



Thomas Jay Oord's Open and Relational Theology: Divine Sovereignty and Human Free Will

Irawati Sandjaja⁽¹⁾ Jonathan Octavianus⁽²⁾ Juanda⁽³⁾
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia Surabaya^{(1) (2) (3)}
E-mail: irawati@sttii-surabaya.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Open and Relational Theology, developed by Thomas Jay Oord, presents a controversial theological paradigm that emphasizes God's openness and human free will as determinative factors for the future. This concept challenges traditional understandings of divine sovereignty and foreknowledge. This study aims to critically analyze the theological foundations of Open and Relational Theology, examine its implications for the doctrine of God's sovereignty, and evaluate its consistency with biblical hermeneutics. Employing a qualitative approach, this research utilizes doctrinal analysis and comparative literature review. Primary data consists of Thomas Jay Oord's works and related systematic theological literature, while secondary data includes theological journals and academic critiques of Open Theism. The findings reveal that Oord's Open and Relational Theology constructs a mutual and interdependent God-human relationship, wherein divine foreknowledge is limited by human free will. This concept implies an indeterministic and probabilistic future, which stands in contrast to the doctrine of divine sovereignty in orthodox theology. Hermeneutical analysis uncovers inconsistencies with the biblical narrative of God's sovereign plan. Although Oord's Open and Relational Theology offers a potential solution to the problem of theodicy, it fundamentally weakens the concept of divine sovereignty and introduces the risk of theological relativism in scriptural interpretation. Its practical implications may significantly alter the foundations of orthodox Christian faith.

Keywords: Open and relational theology; divine sovereignty; free will; divine foreknowledge; determinism; biblical hermeneutics

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INTRODUCTION

R.A. Contemporary Christian theology faces significant challenges in responding to the rise of theological paradigms that question fundamental doctrines. One of the theological movements that has gained prominence in the past decade is Open and Relational Theology, popularized by Thomas Jay Oord. This concept presents a radical understanding of the nature of God, particularly concerning divine sovereignty and foreknowledge, which fundamentally departs from historical Christian orthodoxy. The term "*Gospel*" (εὐαγγέλιον/*euangelion*) in the New Testament refers to the "good news" of God's salvation through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:25; Romans 1:16–17). However, the history of Christianity records the emergence of distortions or "another gospel" (ἕτερον εὐαγγέλιον), which appeared as early as the apostolic era, as warned by Paul to the Galatian church (Galatians 1:6–7). This phenomenon is not confined to the first century but has continued to reemerge in various forms throughout church

history. Open Theism, with its emphasis on divine openness and human free will as determinants of the future, raises a fundamental question: Is this theological construct consistent with the soteriological framework of orthodox Christian theology, or is it a contemporary manifestation of the “other gospel” against which Paul warned?

Research on Open Theism has grown significantly within the field of systematic theology. Sanders (1998), in *The God Who Risks*, laid the theoretical foundation for Open Theism by emphasizing divine risk in the God-human relationship.

Boyd (2000) strengthened its philosophical arguments in *God of the Possible*, while Pinnock (2001) developed its ecclesiological implications. Criticism of Open Theism has emerged from various theological perspectives. Ware (2000), in *God's Lesser Glory*, critiques its inconsistency with divine sovereignty, whereas Piper (2003) highlights its problematic soteriological implications. Frame (2002) offers an analysis from a Reformed epistemological perspective, identifying hermeneutical tensions in the interpretation of prophetic texts. Thomas Jay Oord, through *The Uncontrolling Love of God* (2015), developed a more radical variant called “Essential Kenosis,” in which God is essentially incapable of controlling creation. However, a comprehensive critical analysis of the soteriological implications of Oord's theological construct remains limited in Indonesian academic literature.

Based on the above background, this study formulates the following research questions:

1. How does Thomas Jay Oord's theological construct of Open and Relational Theology affect the understanding of divine sovereignty and human free will?
2. To what extent is the concept of future determination in Oord's theology consistent with the biblical soteriological narrative?
3. Can Open and Relational Theology be categorized as “another gospel” in the context of Paul's warning in Galatians 1:6–7?

This study aims to:

1. Critically analyze the philosophical and theological foundations of Thomas Jay Oord's Open and Relational Theology, especially regarding the concepts of divine sovereignty and human free will.
2. Evaluate the consistency of Oord's theology with the biblical soteriological framework through a comparative hermeneutical analysis.
3. Assess whether Oord's theological construct meets the criteria of “another gospel” as warned against in apostolic tradition.

