talked about the immutability of God, that is, that in His nature, essence and character, He cannot and does not change. From the Prophets to the Apostles to the Church Fathers and Reformers, they all with one voice affirmed that God had an unchanging nature and knew all things — even the future — perfectly. This is explicitly and repeatedly taught in the Bible. God may change His program (external) but His being never changes. He does not have to learn or acquire information. He is perfect, knowing the end from the beginning. He does not change His mind in the human sense. The Scriptures abound with the concepts of God's immutability, omniscience, perfection and complete foreknowledge. Consider the testimony of Scripture:

"He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man, that He should change His mind" (1 Samuel 15:29, NIV).

"Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (Psalms 139:4, NIV).

"Great is our Lord and mighty in power; His understanding has no limit" (Psalms 147:5, NIV).

"I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come" (Isaiah 46:9-10, NIV).

"I the LORD do not change" (Malachi 3:6, NIV).

"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19, NIV).

"Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18, KJV).

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8, NIV).

God's omniscience and foreknowledge is everywhere in Scripture and has been held consistently by historical orthodoxy. Acts 2:23; Romans 8:29; 11:2; 1 Peter 1:2 contain plain statements that God foresees the future. Christ's death was planned and known before the foundations of the world (1 Peter 1:20-21).

Standard works on doctrine insist on God's immutability as William Evans asserts: "He remains forever the same, and unchangeable."²⁶

Henry Clarence Thiessen echoes Evans' foundation: "By the immutability of God we mean that in essence, attributes, consciousness, and will God is unchangeable. ... Any change in His attributes would make Him less than God."²⁷

James Petigru Boyce, a 19th-century Baptist stalwart, lays out in his 493-page *Abstract of Systematic Theology* the attributes of God as contained in Scripture: "By the immutability of God is meant that he is incapable of change, either in duration of life, or in nature, character, will or happiness. In none of these, nor in any other respect is there any possibility of change."²⁸

Boyce said of immutability: "It is expressly taught by the Scriptures" and then listed "a few passages" to uphold his maxim:

"(a) They declare him to be unchangeable in *duration and life*: Gen. 21:33; Deut. 32:39, 40; Ps. 9:7; 55:19; 90:2; 102:12; Hab. 1:12; Rom. 16:26; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16. (b) They affirm the unchangeableness of his *nature*: Ps. 104:31; Mal. 3:6; Rom. 1:23; James 1:17. (c) They also assert that his *will* is

without change: Job 23:13; Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21. (d) His *character* is also said to be immutable, as for example his *justice*: Gen. 18:25; Job 8:3; Rom. 2:2; his *mercy*: Ex. 34:7; Deut. 4:31; Ps. 107:1; Lam. 3:22, 23; Mal. 3:6; his *truth*: Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Mic. 7:20; Rom. 3:3; 11:2, 29; 2 Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2; his *holiness*: Job 34:10; Hab. 1:13; James 1:13; and his *knowledge*: Isa. 40:13, 14, 27, 28."²⁹

The Westminster Confession of Faith expressly reflects what the Church has always believed about God:

"There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions [meaning impure passions], immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory. ... his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain."³⁰

Boyd understands the classical position very well:

"Most evangelical Christians take it for granted that God knows everything that is ever going to take place. They have been taught that the future is completely settled in God's mind and has been so from all eternity. This view is sometimes called the 'classical view of divine foreknowledge.' Though it has always been the majority view in the church, it is the view I will be arguing *against* throughout this work."³¹

PROBLEMS OF NEOTHEISM

Boyd seems to be diminishing God greatly by his view that:

"...it might help if we think of God's power and our say-so in terms of percentages. Prior to creation, God possessed 100 per-

cent of all power. He possessed all the say-so there was. When the Trinity decided to express their love by bringing forth a creation, they invested each creature (angelic and human) with a certain percentage of their say-so. The say-so of the triune God was at this point no longer the only one that determined how things would go. God's personal creations now possessed a measure of ability to influence what would occur. This was necessary (as was the risk that went with it) if God's creations were to be personal beings who had the ability to make authentic choices, including the choice whether to enter a loving relationship with him."³²

Boyd defines (in context) the say-so of God as his power. However, all power belongs to Jesus (Matthew 28:18). Any derived authority we have is certainly limited by God's power and ultimate will. We have no absolute and ultimate power and say-so as Boyd suggests. God's essential and absolute power is as noncommunicable as His omnipresence. He is the only omnipotent One. Any derived "power" that we have is to be used sharing Christ and obeying God.

