

A Book Review by Julie Short

The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God

By Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, Basinger.

What kind of God created the world? What kind of world did God create?"

Throughout life we may come to times when we realize that our intellectual beliefs conflict with beliefs embedded in childhood. For example, we may honestly think of God as a God of grace but live our lives in fear. Conversely, our personal experience of a loving, responsive, open God may conflict with our theology of a more restrictive, penalizing or all-controlling God. I have recently been mucking around in one of these periods—at times struggling to sort out what I believe about the nature of God, myself, my relationship with him, etc.; at other times resisting the struggle, trying not to think about it at all. As usual, the torture of stagnation becomes something I no longer want to suffer through and my resistance abates. With time I dig in my heels a little less tenaciously and return to the realm of observing what I truly think and believe, reading scripture and, recently, reading a book which helped me to think through many of the issues I have struggled with off and on since growing up an adolescent who struggled with the problem of human suffering during the Viet Nam War.

The Openness of God is no small undertaking. In a mere 176 pages the authors, each writing a different chapter, examine the history of various traditional views of God. Many of these traditional views have been heavily influenced and shaped by early Greek philosophers and medieval theologians.

The authors, all of whom are evangelicals who place great emphasis on following the Bible, begin by examining the "Biblical Support for a New Perspective." Through their comprehensive examination of scripture, they demonstrate a loving, dynamic God who interacts with his creatures in a world which he chose to create in the way that he did—a world in which he chose to create creatures who think and make decisions on their own; a world in which all are invited into a loving relationship with their creator but who are not forced by the creator to open their hearts to him.

The open view of God stresses qualities of generosity, sensitivity and vulnerability more than power and control. It allows us to think of God as taking risks. Instead of locating God above and beyond history, it stresses God's activity in history, responding to events as they happen, in order to accomplish his purposes. Rather than deciding the future all by himself, God made creatures with the capacity to surprise and delight him. Like a loving parent, he rejoices with them when they are happy and suffers with them when they are in pain. In and through everything, God is committed to their welfare and continually works to achieve what is best for them. [p. 125].

Additionally, the authors provide a comparative study of various traditional views and an open view on topics such as: the power of God, the knowledge of God, the immutability of God, God's will, and free will of the creature. The final chapter addresses practical implications for an open view of God, leading the reader through an examination of how one's view of God shapes one's view of petitionary prayer, divine guidance, human suffering, social responsibility, and evangelistic responsibility. All the big existential questions are addressed by examining your view of God!

This is a compelling book. It gave me a jump-start on a time of re-evaluation and re-thinking which I had been avoiding. Because of the thoroughness of the book, careful citations, and enormity of the subject matter, it is not a fast read. However, I found it illuminating, thought-provoking, spiritually freeing, and rejuvenating. As discussed in the book, it is often our very view of God which can keep us from turning to God and having a more meaningful relationship with him. In his chapter on "Systematic Theology," Clark H. Pinnock encourages the reader to reconsider one's view of God and acknowledges the anxiety and discomfort we may experience on this reflective task. He then suggests,

"Rather than worry about our discomfort, perhaps we should be concerned about God's reputation. Does it not concern us that God's name is often dishonored because of poor theologies of God? How can we expect Christians to delight in God or outsiders to seek God if we portray God in biblically flawed, rationally suspect and existentially repugnant ways? We cannot expect it." [p. 104]

I recommend a thoughtful reading of this carefully written book. Since I finished reading it, I have had a great desire to discuss these ideas with others. It is an excellent book for a small study/discussion group made up of people interested in reading a book of this level and willing to discuss and grapple with their current views of God and the implication for a more open view of God. Pinnock writes:

Many contemporary Christians will not be surprised by the model we call the Openness of God or free will theism. They already enjoy a vital personal relationship with God and experience God as dynamically responding to them. Few doubt that what they do in life has an impact on God and calls forth appropriate responses from God. The problem actually lies more in systematic theology than it does in religious experience. For some reason, when we do theology we lose sight of the Openness of God that we experience. There is resistance to conceptualizing it, even though it is existentially familiar." [p. 105]

Easing the grasp on this resistance can lead to a greater integration of what we say and believe and how we live our lives. The Openness of God can help to launch us on this journey.