

A Response to John Piper

by Dr. Gregory A Boyd

(Professor at Bethel College, Preaching Pastor at Woodland Hills Church)

In what follows I shall respond to a recent packet of essays which were written and distributed by Rev. John Piper regarding my theological views. On the whole I commend John for the fairness and accuracy with which he presented his case against me. But I believe a few words of rebuttal and clarification are needed to fill out the picture of what I believe and of what this debate is about.

John's essays do not contain page numbers so I shall proceed by simply listing my remarks under the title of each individual essay. But first a few preliminary words about the nature of this debate and the contents of my view are in order.

A Preliminary Word: What This Debate is About

Let me begin by expressing my unqualified commitment to the Affirmation of Faith of the Baptist General Conference. It is a guiding principle for me in teaching at Bethel College and preaching at Woodland Hills Church. I do not believe that my views depart in any way from this statement. Nor do I believe that my views are inconsistent with the pietistic tradition of the Baptist General Conference which has always stressed the importance of maintaining an irenic spirit on peripheral matters of theology as we fellowship together for the purposes of carrying out our mission to the world.

The particular view that is causing John consternation is unaddressed by the BGC Affirmation of Faith (or any of the ecumenical orthodox creeds of the Church for that matter). It concerns a rather technical philosophical point regarding the "ontological status of the future in the present." Put simply, while many hold that all of the future consists in "definite realities" (everything is definitely *this* way and definitely *not that way*) I hold, for biblical reasons, that it partly consists in "indefinite possibilities" (it is *possibly* this way and *possibly* that way).

As John acknowledges, I unequivocally affirm the omniscience of God. Whatever is real, God knows. John's disagreement with me thus isn't over whether or not God is omniscient. It is a disagreement over the *contents of reality*, which the omniscient God knows.

This debate, it should be noted, has a long tradition and has throughout Church history generated a number of novel positions. For example, in the seventeenth century Luis de Molina argued the view that reality consisted not only of what is and what shall be but also of what could possibly be. He thus held that the omniscient God possesses "Middle Knowledge." Others argued that such possibilities don't exist, so God of course doesn't know them. The issue has been hotly debated ever since.

My view is in essence a modification of Molina's view. I agree with him that God knows all possibilities. I disagree that what shall be is in all respects settled from all eternity. And the debate goes on.

It is also important to note that this debate is not over the nature or character of God. Though John could be read as suggesting otherwise at points, his view that the future is in all respects settled does not produce a more exalted view of God's omniscience than my view that it is not. Suppose you and I disagree about the contents of a particular room. You say there are 35 chairs while I maintain there are only 25 chairs. We both agree that however many chairs there are God knows it, for God knows reality just as it is. No one would claim that your view of God's omniscience is greater than mine because on your counting he knows more chairs. The question is about the contents of the room, not the quality of God's omniscience.

So too, John and I disagree about the contents of "the room of the future." He holds God knows it all as definite because it is definite. I hold he knows some of it as indefinite because it is partly indefinite. But his view of God's omniscience is not greater than mine for this reason. Again, the question is solely about the content of reality, not the quality of God's knowing

My Reasons For Believing in a Partly Open Future

The basic conviction that leads me to my position is that I want to affirm the whole of Scripture as literally true unless Scripture itself gives me reason to think it doesn't mean to be taken as literal. There are, of course, many passages of Scripture which suggest that at least some aspects of the future are predestined and/or foreknown. But there are many other passages of Scripture which suggests that at least some aspects of the future are not predestined or foreknown. John believes that to affirm the former set of passages one must treat the latter set of passages as figurative, not literal. I believe that one can consistently affirm *both* sets of passages as *literally true*.

A few examples will help make my position clear. When the Bible says that God "changed his mind" (e.g. Ex. 32:14; 2 Chr. 21:15; Jon.3:10, Jere. 26:2-3; Joel 2:13-14), I simply do not see anything, in the text which suggests it is intended to be taken as figurative. So too, when God adds fifteen years to Hezekiah's life after he's prophetically informed him of his intention to end it immediately (Isa., 38:1-5; 2 Ka. 20:1-6), I assume that God altered his plans. The same is true when God says he will reverse his prophesied decision to bless or curse a nation if that nation changes (Jere. 18:7-11). I don't know how to faithfully interpret this passage unless God really changes his mind. And this, so far as I can discern, implies that the fate of the nation was not from eternity a foregone conclusion.