Baker Book House formerly printed books that were orthodox and Reformed. Early in 2000, it promoted in its advertising catalog Boyd's book, *God of the Possible*, calling his view "the open view of God." Baker said Boyd outlines "an alternate open view" to the traditional view that God always knows what will happen in the future.

For all the posturing and nuancing, the question boils down to this: does God know all the future or does He not? To say He might just know a little of or even most of it denies all the Scriptural passages that say He knows all of it. If He is ever-growing, ever-learning and adjusting, He is not unchanging. It appears Baker Book House is capitulating to a weak and terminal aspect of Postmodernism: the idea that everyone's viewpoint is valid.

Earlier this year, *Christianity Today* ran an editorial titled, "God vs. God

— Two competing theologies vie for the future of evangelicalism." The magazine named Clark Pinnock, John Sanders and Boyd as being purveyors of a new view of God. The editorial commented:

"Such a God, this theology argues, does not exist in changeless perfection outside of time, but must rather take risks by engaging his lost creatures in truly mutual relationships that have no guaranteed outcomes. Thus God does not genuinely know the future, and he actually changes his mind when shifting situations demand it."³³

The CT article further says that Process teachers "psychologize God." It seems that God in the finite godism view is more the Wizard of Oz than Jehovah Elohim, the great I Am. Others that subscribe to this new view are Adventist Richard Rice (his book is titled, *The Openness of God*), Stephen Davis and Anthony Kenny.

As we will see, the problem with this new "theology" is not theology at all but hermeneutics and presuppositions — the selected Scriptures and literalization of those passages that prop up the premise. Its exponents fail to recognize that while God may use figures, metaphors and human analogies to speak of Himself to help our understanding, it does not change His essential being.

Boyd himself answers the question regarding the verses that speak of God "changing" or "repenting" or "regretting":

"The Bible sometimes uses figures of speech that portray God in human terms (anthropomorphisms). ... Classical theism largely relies on the understanding that all passages describing God as changing are anthropomorphic."³⁴

Boyd's teaching is not new. It has a history and roots outside of evangelicalism that can be traced to the early 1800s and names like Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, who have been described as "considering experience as the ultimate court of appeal."³⁵

Technically, Whitehead and Hartshorne teach what has been labeled panentheism. Boyd's view is a close cousin, though he would deny it and tries to distance himself from it. However, from our perspective, Boyd's ideas are a move toward panentheism or at least a modified and Christianized version. It lies somewhere between panentheism and classical Theism.

This teaching has been called "Finite Godism," "Processianism," "Open God Thought," "Openness of God view" and "Free Will Theism" but is most often referred to as "Process theology." Dr. Robert Morey explains the overall views of Process theology:

"Process theology (or processianism) teaches that the infinite God of historic Christianity is a myth. In its place is erected a finite god who is incapable of knowing or controlling the future because he is not omniscient, omnipotent, perfect, immutable, or, in some cases, omnipresent. The finite god of processianism is trapped in a chance-driven universe that is out of his control. He himself is caught up in an ongoing process and is evolving in his nature toward an unknown future. Only time will tell what this god will end up being."³⁶

Boyd no doubt would not want to be referred to as a Process theologian since, for now, he only redefines omniscience and foreknowledge and not the other omni-attributes of God.

Boyd erects the old straw man that classical Theism is just a product of Plato and Greek thought. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Morey dispels the myth propagated by Process theology that Classical Theism is "Greek thought," since the opposite is true:

"And, indeed, it will take a great deal of imagination to picture Moses and the prophets learning about God from the Greek philosophers who were not even born until hundreds of years later!"³⁷

It was the Greeks who had growing and emerging gods.

We must never forget the truth and reality that Greek gods and goddesses were processing, discovering, growing and learning.