This study has substantial theoretical and practical significance:

1. It contributes to contemporary systematic theological discussions on the nature of God and human free will.
2. It enriches Indonesian academic literature in the fields of comparative theology and doctrinal analysis.
3. It develops an evaluative framework for assessing the consistency of contemporary theological movements with Christian orthodoxy.
4. It provides pastoral guidance for churches in responding to the challenges of contemporary theology.
5. It assists theological educators in developing curricula that are responsive to the evolution of theological thought.
6. It offers analytical tools for practitioners to evaluate the consistency of teachings with the biblical soteriological framework.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using doctrinal analysis and comparative literature review to examine Thomas Jay Oord's Open and Relational Theology, particularly in understanding the relationship between divine sovereignty and human free will. A qualitative approach is chosen due to the exploratory and interpretative nature of the research, which engages with complex theological concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Doctrinal analysis is used to systematically investigate Oord's theological teachings by identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing key concepts within Open and Relational Theology. This method follows the principles of theological hermeneutics, which emphasize contextual and systematic understanding (McGrath, 2017). A comparative literature review is applied to contrast Oord's thought with other theological traditions, especially Classical Theism, Process Theology, and traditional Open Theism. This approach enables the identification of the uniqueness and distinctive contributions of Oord's theology within contemporary theological discourse (Hart, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Early Development of Open Theism

In 1994, the Open Theism movement was formally inaugurated when five Evangelical theologians in the United States Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger published a collaborative work titled *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Pinnock et al., 1994). This book proposed a theological proposition that God is open to humanity and humans are open to God, thereby establishing a reciprocal relationship in which both are interconnected and mutually influential. The theological philosophy of Open Theism was later further developed by Thomas Jay Oord in his work *Open and Relational Theology: An Introduction to Life-Changing Ideas* (Oord, 2021). Oord emphasized the concept of human free will as having a significant impact on the determination of the future. According to Oord, humans play an active role in shaping their own future, a theological position closely aligned with Arminian tradition, which forms the root of Open Theism.

Oord's perspective on divine knowledge differs from traditional theological views. He argues that although God and humans both possess knowledge of the past and present, God's knowledge of the future is limited. God only knows the future once humans make free-willed decisions and take concrete actions (Oord, 2021). This concept presents God as one who depends on human decisions regarding plans, will, and freedom a God who does not possess absolute divine sovereignty.

In developing his theology, Thomas Jay Oord integrates elements of process theology and relational philosophy, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach in contemporary theological studies. Oord, as the director of the doctoral program in Open and Relational Theology at Northwind Theological Seminary and director of the Center for Open and Relational Theology, is recognized as the author or editor of over thirty books and hundreds of articles (Oord, 2025). His integrative approach to process theology illustrates how his theological framework is axiomatically grounded in process metaphysics, serving as the philosophical foundation of his thought (Oord, 2020).

This reflects the dynamic nature of the theological world which, much like the secular world, continues to evolve with theoretical developments from various philosophical and theological perspectives. Oord's open relational theology offers a transformative view of the divine, highlighting a God who is relational and influenced by human action through the concept of "uncontrolling love" (Almost Heretical, 2024). In his works, Oord draws

from Scripture, science, philosophy, and diverse theological traditions to present a novel theology of providence *essential kenosis* which emphasizes a divine love that is inherently non-coercive in relation to creation.

The human thought process within Oord's theological context is shaped by various aspects of life that are internalized and later believed to be foundational truths, subsequently forming doctrines or teachings for oneself and one's community. Oord interprets scientific research and responds from theological and philosophical standpoints, offering an up-to-date review of the study of love and altruism. This multidisciplinary approach demonstrates how contemporary theology evolves through dialogue with various fields of knowledge, creating a dynamic synthesis between theological traditions and modern philosophical insights.

Oord's intellectual development illustrates how process theology and relational philosophy can be integrated to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between God, humanity, and the universe. As an acclaimed author of over twenty-five books and a twelve-time recipient of the Outstanding Faculty Award Oord's contributions reflect not only individual theological evolution but also the broader dynamics of contemporary theological discourse, which continues to adapt to philosophical and scientific advancements.

In response to sharp criticism of Arminian theology Roger E. Olson, a leading Arminian theologian and consulting editor for *Christianity Today*, wrote a provocative article titled "*Don't Hate Me Because I'm Arminian: My Reformed Friends Sometimes Treat Me Like the Enemy, but Actually We Need Each Other*," published in *Christianity Today* on September 6, 1999 (Olson, 1999). This article was a response to the antagonism frequently directed toward Arminian theologians by the Reformed community, in which Olson emphasized the importance of mutual acceptance and cooperation between the two theological traditions despite their doctrinal differences.