In just the same way, when the Lord says that he *thought* Israel would turn to him and expresses disappointment over the fact that they didn't (Jere. 3:6-7, 19-20), I personally don't know how to interpret this with integrity without concluding that what Israel was actually going to do was somewhat up in the air at the time God thought this. When the

Lord says that he "regretted" the way even decisions which he made turned out, I have to take this as factual (Gen. 6:6, I Sam. 5:12, 35). And when the Lord speaks of the future using words like "if," "perhaps" and "maybe," as he frequently does, I don't know how to acknowledge these words as absolutely authoritative in my thinking- without concluding that the aspects of the future to which he refers is genuinely a "maybe," not a settled issues (e.g., Ex. 4:1-9; Jere. 38:17-18, 20-21, 23).

I respectfully acknowledge that John and many others interpret these verses less literally and do so out of a desire to affirm the whole of Scripture. Where we disagree is over whether or not one can and/or must take this second class of Scriptures literally while affirming, or in order to affirm, the whole of Scripture. Even more fundamentally, we disagree about whether someone like myself who thinks they should be taken literally is within the parameters of the orthodoxy of the BGC fellowship.

Having laid this foundation I turn now to respond to some of the particular points John raised in his essays on my view.

Editor's Note: The remainder of Dr. Boyd's responses to Dr. Piper have also been appended to the essays for easier comparison by the reader. The complete listing is found in the index to this discussion.

The Socinian Exception

My most significant complaint about any of the essays which John distributed is his labeling me a "Socinian." It is true that, so far as we can tell, the sixteenth century heretic Socinius held that the future was not exhaustively settled, either in reality or in God's mind. He also denied the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus and the substitutionary atonement, however. Calling me a "Socinian" is a bit like me calling John a "Muslim" because his view of God as predestining every detail of world history is exactly what the Koran teaches. It would be an unfair accusation, of course, because John parts from the Muslim teaching in most other important respects. But in just the same way I differ from Socinius in all other respects. Indeed, though I cannot enter into the issue here, its doubtful that Socinius' view is the same as mine and even more doubtful that he held to it for the reasons I hold to mine.

Excerpts From and Comments on Trinity and Process

I commend John for wrestling with this difficult work (dissertations are never easy reading!) and for fairly portraying my arguments. John is understandably bewildered by the rather awkward gender neutral language I use of God in this work (my doctoral dissertation). The reason for this is straightforward. This was the required style of my doctoral dissertation committee.

John criticizes me for doing little scriptural exegesis in this work. As I make clear in the beginning of this work, however, this was an exercise in philosophical theology. It was not intended to be a scriptural exposition. I was critiquing a rationalistic system of

thought (Hartshorne's process philosophy) on the basis of reason. My central argument is that reason requires (what Scripture teaches) that we view God as self-sufficient (not needing the world) and as internally related (the Trinity).

More to the point of the issue, John and I agree that for something to be foreknown it must be predetermined. He holds this is true of the whole future; I that it is only true of part of the future. He thinks I am inconsistent on this point. The example he cites several times in his essays is the crucifixion. How could God predetermine and thus foreknow that, Jesus would be crucified by wicked people (Acts 2:28: 4:28) if he didn't predetermine and foreknow particular individuals to carry out this deed, he wonders?

Two points can be made in response. First, in these verses Peter tells us that God predestined Jesus to be crucified, *not* that certain people were predestined to crucify him. John *deduces* that certain people must have been predestined to do this, but that is his deduction, not Scripture. So, even if I couldn't explain exactly *how* God carried out his prophecy without predestining individuals to carry it out I shouldn't be judged as going beyond Scripture for holding this view. If anything, John is the one going beyond Scripture with his deduction.

Secondly, I do not for my part see how it would be difficult for God to predestine an event without predestining exactly who would carry out the event. All that would be required of God is an accurate knowledge that a certain percentage of fallen people will under certain circumstances act in certain ways. To use an analogy, sociologists, advertisers and insurance companies consistently predict with remarkable accuracy group behavior without being, able to predict individual behavior. Why think it would be difficult for the omniscient God who created these people to do the same?