The Greeks may have looked for an unchanging metaphysical principle but they never identified it with God. Dr. Norman Geisler reminds us that an unchanging God "was the unique Judeo-Christian contribution to philosophy of religion."³⁸

God is remolded and redefined in Process theology. Philosophically it applies evolution to everything in the universe, including God. Whitehead dealt in speculative philosophical metaphysical interpretations about personal identity, teaching that since identity is formed by changing relationships and growing experiences, God's identity must be formed the same way. Hartshorne seemed to say that the word "perfect" had to be redefined as a sort of progressive perfection.³⁹

Geisler further explains the presuppositions of Process theology:

"Hence the world and God are mutually dependent. Moreover, the creatures in the universe contribute value to God's life. The inclusive aim or goal of all creatures is to enrich God's happiness and thus help him fulfill what he lacks. ... God is a cosmic Sympathizer rather than a cosmic Activist."⁴⁰

Boyd's *God of the Possible* is not his first attempt to launch Process theology and give it credibility. His 1992 book, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (Peter Lang Publishers) was an attempt to refashion Hartshorne's di-polar theism into a more palatable form and create a Trinitarian metaphysics, as his long subtitle explains. Using Hartshorne as a basis, which is questionable, Boyd corrects those things he feels are in error in Hartshorne's system and tries to develop a more Christianized construct. He nuances and reshapes to create a more biblically palatable end-product.

Boyd's early book was panned by Christian Research Institute. The re-

view described Hartshorne as "the most forceful contemporary critic of classical Christianity."⁴¹ In the CRI piece, reviewer William Watkins weaves methodically through Boyd's almost incomprehensible meanderings and metaphysics of God as an ongoing event and temporal — one who is surprised by the free acts of His people. While some have branded Boyd's position as heretical,⁴² Watkins takes a kinder view:

"And even though I find TP's [Trinity and Process] revised view of God seriously confused (is God infinite or finite?), I do not believe it can fairly be labeled heretical. It should rather be considered aberrant, in a class with the 'open God' of Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and others."⁴³

Early in 1993, PFO shared a similar point of view to that of Watkins. It was our opinion that Boyd's *Trinity and Process* was cumbersome, philosophical and easily misunderstood. The manuscript was difficult to read. Because of all these dynamics, at that time, we thought it not to be unorthodox. However, in light of the now more clear-cut declarations of his latest work which brings his premise down to a layman's understanding, it can be stated without qualification his view is clearly unorthodox.

John Piper, a colleague of Boyd in the Baptist General Conference, does not take the softer view of Watkins but says Process theology is:

"Not Historic, Orthodox Christianity ... what I cannot do is treat this view as though it belonged to historic, orthodox Christianity, much less biblical evangelicalism. It is a profoundly defective view of God and therefore will lead, if not checked, to the uprooting of true delight in God and the depreciation of his glory."⁴⁴

Piper continues:

"Jonathan Edwards shared this negative assessment of the denial of God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge, and therefore devoted a major section of his greatest book, *The Freedom of the Will*, to the defense of God's

foreknowledge of moral choices. The title of that section is, 'The Evidence of God's Certain Foreknowledge of the Volitions of Moral Agents.' Paul Ramsey, the editor of this volume of Edwards' Works explains Edwards' driving motive: 'Into the writing of [*The Freedom of the Will*] he poured all his intellectual acumen, coupled with a passionate conviction that *the decay to be observed in the religion and morals followed the decline in doctrine since the founding of New England*. In other words, doctrine matters for life and worship. Edwards believed passionately that a defective doctrine of God would, in the end, destroy delight in God and devotion to God. And above all, this meant that the glory of God would be lost in the church and in the world.'⁴⁵

Idolatry, which is the creation of other gods, is not looked on as just aberrant in Scripture but is seen as heresy and gross violation of the First Commandment. Israel suffered great judgments for distorting Yahweh's true nature and character. They were to have no other gods before Him.

In a startling move (May 19, 1998), Bethel College and Seminary, Boyd's employer, issued a statement paper from their Committee for Theological Clarification and Assessment saying that Open View Theology "is within the bounds of evangelical Christian orthodoxy and compatible with the theological commitments expected of faculty members at Bethel."⁴⁶

The framers of this resolution say they do not agree with Boyd's views but can live with them. It remains to be seen if this explosive and critical issue will split the Baptist General Conference. They apparently have succumbed to Boyd's appeal for love and no division. Boyd, in his book, applauds the "irenic leadership" of "Jay Barnes, provost of Bethel College, and Truett Lawson, executive pastor of the Minnesota Baptist Conference."⁴⁷

