

# **Examining the Fruit of the Fruitless Gospel of Open Theism**

## **An introduction to the key issues in open theism related to divine foreknowledge and human free will.**

Clint Sheehan

Scripture contains some things which are difficult to understand, or even paradoxical. For instance, it affirms that salvation is a sovereign act of God (e.g., Rom. 9:14-24). It ties salvation to the faith of man (e.g., Rom. 10:9-11). Both of these principles are also found simultaneously (e.g., John 1:12-13). Uncomfortable with such theological mysteries, some subordinate one principle to the other in order to eliminate the mystery. Hyper-Calvinists ultimately dismiss the role of man's faith while Free Will Theists ultimately dismiss the role of God's sovereignty.

A modern form of Free Will Theism is Open Theism, invented to salvage Arminianism from a fatal logical flaw. If God has an exhaustive foreknowledge of all future acts, decisions, and events, and if God could have knowingly created the universe different in anyway than He did, then by creating this universe and not another the entire course of history was sovereignly decreed from the foundation of the world. Exhaustive foreknowledge is incompatible with the Arminian understanding of the role of the will of man in salvation because the unavoidable corollary of exhaustive foreknowledge is determinism. Thus to be logically consistent an Arminian must either become a Calvinist or reject altogether the idea that God has exhaustive foreknowledge. Open Theists choose the latter.

A key feature of Open Theism is its redefinition of God's foreknowledge; God knows the future as a set of possibilities rather than as certainties because the future is unsettled, being contingent upon the unforeseeable choices and actions of free moral agents. Because our thoughts, decisions, and actions fall outside of the scope of foreknowledge, God cannot know them until they have occurred. Open Theism also teaches that God intentionally limits the exercise of His absolute sovereignty, valuing the genuine freedom of man above the exercise of His own sovereignty. God occasionally exercises His absolute sovereignty as necessary to bring about certain future results, such as with predictive prophecy, but without coercing individuals to act against their will.

Typically the debate with Open Theism involves each side presenting their favourite proof texts. This approach to theological debate is rarely effective because each side presupposes the priority of their own proof texts and subordinates the other side's texts to their own. There is a simpler approach. Concerning false teachers Jesus taught "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them". By examining the fruit of Open Theism we can determine whether the system is good or corrupt while avoiding the proof text quagmire.

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of all of the problems with Open Theism. For instance, their understanding of free will is absurd. The will is the

faculty by which we make decisions. The common understanding of free will is that man is free to choose whatever he desires in any situation without outside coercion. Each choice, whether wise or unwise, is determined by some combination of nature, character, experiences, knowledge, faith, reason, and emotions. This however is rejected by Open Theists who hold a libertarian understanding of free will. They maintain that if these factors play a role in determining our choices, then our choices are not truly free. To be genuinely free they argue that our choices must be free from all influences and so we must be able to choose contrary to our nature, character, experiences, knowledge, faith, reason, and emotions. Interestingly this would form the basis for a legal insanity defense. If a defendant in a murder trial truthfully testified that this was his only murder, that he knew murder was wrong, that he found murder repulsive, that he personally liked his victim, that he had no motive or desire to kill his victim but he chose to kill the victim anyway, he would surely be found not guilty by reason of mental defect or insanity and would be committed to a psychiatric institution. Yet this is exactly the libertarian definition of a genuinely free will. Decisions not motivated by some combination of these factors are random and inexplicable. The libertarian understanding of the will does not give us freedom *of* the will but freedom *from* a will. We should also note that careful reflection upon the Open Theism understanding of free will and God's foreknowledge demonstrates the impossibility of the God of Open Theism ensuring any future results. Predictive prophecy is reduced to nothing more than a set of educated guesses with no certainty of anything coming to pass.

A central premise of Open Theism is that our salvation ultimately results from the exercise of our own will. We hear the gospel and choose either to accept or reject Christ. The fatal flaw of this premise, and therefore the fruit showing the tree to be corrupt, is that nobody could be saved under this system. Scripture teaches that by nature we are at enmity with God.<sup>1</sup> There is none righteous, no not one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks after God.<sup>2</sup> Men love the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds are evil.<sup>3</sup> We have eyes but see not, ears but hear not and hard hearts and dark minds.<sup>4</sup> Our every thought and inclination is only evil always from our youth.<sup>5</sup> The unsaved, being spiritually dead<sup>6</sup>, are unable to understand the things of God since they are foolishness to them, being spiritually discerned.<sup>7</sup> To the unsaved the gospel is foolishness and a stumbling block.<sup>8</sup> Faith is a fruit of the Spirit<sup>9</sup> whom we receive

---

<sup>1</sup> Rom.8:1-8; James 4:4

<sup>2</sup> Rom.3:10-18

<sup>3</sup> John 3:19-20

<sup>4</sup> Mat.13:10-15

<sup>5</sup> Gen.6:5; 8:21; Rom.1:28-32

<sup>6</sup> Eph.2:1-3

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor.2:14

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor.1:18-23

<sup>9</sup> Gal.5:22

at our regeneration<sup>10</sup>, thus the unregenerate are incapable of exercising faith in Christ.<sup>11</sup> It is clear therefore, unless there is some sort of external intervention to change our wills, which are by nature from the time of birth utterly in opposition to God, nobody would be saved. Open Theism however teaches that God would never intervene in any individual's life in any way that would make him act against his will. Since by nature our wills are entirely directed against God and since God would not do anything that would coerce us to act against our wills, then nobody would be saved. Nevertheless, the New Testament clearly indicates that some are saved. Therefore this central premise of Open Theism is false and so the system itself is false. Of course with their nonsensical libertarian understanding of free will they might maintain that a person could hate God, love evil, and not understand or believe the gospel message and still choose to accept Christ. The absurdity of this is self-evident. Furthermore, the absolutely certain future outcome that none could be saved under this system demonstrates that Open Theism's understanding of God's foreknowledge is false and their system self-contradictory.

Like all systems of false doctrine, Open Theism offers an impressive array of proof texts but by its fruit we know it to be corrupt. It is a system under which none would be saved. Its foundation is an absurd idea of free will and an untenable redefinition of God's foreknowledge. It is full of logical inconsistencies. By virtue of valuing the exercise of human faculties above the exercise of Divine attributes it exalts the creature above the Creator. Open Theism has no place within orthodox Evangelical Christianity. Open Theists may be sincere in their beliefs but they are sincerely wrong.

Published in *The Gospel Witness*, June 2005.

---

<sup>10</sup> Eph. 1:13-14

<sup>11</sup> John 6:35-37,44,61-65; 10:25-28