Pastoral Implications in Dealing with Suffering

John pits Hebrews 12:3-11 in which the Lord speaks about disciplining his children through persecution against my statement to my Father in *Letters From a Skeptic* that we shouldn't look for a higher divine purpose in a young girl being killed by a drunk driver. He then wonders if I think we should look to the purpose of God "in the evils of Judas, Pilate, Herod, the Jews and the Gentiles as they conspired to torture Jesus."

Of course, I think we should look to the purposes of God in the torture of Jesus -- because God *tells us* he had a predetermined purpose here. The point I disagree with John on is that I don't see that Scripture warrants making this a universal principle to explain *all* suffering. I see nothing in Scripture that justifies seeing such things as young girl getting killed by drunk drivers or children getting raped and mutilated as the working out of God's predestining plan. Jesus was God incarnate, and he fought *against* evils in this world as ultimately originating in the mind of Satan, not God. If such things are in fact the result of God's predestining plan, as John holds, then it seems to me that we have God the Son battling God the Father, a "kingdom divided against itself" if ever there was one.

Because Scripture teaches it, I of course believe that God sometimes specifically allows suffering for a greater good, as he did with the Hebrew Christians. And, because Scripture teaches it, I believe God always works to use suffering for a greater good (Rom. 8:28). But it is one thing to say that God sometimes specifically allows and always works to *use* suffering for a greater good, and quite another thing to say that God *ordains* all suffering. The only suffering which Scripture says was specifically preordained was his own: the suffering on the cross. Taking this as the key to understanding suffering in general is, to my way of thinking, unwarranted and ill advised.

Does The BGC Affirmation of Faith Exhaust What The BGC Regards As Essential..?

In this essay John argues that "the doctrine of the simple exhaustive foreknowledge of God" was "assumed" by the designers of the BGC Affirmation of Faith, which is why it wasn't specifically included. Hence, he would argue that the view that the future is partly open stands in contradiction to this Affirmation even though the Affirmation doesn't specifically rule out this view.

In response, I suggest the modesty of the BGC Affirmation was intentional. In sharp contrast to, and partly in reaction to, the more scholastic and fundamentalistic Christian traditions, the pietistic tradition which the BGC is part of has always wanted to affirm unity on essentials and allow for diversity in non-essentials. It is, by design, an Affirmation that can encompass theologies even as diverse as John's and mine.

This intention is altogether lost if we now are going to try to *interpret its silence and psychologize its designers* by trying to guess at all the other things we think they might have assumed while designing the statement. To go down this road would lead us out of the pietistic tradition and right into the scholastic and fundamentalistic traditions to which it was a reaction to.

No minority opinion would be safe if we venture in this direction. Allow me to turn this logic back on John. Many (including me) would argue that there are few things as central to the pietistic tradition (and Scripture) than the affirmation that God loves all people alike and thus that Jesus died for all people. But John unabashedly denies this. In his view many are predestined for hell from all eternity and Jesus died only for the elect. Couldn't one reasonably argue against this minority view on the basis that the pietistic framers of the BGC Affirmation of faith assumed the universality of God's love and of Christ's saving work?

I for one would not want to see this happen. I am proud of belonging to a tradition that allows for significant diversity on relatively minor points of doctrine. It is, I am convinced, one of our greatest strengths. But for just this reason John's case against me on the basis of his interpretation of the silence of the BGC Affirmation of faith concerns me. I think it should concern us all.

What if God Can't Know What Influences Will Sway a Free Choice?

John accurately represents my view that people are free to the extent that they are not coerced, either by God or by external influences. But he wonders how God can "speak so many times in the Bible about what he will do in bringing about certain circumstances involving many people's wills.

Three points may be made. First, many times in the Bible statements that look unconditional (certainties) are in fact conditional. God told Hezekiah he was going to die. It looked like an absolute certainty. In the light of his subsequent decision to add fifteen years to his life, however, we must conclude that this was in fact a conditional prophecy. So too, Psalm 89 looks like an unconditional promise if ever there was one: "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations." This didn't happen, however. Why? Elsewhere we learn that it was actually a conditional promise. "*If* your sons keep my covenant and the statues I teach them, then their sons will sit on your throne for ever and ever" (Ps. 132: 12, emphasis added). There are numerous examples of this in Scripture and for this reason I'm not sure that God speaks with absolute certainty about the future as much as John supposes.