Robert Strimple shows that Process thought is a rehashing of the old Socinian heresy and says of this

movement that had been rejected by the Church: "Socinianism also held to a heretical doctrine of God."⁴⁸ Strimple says also that God's complete and infallible omniscience (perfectly knowing past, present and future) was a "universally held Christian doctrine."⁴⁹

R.K. McGregor Wright levels his guns at Process theology:

"Finite godism is just another variety of pagan idolatry, while a 'Christian' finite godism is just a form of syncretism, the fruit of intellectual worldliness, of abasement before the spirit of modernity as it appears in successive ages."⁵⁰

The further gist of Boyd's argument is that there are Scriptures that say God knows the future perfectly and exhaustively⁵¹ and then there are Scriptures that seem to indicate that He does not, but "repents" and "changes His mind" and so forth.

Boyd concludes that both sets of Scripture are true and the answer to the dilemma is that there are some things God knows exhaustively and perfectly and there are some things He does not. God has perfect knowledge about certain things but not others.

Boyd concludes that both sets of Scripture are literal;⁵² therefore God must know some future things or is at least pretty sure of them or makes sure those things happen one way or the other.

Then, in a strange contradiction of his own premise, Boyd argues that even the settled part of the future that God knows for sure, is not settled:

"Thus, even when the Lord announces that some aspect of the future is settled, it may still be alterable. The 'settledness' may be conditioned on unsettled factors, such as decisions we make. What this shows us is that not only is part of the future open, but also some aspects of the future that God has announced as settled are to some extent open. God's mind can yet be changed, a biblical truth that is difficult to square with the classi-

cal view of divine foreknowledge."⁵³

The heading on this is "The Openness of Biblical Prophecy," which means that Boyd believes God's prophecies can fail or be wrong. This leaves us absolutely nowhere and God at the mercy of our decisions.

The deep dilemma Boyd creates is that the test of a true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:22 could not be valid. A God of limited omniscience makes it impossible to test a prophet for accuracy.

Boyd moves on to bolster his view of prophecy from physics and social science,⁵⁴ but ends up making statements that are not much more than educated guesses. He says that "God knows the character of Satan well enough to predict some of his strategy at the end of the age when he releases his fury one final time."⁵⁵ So God "predicts" things about Satan based on Satan's character. It is an informed projection.

Even Peter's denial was based on "one very predictable aspect of Peter's character."⁵⁶ This hardly answers the question of how Jesus could simply predict the exact time of a rooster crowing three times since the fore-known timing has nothing to do with animal proclivities but absolute certainties about the future and its details.

One of the other major elements in Boyd's overall argument is even less convincing: the idea that God could not know a future that has not happened since it has no reality yet (at least to us).

A God who cannot know a future that has not happened for us cannot have knowledge of any part of the future. Boyd's view here demolishes all he has said about God knowing some of the future. Boyd will try to pose that God is committed to try to make it happen but that is effort, not knowledge.

Boyd then falls back on the idea that God has knowledge of all the possibilities (hence his book's title, *God of the Possible*), therefore cannot ever be taken by surprise.⁵⁷ Boyd offers that God infallibly knows possibilities.

That is of little help to us. If I knew someone could get from the 25th floor of an office building to the ground level either by elevator, taking the stairs, climbing down a rope out of a window, being rescued by firefighters, jumping off the roof or out of a window, or carried out dead by paramedics, I still would be surprised by several of these choices. My awareness of all the combinations does little to prepare me to deal with the worst if it occurs.

Multiply that by the billions of people with billions of possibilities and it makes little sense to offer that knowing possibilities means much at all. Possibilities are just that. They are not certainties.

Boyd declares that an open view of providence is simply "choose your own adventure" stories.⁵⁸ Read what Thiessen has to say in his *Introductory Lessons in Systematic Theology*:

"Etymologically the word 'providence' means *foreseeing*. From this basic idea has developed the meaning of *foreseeing*, or *providing for the future*. But in theology the word has received a more specialized meaning. In this field providence means that continuous activity of God whereby He makes all the events of the physical, mental, and moral phenomena work out His purposes; and that this purpose is nothing short of the original design of God in creation. To be sure, evil has entered the universe; but it is not allowed to thwart God's original, benevolent, wise, and holy purpose."⁵⁹

Boyd floats the premise that God could not have known in advance about the evil that would be committed by Adolph Hitler: "this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler."⁶⁰ Boyd thinks he has rescued God from bad press and helped with some resolution of the problem of evil. He has done no such thing but only pushed the problem up a bit.