Subsequently, in a more comprehensive effort to bridge the understanding gap between these two theological traditions, Olson published his work *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Olson, 2006). This book represents a systematic attempt to correct widespread misconceptions about Arminian theology while also delineating both the substantial similarities and differences with Calvinist doctrine. It is regarded as the only book dedicated solely to presenting Arminian theology as a coherent theological system, making it an essential reference in contemporary theological studies (*Don't Hate Me Because I'm Arminian | Evangelical Arminian*).

Through both works, Olson demonstrates that Calvinist and Arminian camps share a foundational theological concern regarding predestination, free will, and divine sovereignty. However, the fundamental differences lie in the interpretive emphases of each tradition. Olson identifies Arminian theology's focus on divine love, mercy, and grace, in contrast to the Calvinist emphasis on divine majesty, power, and control (*Family Feud | Christianity Today*, 2007). These differing perspectives shape contrasting hermeneutical frameworks for understanding fundamental Christian doctrines.

Oord's Philosophical Concept of the Future

In *Open Theism*, Thomas Jay Oord develops a concept presented in his book *Open and Relational Theology: An Introduction to Life-Changing Ideas* (Oord, 2021), in which the doctrine of God's sovereignty is not viewed as absolute in determining human life and the future. This approach is rooted in the fundamental principle that God is open to humanity and, conversely, humans are open to God in a dynamic and mutually influential relationship.

Oord advances a philosophical concept that emphasizes free will and an open future through the lens of probability and contingency. One of the core principles in Oord's thinking is that "the good life isn't divinely

imposed,” a notion that rejects the idea of divine determinism over human life and future (Oord, 2021). This contrasts with traditional theological views that stress predestination and absolute divine sovereignty.

In *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Oord, 2015), he articulates a revolutionary theology of providence through the concept of *essential kenosis*, emphasizing that God’s inherent love is non-coercive in relation to creation. This theology provides a new model of providence *essential kenosis* that highlights a divine love which, by nature, does not override creaturely freedom. This perspective offers a compelling response to the problem of evil, randomness, and divine action in the world.

Oord’s understanding of probability is rooted in the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between God and humans, in which both parties influence each other in an ongoing process. This concept also includes the idea that God’s knowledge of the future is limited or self-limited not due to any deficiency in God’s nature, but as a deliberate choice to allow genuine human freedom. Within this framework, numerous possibilities may unfold, making the future inherently indeterminate even for God.

Oord’s doctrine of Open Theism asserts that God does not possess exhaustive and definitive foreknowledge of human decisions. Rather, God responds with love and wisdom once humans have acted based on their free will. This creates a more dynamic and interactive model of the divine-human relationship, in which the future is shaped by the cooperative interplay between divine initiative and human response (Oord, 2021).

In his more recent work *God Can’t: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils* (Oord, 2019), he further elaborates the argument that God’s love is inherently uncontrolling. According to Oord, God loves everyone and everything and therefore cannot control anyone or anything. This means that God cannot unilaterally prevent evil due to the non-coercive nature of divine love. God cannot stop perpetrators of evil be they human, animal, organism, or inanimate force.

This theological stance carries significant implications, particularly for understanding theodicy, prayer, and human moral responsibility. By affirming an open and undetermined future, Oord offers a theological foundation for understanding the meaningfulness of prayer, the real consequences of moral choices, and why God does not always prevent tragedy or suffering (Oord, 2015). This theology also provides a more pastorally satisfying response for those wrestling with questions of suffering and evil in a world created by a loving God.

Oord’s theological model of an open and probabilistic future challenges traditional understandings of divine omniscience and sovereignty while seeking to uphold belief in God’s perfect love and active involvement in the world. Through the concept of *essential kenosis*, Oord shows that God’s self-limitation is not a weakness but the highest expression of authentic love one that honors the freedom and dignity of creation.

Differences from Traditional Arminian Theology

Although Thomas Jay Oord’s theological concept of human free will shares similarities with Arminian theology the foundational framework of Open Theism there are significant differences in its application. In Arminian theology, free will is primarily emphasized in the context of salvation, where it is asserted that human beings possess the unimpeded ability to accept or reject salvation (Hasker et al., 1994). While Arminians affirm that salvation is a gift from God, they also hold that humans can resist and reject this gift of grace.

In the doctrine of salvation, Arminian theology stresses the human contribution through free will in responding to God’s offer of salvation. As articulated in classical Arminian theology, “The Arminian recognizes God’s sovereign choice to save sinners” yet underscores the active human role in responding to that grace.

Arminianism embraces the concept of synergism cooperation between God and humanity in the process of salvation contrasting with the monergism of Reformed Calvinist doctrine. According to Arminianism, God initiates salvation by offering grace, and humans respond in faith.

