

Theological Lawbreaker?

A response to Stephen Williams.

John Sanders

Stephen Williams' review of my book, *The God Who Risks* [B&C, November/December 1999], raises some issues he believes I should address and others which he thinks I sophomorically ignored. Let me see if I can shed some light on three important issues he raises, and so make the book seem less naïve than the reader of his review might conclude.

Williams opens with a satire on what he believes would be my paraphrase of the Annunciation. Here the issue is predictive prophecy and whether things will happen precisely the way God says they will. It is true that there are many predictions in the Bible that come to pass exactly as God said. However, there are also a number of predictions where what God said would happen did not, in fact, occur. King Hezekiah, for example, falls ill and is informed by Isaiah, "Thus says the Lord...you shall die and not live" (2 Kings 20:1). God explicitly says that the king will not recover from this illness. However, Hezekiah prays, and God sends Isaiah back to the king to announce that God has rescinded his decision. Now, even though God spoke unconditionally, it turns out that this was a conditional prophecy (this will happen unless something changes), but we know it was conditional only because it did not occur as God first said.

One of the differences between Williams and myself is the number of conditional predictions we believe are in Scripture. Our habit is to classify the unfulfilled predictions as "conditional" and the fulfilled ones as "unconditional." In my view, many of those typically classed as unconditional were actually conditional prophecies which came about because God's unspoken conditions were met. The subtitle to Williams's review asks, "Were the biblical prophecies mere probabilities?" No. But were some (even many) of the biblical prophecies conditional utterances? The answer to that is, Yes.

Thus far, Williams has gotten me mostly correct. But am I committed to all he accuses me of in his satire? No, because he plays down the other two explanations of prophecy from the openness view. First, some predictions express God's intention to do something in the future irrespective of human decision. These predictions do not depend upon a "crystal ball" by which God sees the future; rather, they depend upon the power of God to carry them out (the issue is omnipotence, not omniscience). Second, some predictions are based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present (our character, physical circumstances, and so on). God knew Mary's heart so thoroughly that God could be quite certain she would comply even though she retained the freedom to refuse God.¹

Next, Williams claims that the passages I discuss regarding God changing his mind, regretting things, grieving over sin, and responding to prayer are not "hermeneutically significant" while the passages he cites are. He bases this claim on two grounds. First, by his deep feelings, intuitions, and "religious sensibilities" he just knows I'm wrong, so

there is no need to "adjudicate all the substantive issues." This is like some present-day naturalists who say, "Because of our scientific sensibilities we just know intelligent design is wrong, so there is no need to consider any evidence which might call our sensibilities into question." What is there to argue with? Second, Williams claims that the view of God seen in the latter prophets should rule out the passages in earlier writings, such as Exodus and Samuel, where God changes his mind, grieves and responds to prayer. He asserts that I completely ignore this issue.

In fact, however, in *The God Who Risks* I cite several studies regarding the prophets, including some later than Isaiah, demonstrating that the belief that God changes his mind was a key doctrine throughout the Old Testament and not merely in the early writings. Jeremiah 18 has a lengthy discussion of divine repentance, and both Joel (2:13) and Jonah (4:2) have creedal formulations saying that God is a "gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who changes his mind." I take such creedal affirmations to disclose the unchanging nature of God, and it is hermeneutically significant that divine changing of mind is included in describing that nature. Williams asserts that Isaiah would not recognize the view of God portrayed in *The God Who Risks*. If so, then Isaiah would not recognize the God of Jeremiah, Joel, or Jonah either.

If these texts are not hermeneutically significant, then what do they mean? Williams never says what "God changed his mind" means. I claimed such texts were "reality-depicting" metaphors. Williams asks why I don't then take the metaphors of divine body parts literally as well. Well, the "arm of the Lord" is a metaphor for God's ability to deliver. God as the "husband of Israel" is a metaphor of the type of relationship Yahweh has with Israel. God "repenting" is a metaphor for God taking a different course of action from the one previously declared. Metaphors have meaning. What does Williams think grieving, repenting, and responding mean when applied to God? In 1 Samuel 13:13 God declares there would have been no "line of David" had King Saul followed the Lord. Read straightforwardly, this seems clearly to imply an open future, dependent to some degree on human choices in the sphere of freedom that God has granted to his creatures.