Boyd still has to answer the glaring question left, which is, after God did find out what Hitler *was doing* already in the late 1930s and early 1940s —

why didn't He put an immediate stop to it when He discovered it? After all, Boyd tells us "He is 'there' when the information originates."⁶¹ Boyd has not rescued God, even though he says his view "makes more intellectual sense" and has the "ring of truth."⁶² We think not.⁶³

Boyd should have taken his own advice when it comes to mysteries about God:

"Even if this is a mystery to us, it is better to allow the mystery to stand than to assume that we know what God's wisdom is like and conclude on this basis that God can't mean what he clearly says."⁶⁴

Boyd may have abandoned classical Theism and may want us to abandon it, too, but he does not have a viable alternative to offer.

THE PARALLELS OF NEOTHEISM

Boyd suggests that there have been a few scattered people in Church history who shared his view, though he offers little documentation.⁶⁵ What he fails to mention are the liberals and cult groups who hold to finite godism.

It is troubling that the God of possibilities is much like the god of the cults. In fact, the caricature of God in Process theology mirrors cultic teaching. Morey explains:

"Now the reader may be thinking that only some far-out cultist would believe in such a god. In fact, this used to be the case. Beyond the secular philosophers, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been the most aggressive religious body to teach openly the concept that God does not know the future and thus he is not omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. The concept of a finite god or gods is also a part of Mormonism, Armstrongism, and frequently appears in New Age material. What is little known is that since the turn of the century mainline liberal universities, colleges, and seminaries have been teaching a finite god. Alfred North Whitehead at Harvard (Unitarian) and John Brightman

at Boston University (United Methodist) are examples of this."⁶⁶

Consider the words of Mormon church founder Joseph Smith:

*"It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible. ... and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one."*⁶⁷

The Jehovah's Witnesses teach that God chooses not to know certain things and thereby limits Himself in His knowledge of the future.⁶⁸ The logical inconsistency of the Jehovah's Witnesses' position is that if God plans not to know certain events, He must have known all events from the beginning as a reference point for His choice. If He knows what events He does not want to know, then He knows them all.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also teach that God gets knowledge from His angels, who gather information for Him.⁶⁹ They further teach that God did not know Adam and Eve would fall.⁷⁰

In a Dilbert cartoon, Dilbert's cat says: "Dilbert, you've become too aware of reality. I'm sending you to 'cynics anonymous.' A higher power will help you regain the naive optimism that once made you a perfect employee." Dilbert then asks: "Why can't the higher power change me while I'm sitting here?" His cat responds: "Fluorescent lights block His power." Sounds silly (and it is intended to be) but the Dilbert cartoon is simply presenting the idea of a limited God.

Boyd seems to hold to the idea that there is only one way of knowing the future, that is, the way we as humans know it. Since there is only one basic

way of knowing the future, that must be the way in which God knows it; that is, sequentially or one current moment at a time. We have reason to question that idea because Isaiah tells us that God's "thoughts are not our thoughts" (55:9). We have at least the suggestion that God does not think exactly like we think.

Further, 2 Peter 3:8 reminds us "that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day." If nothing else, Peter is telling us that God is not time-bound. God does not relate to or experience time as we do.

Boyd's own position at many points (the suggestion that God may know at least some of the future) demands that God knows in a totally different way from the way we do. If He knows any of the future, that is much more than a human knowing.

Boyd's proposition is that if God knows the future, it somehow negates free choice or freedom to choose. One proposition does not follow the other as Geisler shows:

"Since God is an omniscient being, he knows with *certainty* what we will do *freely*. ... So, God does not have to wait to see what will happen. He knows it eternally in his eternal mind. Hence, his knowledge is not dependent on it happening (as Molinists claim). A totally independent being cannot be dependent on anything. And since God's knowledge is one with his eternal and independent mind, it follows that God knows everything that will yet be (to us) within his eternal and unchangeable essence. ... from God's perspective (since he knows the future infallibly) every thing is certain. But as noted above, this does not mean that from the human standpoint these actions are not chosen freely. It is simply that God knew for *certain* how they would *freely* exercise their choice."⁷¹