Secondly, holding that people are free does not mean that they possess unlimited freedom. To the contrary, it seems evident both from Scripture and from observation that our freedom is actually quite restricted. An omniscient God who knew the parameters of our freedom would thus be able on this basis alone to speak with certainty about a great many things about the future, especially things where he had decided to influence matters in a certain direction.

Third, I have no difficulty affirming that God can and does at times unilaterally intervene and work in a coercive way to bring about a certain state of affairs. I would only add that a) he doesn't do this all the time, and b) he doesn't coercively use persons in violation to the character they have acquired by their choices and then hold these persons morally responsible for what he made them do.

Why the Gospel is at Stake in the Denial of God's Foreknowledge of Human Decisions?

Unless the future is exhaustively a settled matter, John argues, God cannot *plan* for the death of his Son, cannot *prophesy* about the death of his Son and cannot *perform* the death of his Son. For this reason he suggests that the Gospel itself is "at stake" in our rejecting the view that the future is partly open.

Two points are worth mentioning. First, it is important always to distinguish between what one thinks is a logical implication of another person's position and the position of that person itself. I may argue, for example, that John's view that only certain people are predestined to be saved logically undermines the universal love of God, the genuineness of his offer of salvation to all and the urgency of missions. But this is my reasoning about John's position, not John's position itself. I know that John somehow manages to affirm all these important truths. I would thus criticize John for being logically inconsistent, but

not for undermining the Gospel. If he *actually denied* any of these truths, *then* I'd say the Gospel was "at stake" in rejecting his position.

So too in my case. John doesn't accuse me of actually denying any essential point of the Gospel but he nevertheless argues that the Gospel itself is "at stake" in rejecting my view. He does so because *he thinks* it logically undermines it. Even if I couldn't convince him otherwise, however, this shouldn't warrant the alarmist announcement that the Gospel itself is at stake in rejecting, my view. If I were actually to deny any element of the Gospel *then* one could rightly announce that the Gospel is at stake in rejecting my position. But this even John acknowledges I do not do.

In fact, John's argument against me at this point could be applied to all Arminians since all Arminians deny that God predestines morally evil behavior. He does not think that any of us can consistently hold to the cross as a predestined event and yet hold to the freedom of people in carrying out this event. Would he therefore argue that the Gospel is "at stake" in rejecting Arminianism?

In any event, there is no force to his argument that my view logically undermines God's plan, prophecy, or performance of the crucifixion. And this is my second point. I hold that God can plan, prophesy or perform anything he chooses. He just doesn't choose to do this with everything. Where is the contradiction here? Why should we accept John's "all or nothing" logic? For reasons I've given above, there is no difficulty in affirming that some but not all things are predetermined and foreknown, and thus no problem in affirming that *the event* of the crucifixion was planned, prophesied, and performed by God while at the same time affirming that the free agents who carried out this crucifixion were not predestined.

Does Greg Boyd's View...Jeopardize Our Confidence in the Inspiration of the Bible?

John asks, "If God cannot know beforehand what inspired writers will choose to write, then can he inspire Scripture such that his word is infallibly written?" My reply is that there is no connection between the issue of foreknowledge and God's decision to inspire his Word through human authorship. I believe, because Scripture teaches it, that God can supernaturally intervene in the world whenever he chooses. The extent to which his doing so was or was not predestined or foreknown from the foundation of the world doesn't affect the miracle that occurs when he does so. Hence, I do not see how my view at all impinges on our confidence that the Bible is supernaturally inspired.

The New Covenant and the Foreknowledge of God

John here argues that denying that the future is exhaustively settled "is not minor but major in its destructive effects on the Christian faith" The gist of his argument is that my view undermines God's promises to put his law in our hearts and cause us to walk in his ways.