Because Williams understands Isaiah to teach exhaustive foreknowledge of future contingent events, he believes that it is impossible for God to grieve, repent, or respond.² Now I agree that if Isaiah taught exhaustive foreknowledge it would render such actions impossible, but I believe that Isaiah is saying God declares the future and brings it about—unlike the other gods—because of Yahweh's power over creation, not because of some timeless knowledge. In my view, there are two kinds of scriptural texts of importance here. First, numerous texts portray God as declaring and/or predetermining certain future events. Second, numerous texts portray God as changing his mind, grieving, and not knowing certain details of the future. Williams believes the former cancel out the latter. That is, the repenting, grieving texts do not reveal God as God truly is but only as he appears to us. The approach of the openness of God view is to develop an understanding of God that does justice to both sets of texts, forming a coherent theological model.³

The third issue raised by Williams is God's relationship to time. His statements about this, however, are extremely difficult to decipher. What are we to make, for example, of the talk about God's spending an "infinite number of half-hours" in any given half-hour of time? And what conclusions are we supposed to draw from all this, other than that we are free to dismiss any biblical statements about God we don't like as "accommodation"? Most likely, this sort of talk is Williams's way of getting at the traditional doctrine of divine timelessness—at least, so I shall assume. In *The God Who Risks* I cited several classical studies of God and time by biblical scholars who conclude that the biblical writers did not understand God to be timeless. Moreover, I cited numerous theological and philosophical studies by esteemed Christian scholars such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, and William Hasker who reject divine timelessness. Indeed, the past 40 years of scholarship has witnessed a huge debate on timelessness, so I am puzzled why Williams thinks I'm saying something new. Williams expresses his "worry" over my "lack of any embarrassment" regarding this understanding of God. I wonder if Nicholas Wolterstorff feels embarrassed? It seems not, since he has recently said, "If God really responds, then God is not metaphysically immutable; and if not metaphysically immutable, then not [timeless]."⁴ Williams is within his rights to believe God never responds to our actions and prayers, but I see no compelling reason why those of us who do should be embarrassed to affirm what we believe the Bible teaches.

Incidentally, Williams might have been less shocked at my approach to divine foreknowledge if he had been familiar with the work of eminent British philosophers such as Peter Geach, J. R. Lucas, and Richard Swinburne—all of them devout orthodox Christians whose views on the subject are essentially the same as mine.

Williams thinks I should be embarrassed because I've transgressed "fundamental theological rules" such as divine timelessness and the content of omniscience. Yet, he also says, "Sola Scriptura commits us to a radical and often painful principle of regular scrutiny and preparedness to give up cherished ideas." With this I concur, and I acknowledge that I'm asking him to give up some cherished beliefs. However, I do not believe the issues raised in *The God Who Risks* are outside the boundaries of permitted theological discourse. Williams himself affirms that it is legitimate to debate divine impassibility and immutability. But for most of Christian history those doctrines functioned as "fundamental theological rules" not to be transgressed. It went against the "religious sensibilities" of philosophically minded Christians to believe God had emotions. This played an important role in discussions of Christology, where the Arians and the orthodox both "intuitively" knew that God could not suffer. It was not until the nineteenth century that serious debate about these "obvious" doctrines began. Other key beliefs, such as geocentrism or the damnation of children who die unbaptized, functioned as "obvious" theological rules for well over a millennium in Christian theology. They certainly do not function that way any longer. Furthermore, think of John Eck's assertion that Luther had broken fundamental theological rules and should be silenced for the well-being of the Roman church. Luther was a theological lawbreaker, but both Williams and I are glad of it.

Now, I believe there are fundamental rules for Christian theology, but they center in God's redemption in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, not divine timelessness. Williams and I are both committed to placing Scripture above the tradition of interpretation. We both want to be convinced by Scripture and sound reasoning. Thus, simply claiming that I've transgressed the religious sensibilities of proponents of timelessness and foreknowledge will not dissuade me. Perhaps I am wrong about the model of God developed in *The God Who Risks*. If so, I pray the Holy Spirit will correct me. This will likely come through the "detailed biblical, theological and philosophical discussions" which, unfortunately, Williams claims are unnecessary in regard to my views. Let us seriously engage the issues, not simply dismiss supposed theological lawbreakers.

John Sanders is associate professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington College. His book, The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence, is published by InterVarsity Press.

1. Of course, as I acknowledge repeatedly in *The God Who Risks*, other proponents of the openness view are not committed to agreeing with all of my interpretations of particular texts.
2. Proponents of divine timeless knowledge agree that it is incoherent to claim such a deity grieves, and I cited studies by such scholars, while observing that although statements such as God "declares the end from the beginning" are certainly compatible with exhaustive foreknowledge, they do not require that theory.
3. See Gregory Boyd's *The God of the Possible*, forthcoming from Baker this spring.
4. "Does God Suffer?" Interview in *Modern Reformation* (September/October, 1999), p. 47.