All through Jewish history, the Old Testament Jews did not ever think that God's perfect foreknowledge inhibited free choice. As George Foot Moore observes, "The sententious

words of Akiba are familiar: 'Everything is foreseen (by God), and freedom of choice is given (to man).'"⁷²

Strimple affirms:

"The Bible never presents the fact that God orders all things according to the purpose of His sovereign will as a threat to human freedom. Rice and Pinnock see a great tension, even an impossible contradiction, between any affirmation of God's sovereign foreordination and an affirmation of man's true freedom. The Bible does not. The insistence by these 'free-will theists' that there is an irrational tension here — and thus we must choose which truth we shall affirm, God's absolute sovereignty or genuine human freedom — strangely echoes the concern that has been the driving motivation of modern atheism, whether in Ludwig Feuerbach (who influenced Karl Marx so strongly) or in Friedrich Nietzsche or in twentieth-century existentialist Jean Paul Sartre. We might call this a seesaw (teeter-totter) conception: if humans are to 'go up' (be recognized for all that they are, as significant and valuable), then God must 'go down.' God is viewed by such thinkers as the greatest imaginable threat to the dignity and freedom of man. But the biblical perspective is diametrically opposed to that notion."⁷³

Boyd may be overreacting to hyper-Calvinism and jumping to the opposite extreme.

Boyd appeals to Methodist expositor Adam Clarke as one who "espoused, in one form or another" the openness view.⁷⁴ The best that could be said about Clarke, at least at this point, is that he was extremely contradictory. In discussing foreknowledge and omniscience, Clarke, the normally consistent Arminian, makes two conflicting points.

Clarke stated that "Omniscience, or the *power to know all things*, is an attribute of God."⁷⁵ In a cumbersome argument, Clarke proposed that there can be no foreknowledge, strictly

speaking, since God dwells in eternity living in futurity. All past, present and future are the same to God. When we speak of future or past, Clarke says these are relative terms which "can have no relation to that God who dwells in every point of eternity; with whom all that is *past*, and all that is *present*, and all that is *future* to man, exists in one infinite, indivisible, and eternal NOW. ... God's *omniscience* implies his *power to know all things*."⁷⁶

Then Clarke begins to mire himself in contradiction to try to save his view of man as a free agent. His argument is that God, who is omnipotent, does not always exercise omnipotence. God who is omniscient, in Clarke's view, does not always exercise omniscience. God is not obliged to do all He can do, therefore He is not obliged to know all He can know. God, in Clarke's scheme, ordains certain things that are absolute and unalterable and ordains certain things as contingent and leaves them up to man's decision.

Yet Clarke quotes from Bird's Conferences: "God doth necessarily foreknow all that will be done. ... God indeed foreknoweth all things, because they will be done; but things are not (therefore) done, because he foreknoweth them."⁷⁷ It seems we can choose which side of Clarke we want.

THE PERILS OF NEOTHEISM

We can believe what the Bible says about God's ability to know all things — even things in the future. Isaiah 25:1 tells us that God's "counsels of old are faithfulness and truth." Those counsels tell us that God is all knowing as in Psalm 147:5, "His understanding is infinite" and 1 John 3:20, "God knows all things." We are reminded in Acts 15:18, "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world." Because man is one of His works we can conclude He knows all about us from the beginning of the world.

To propose, as Boyd does, that God knows what He will do — but not what we will do — is an outright denial of biblical teaching. If God were limited in knowledge as to our choices, there would be precious little

He could know.

Limited knowledge on God's part, as we have noted, belonged to Socinianism, liberalism and cults for the most part. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that God's knowledge is limited, rather the opposite. We believe that Boyd is trying to rob us of a true picture of the true God. Talking of God as "open" is just a euphemism for limited.

This is not a debate between Calvinists and Arminians, since both have always held to God's perfect, complete and comprehensive foreknowledge. Foreknowledge to both camps meant all knowledge perfectly: past, present and future.