Three points may be said in response. First, as I've already noted, it is important to see that this is a logical deduction *John* is making *about* my position. Since I unconditionally affirm all elements of the "New Covenant" as well as the promises made about this covenant in the Old Testament, John should simply note that he doesn't see how I can consistently affirm both my view of the future and the Bible's teaching on the covenant. I would argue the same for his view. I think his view logically undermines the moral nature of the covenant of God with his people as well as God's heart to have all people enter into it. But I would not therefore conclude that John's position is dangerous or destructive to the faith. If he worked through the implications of his Calvinistic system of thought in the direction I think it logically leads, *then* I'd conclude that his view was destructive to the faith. But he doesn't do this, and so, though I don't understand his logic, I won't argue this. I would only ask for the same latitude.

Secondly, so far as I can see, everything John argues in this essay against my position could apply as easily to the Arminian position in general. All the verses John quotes regarding God's work to transform his people and to secure us to the end are the verses which Calvinists typically quote against Arminians. Would John therefore want to characterize all Arminians as posing a danger and as being destructive to the heart of the Gospel?

Third, I would answer John's charge the same way any Arminian would answer John's charge. The verses John quotes only rule out human freedom if you insist that God works *irresistibly* in people's lives. There is no difficulty whatsoever in affirming that God promises to give people a new heart and to preserve them to the end while also holding that humans are free if one simply acknowledges that God's work can be either accepted or rejected. This is my position, and the position of all Arminians.

Can an Omniscient God Be Sorry for Something He has Done?

Genesis 6:5-7 depicts God as "regretting" making man because of how terrible the world had become prior to the flood. Similar divine regrets are found elsewhere in Scripture, as when God says he regretted making Saul king over Israel (I Sam. 15). John acknowledges that Genesis 6:6-7 "sounds like God did not know what was going to happen and that, had he known, he would not have done what he did." John denies this, however, rather arguing that God can perform an action which brings him sorrow and joy at the same time. John uses the analogy of spanking his son to make his point. He regrets the sorrow it causes him but approves of the positive effect it has.

Two points may be made in response. First, even if one disagrees with the conclusion that the passages which speak of God regretting how things turn out (or of God changing his mind) imply that the consequences of God's decision were not foreknown with certainty when the decision was made, one can hardly fault too heavily one who does draw this conclusion. For even John admits that this is how it "sounds." Accuse them of being overly literal in their interpretation of the Bible if you will. But the conclusion John draws about those who draw this conclusion seems quite unwarranted: "O how damaging to the church of Christ when the people are led away from the true vision of God!"

Secondly, while I can understand the mixture of emotions which a parent has over spanking their child, I can make sense of this analogy only because the child is *a free autonomous agent* from the parent. The child is acting *against* the parent's wishes and *against* the child's own best interest and so must be disciplined. However, if we were to suppose that the child was doing what the parent somehow made it do even when it was being disobedient, the analogy would lose all force. For now we could not possibly understand the parent's grief in punishing the child. Indeed, the punishment itself becomes unintelligible.

This is the problem I see in John's reworking, of Genesis 6:6-7. For John it was perfectly certain from all eternity that the world would end up just the way it ended up prior to the flood, for this, John holds, was predestined. God was grieved over this and then punished the world with a flood. But if the world was exactly as God planned it to be, why punish it? And why express regrets over it? The situation is altogether different from what occurs when a parent both regrets and approves of spanking a child.

Queries for Gregory Boyd on Whether the Wicked Are Confirmed in Evil in Hell and the Saints Are Confirmed in Righteousness in Heaven.

John wonders how I can believe in any eternally secure heaven and hell if humans are free. Two points may be made.

First, whatever force his argument has it has against all Arminians. The extent to which the future is or is not settled and known as such by God doesn't affect this topic at all. Nor does John ever bring it up.

Secondly, so far as I can see, the argument has no force. With all Arminians I hold that humans are free. But, again with all Arminians, I do not hold that they are unlimited in their freedom, either in terms of the scope or the duration of what they can choose. Our freedom is a limited affair, which settles our eternal destinies. And then it is over. So Scripture teaches. So experience confirms (note how we tend to become fixed in our character over time).

I thus see no problem with the Arminian understanding of eternal heaven or hell. I think there is a problem, however, for the Calvinist understanding. For now we must suppose that the fate of those who are eternally damned was decided an eternity before they were ever born. And, as Arminians have long, pointed out, this violates every sense of morality which we possess as well as a great deal of Scripture (I Pet. 3:9; Ezek. 18:23, etc.).