God knew what Pharaoh would do (Exodus 3:19; 7:14; 9:30; 11:19). The future of King Cyrus was given by God (Isaiah 40:28). Jesus knew exactly what Judas would do (John 6:64). He knew what Peter would do in every detail (Mark 14:30; John 21:18-19). He described the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24), so He knew what the Romans would do. Jesus based the claims of His deity on the fact that He had knowledge of the future, "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am" (John 13:19). No prophecy, no deity. Prophecy demands perfect foreknowledge. There is not a hint of contingency in the New Testament and it is only by literalizing non-literal material in the Old Testament that we can suggest a limited God.

The denial of any of the omnib-attributes of God results in not only serious problems but also devastating loss for the Church. Consider the results of dropping or compromising even one of the omni-passages from Scripture:

• *Disregard for our rich heritage.* All the rich creeds that reflect good theology would have to be trashed or rewritten. Now we must abandon most of the Church Fathers as being ignorant. Now we must ignore the Reformation along with Luther, Calvin, Melancthon and all the others. Now we must sneer at Puritans, and men such as Spurgeon, Whitefield and Edwards. How high-minded and

proud we have become when we destroy the foundation of 2000 years of Church history and profess to know more than all who went before us.

Our church history books have to be trashed, along with most doctrine and theology books. All of our major seminaries and Bible colleges would have to throw away much of their curriculum since it is based on outdated teaching. We could only keep the old textbooks as odd curiosities filled with errors.

• *Disillusionment with the Church's teaching and its hymnody.* No longer can we teach and sing, "How Great Thou Art." No longer can we sing with assurance: "I know who holds the future." No longer can we sing: "Holy Holy Holy, Lord God Almighty," since he is not *All-Mighty*. We now share His "say-so." Our hymnbooks would have to be radically revised if not abandoned.

Men in the pulpit and missionaries who continued to spread the "misguided" and misinformed error of classical Theism would have to be just tolerated or perhaps removed. The new breed of "finite god" teachers would have to try to give comfort to those who could no longer have faith in the pages of the Bible or in a God who was all wise and incomprehensible, knowing the end from the beginning. They could offer no substitutes — only possibilities.

• *Delusion as to who we are.* To bring God down changes the way we view everything in life. The ramifications for understanding man would be mind boggling. Morey explains:

"In short, as long as God is viewed as infinite, the idea that a finite creature is or can become equal to God is impossible. But what if God is reduced to a finite, imperfect, fallible being? What if it is claimed that God is no different from any other finite, imperfect, fallible being, angelic or human? What if God is limited by the space-time universe in the same ways as all other finite creatures? The creature can then begin to entertain delusions of grandeur that he can be or is equal to God."⁷⁸

Endnotes:

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2000, pg. 127.
2. Romans 1:22-23.
3. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 120.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 75, emphasis in original.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 105.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54, emphasis in original.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 64, emphasis in original.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 58.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.
10. John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1951, pg. 57.
11. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 8.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 130, 93.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 94, emphasis in original.
15. See for example, W.E. Vine, *The Expanded Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984, pp. 499-501.
16. Everett F. Harrison, editor, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1960, pg. 257.
17. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 9.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 30.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 153.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 115.
22. Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentaries*. New York: Abington Press, no date, Vol. 2, pg. 549, italic in original.
23. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 75, emphasis in original.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 171, footnote 2, emphasis in original.
25. *Ibid.*, footnote 5, emphasis in original.
26. William Evans, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974, pg. 35.
27. Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952, pg. 127.
28. James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. Escondido, Calif.: den Dulk Christian Gospel Foundation, 1887, pg. 73.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74, italics in original.
30. G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, pg. 23, note added.
31. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 10, emphasis in original.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 97.
33. *Christianity Today*, Feb. 7, 2000, pp. 34-35.
34. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 118.
35. Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, pg. 945.
36. Robert A. Morey, *Battle of the Gods*. Southbridge, Mass.: Crown Publications, Inc., 1989, pg. 9.
37. *Ibid.*, pg. 216.

38. Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997, pg. 96.
39. See further, *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, op. cit., pg. 946.
40. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999, pg. 577.
41. William Watkins, *Christian Research Journal*, "A Summary Critique," Fall 1993, pg. 43.
42. Ronald Nash calls Process theology a dangerous heresy and in a phone conversation (2/4/00) with this author, Dr. Jay Adams branded Process theology as heresy.
43. Watkins, "A Summary Critique," op. cit., pg. 44.
44. John Piper, "Is the Glory of God at Stake in God's Foreknowledge of Human Choices? Jonathan Edwards' Response to Gregory Boyd," July 1998. This article is available on Desiring God Ministries web site (<http://www.desiringgod.org>).
45. *Ibid.*, italic in original.
46. "God, Foreknowledge and the Baptist General Conference." This multi-page document is available online at: <http://www.opentheism.org/resolution.htm>.
47. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 9.
48. John Armstrong, editor, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, pg. 140.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 139.
50. R.K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996, pg. 226.
51. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 53.
52. *Ibid.*, pg. 54.
53. *Ibid.*, pg. 44.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.
55. *Ibid.*, pg. 49.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 35.
57. *Ibid.*, pg. 61.
58. *Ibid.*, pg. 43.
59. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*, op. cit., pg. 177.
60. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 98.
61. *Ibid.*, pg. 133.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
63. For a more balanced view of sin, suffering and evil, we recommend the following: *The Power of Suffering* by John MacArthur, *As Silver Refined* by Kay Arthur, *When God Weeps* by Joni Eareckson Tada and *Why Would a Good God Allow Suffering?* by Martin R. DeHaan II.
64. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 57.
65. *Ibid.*, pg. 115.
66. *Battle of the Gods*, op. cit., pg. 10.
67. Compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977, pp. 345-347, italics in original.
68. See for example, "Foreknowledge, Foreordination," *Insight on the Scriptures*. Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., Vol. 1, 1988, pp. 851-860.
69. See *The Watchtower*, August 1, 1970, pg. 471.
70. See *The Watchtower*, June 1, 1953, pg. 341.
71. *Creating God in the Image of Man?*, op. cit., pp. 108, 111, 133, emphasis in original.
72. George Foot Moore, *Judaism*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Vol. 1, 1960, pg. 455.
73. *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, op. cit., pg. 142.
74. *God of the Possible*, op. cit., pg. 115.
75. *Clarke's Commentaries*, op. cit., Vol 5, pg. 702, emphasis in original.
76. *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.
77. *Ibid.*, pg. 703.
78. *Battle of the Gods*, op. cit., pg. 18.

CAN YOU BE DECEIVED?

(continued from page 1)

"Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; They have not uncovered your iniquity, to bring back your captives, but have envisioned for you false prophecies and delusions."

It seems that for many complex reasons, one of which is the spurious idea of ongoing revelation (along with a diminished view of the sufficiency of the Bible), many people are predisposed to credulity. That is, they are gullible and likely ready to believe anything even on very slight evidence or sometimes with no evidence at all. Testimonials and dramatic stories sell.

The Bible does not go into a lot of intricate detail as to the psychology of deception; it does not have to. What it does is give us warning about its reality and specific instruction on how to deal with it.

The words deceit, deceitful, deceitfully, deceitfulness, deceive, and deceptibility are used again and again

in the Bible. It is one of the major themes. There are warnings everywhere in Scripture about being deceived. There are numerous warnings about the users and purveyors of deceit. The underlying Greek words for deceit cover everything from self-deceit to the practice of deceit by unprincipled religious teachers and con artists. So we are warned repeatedly and must be ready (2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-14).

Deceit is defined as:

"1. The act of representing as true what is known to be false; a deceiving or lying. 2. a dishonest action or trick; fraud or lie. 3. the quality of being deceitful."²

British scholar W.E. Vine defines the Greek words *apate* and *dolos* that underlie the various English words for deceit:

"APATE ... to cheat, deceive, beguile, that which gives a false impression, whether by appearance, statement or influence ... In Col. 2:8, 'vain deceit' suggests that deceit is void of anything

profitable. ... DOLOS ... primarily a bait, snare; hence, craft, deceit, guile."³

UNHOLY WATER

Fiction writer Robert Rosenberg captures the concept of deceit in his first mystery novel, *Crimes of the City*. Detective Avram Cohen is the lead character and is investigating the murder of two nuns in Ein Kerem, west of Jerusalem. A Messianic rabbi, Ovadia, who is using his religious influence to cover drug running, is described by Cohen:

"The only real difference seems to be that he figured out that if he calls it religion, he can get away with things. He's playing the saint, selling blessed water from a faucet."⁴

So, deceitful men get away with things under the guise of religion and playing the saint while they sell worthless panaceas. Years ago we would call them "snake oil salesmen."

To help us in our study, first we need to see...