Thomas Oden's Charge of Heresy

John is greatly impressed by Thomas Oden's remark that "the fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds." He argues that "a great deal for the future of our Conference hangs on how we respond to Oden's charge of 'heresy.'

Three points can be briefly made. First, this is Thomas Oden's opinion and he has a right to it. But it's not clear how this furthers John's case against me. In the end (as well as in the beginning) our discussion should revolve around the interpretation of Scripture, not Thomas Oden.

Secondly, I agree with Oden that if anyone claimed that God was "ignorant" of anything that existed this would be a heresy, for it would be admitting that God is limited. But I do not affirm this. God is not "ignorant" of a unicorn in my office, because there is no unicorn in my office. So too God is not "ignorant" of the future if in fact the future is not exhaustively there to be known.

Third, it is not clear what the "great deal" of the "future of our Conference" is which hangs on how we respond to Oden's charge. Is it the heart of the Gospel which John thinks is undermined by the view that the future is partly opened? I trust I've already answered that charge.

Clark Pinnock's Free-Will Theism and the Limitation of God's Foreknowledge

This essay is a critique of Pinnock's argument for God's "limited foreknowledge." I do not hold that God's knowledge is in any way "limited." Nor do I think that Pinnock's argument, which John interacts with, is irrefutable. Nor do I think that John's refutation of this argument is convincing. But since none of this pertains to me I shall pass it by.

For our present purposes the only point worth noting in this essay is that John here cites a number of examples where God did seem to foreknow future free decisions: Pharaoh would honor the butler and hang the baker in Genesis 40:8; sinful people would pierce Jesus in John 19:36-37; and the Egyptians would oppress Israel 400 years in Genesis 15:13, to site three examples. Though he cites these against Pinnock they apply to my position as well.

My reply is twofold. First, I fully acknowledge this motif of Scripture. Much of the future is a settled matter. I simply don't believe that acknowledging this motif means we must reject, or at least significantly reinterpret, the other scriptural motif, which depicts God as facing a partly open future.

Second, because I hold that God can do whatever he wants to do, because I hold that God sets the parameters of human freedom, and because I hold that God knows humans perfectly and thus can predict general behavior accurately, I have no problem affirming the first motif of Scripture while also affirming the second. I have no problem, for example, holding that God directed a man to pierce Jesus' side so long as it wasn't a righteous man who would have done otherwise had God not put the idea into his head. But there is no reason to suspect that the guard who did this was this sort of person.

On C. S. Lewis' View of God's Omnipotence

I agree with John that God cannot do the logically contradictory and that this does not weaken God in the least. To say that God "can't" make a rock so big he can't lift it does not limit God, because every rock is by definition "liftable" by an omnipotent God. I also agree with John that issues of what God can and cannot do must be settled "not philosophically but exegetically."

At the same time, I would argue (though I will not do it presently) that it is no limitation on God to say that he "can't" from eternity exhaustively foreknow the future free decisions of morally responsible agents, for supposing this constitutes a logical contradiction. It is on a par with a rock so big God can't lift it. Arguments to this effect, however, do not constitute my reasons for holding to a partly open future. This I do because I am convinced fidelity to Scripture requires it.

Conclusion

I sincerely applaud John's passion in wanting to defend truth, at least as he understands it. I do not fault him from taking a public stand on an issue, which he feels, is important. And I thank him for the candor and fairness with which he wrote these essays. At no time have I sensed that John's issues with me were at all personal, and I thank him for this.

The three issues John has placed before us are: a) Is the view that the future is partly open fundamentally unscriptural?; b) If so, does holding to this position pose a danger to central features of the Christian faith?; And c) Is such a position inconsistent with the BGC Affirmation of faith? John and I obviously disagree on all three.

My hope is that we stand firm within our pietistic tradition and remain united in essentials and very tolerant in non-essentials. I pray that we define the parameters of our fellowship by what we each explicitly endorse, not by what we think is logically entailed by what each other endorses. In the end it is all of us who must as a collective body decide these matters for our fellowship. As we discuss this topic in the months to come let us pray that we be led by the Spirit of God in all our reflections and that we continue to manifest Christ like love in all of our conversations.

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