However, the Open Theism developed by Oord presents a more radical perspective on free will. While traditional Arminianism focuses on free will in the context of salvation, Open Theism expands this concept to include the understanding of God's knowledge of the future. In the view of Open Theism, "God does not know with certainty what free creatures will actually do until creatures act" (Oord, 2017). This stands in contrast to classical Arminianism, which maintains that God possesses perfect foreknowledge of the future, even while affirming human freedom.

Regarding the future, Arminian theology emphasizes human responsibility in the present life. The Arminian view sees the future as a dynamic interplay between God's predetermined plan and human responsiveness. Humans are seen as having the opportunity to participate in and respond to God's plan, thereby shaping their own destinies within the framework of divine providence. By contrast, Open Theism takes a more radical stance by asserting that "the future is not entirely settled" and that God experiences time sequentially, much like human beings do (Oord, 2020).

Another fundamental difference lies in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Traditional Arminianism holds that because of free will, believers can fall from grace and potentially lose their salvation: "because of free will, believers can turn away or fall away from grace and potentially lose their salvation" (Sunday, 2020). Open Theism not only upholds this possibility but further emphasizes that the uncertainty of the future complicates any assurance of salvation, as the future remains open even to God.

In terms of theological methodology, traditional Arminianism attempts to balance divine sovereignty and human free will within the framework of classical theism, preserving divine attributes such as omniscience. Open Theism, as developed by Oord and others, takes a more radical approach by revising the classical attributes of God in order to accommodate libertarian free will, including limiting God's knowledge of a future that is yet undetermined.

The Interconnection of Free Will, the Future, and Divine Sovereignty: A Contemporary Theological Perspective

The discussion surrounding human free will, the future, and divine sovereignty has been a central theological debate for centuries. The fundamental question of the extent to which human beings possess freedom in shaping their lives vis-à-vis the sovereignty of God continues to provoke deep reflection across various theological traditions. This essay explores the interconnectedness of these three concepts through the lens of contemporary theological perspectives.

The Historical Foundations of the Concept of Free Will

The concept of free will did not emerge in a theological vacuum. Aristotle (384–322 BCE), one of the foremost Greek philosophers, laid the intellectual foundation for human freedom by asserting that human beings are rational creatures capable of making voluntary and independent decisions (Aristotle, trans. 1999). This idea was later reinforced by Epictetus in the first century CE, who emphasized that humans possess the power to act or refrain from acting according to their own choices.

Aristotle believed that human beings possess an inherent capacity to exercise free will in making virtuous choices and leading a moral life. This concept implies that humans can become masters of their own lives, with wills and actions independent from external authority including divine authority (Ross, 2019).

The Open Theism Perspective on Free Will

Clark Pinnock's View

Clark Pinnock, a leading figure in the Open Theism tradition, developed a distinctive understanding of human free will. Pinnock (2001) argued that human beings have an intuitive ability to grasp certain truths instinctively, apart from rational deliberation, and therefore possess authentic freedom of will. For Pinnock, this freedom is not merely an abstract philosophical idea but a fundamental component of the relational dynamic between God and human beings.

Personal and Mutual Relationship according to Thomas Jay Oord

Thomas Jay Oord strengthens this argument by emphasizing that freedom is an integral part of the divine-human relationship, which is personal and mutual rather than manipulative or causally deterministic (Oord, 2010). This understanding implies that the relationship between God and humanity is founded on mutual respect for each party's freedom.

An Operational Definition of Freedom

William Hasker, citing David Basinger, offers an operational definition of freedom: "*when a person is free to perform an action, she has it in her power to choose to perform A or choose not to perform A*" (Hasker, 1989, p. 66). This aligns with Gregory Boyd's assertion that "*at least some of what we will do tomorrow is not settled*" (Boyd, 2000, p. 110). Both statements suggest that the future is, at least in part, open to indeterminate possibilities.

The Theological Foundations of Free Will

The concept of free will is a central pillar in the theology of Thomas Jay Oord. While Oord references and grounds his theology in biblical texts, his arguments are generally more philosophical than based on rigorous and systematic biblical exegesis (Oord, 2015).

To understand free will and the will of God comprehensively, this analysis is rooted more directly in the truth of God's Word. In Genesis chapters 1–3, from the account of creation to the fall, the Bible teaches that God created humanity in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). From this creation narrative, three key aspects related to the concept of free will can be discerned: will, choice, and freedom.

Human beings were created with a will and were given the freedom to live, as evidenced in the act of naming the animals God had created (Genesis 2:20). Nevertheless, humanity was also presented with a clear moral choice: to obey God by not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or to disobey (Genesis 2:16–17). This demonstrates that God did not create humans as automatons devoid of will, but as moral agents capable of responsibility.

Case Analysis: Abraham as a Model of Obedience

Abraham serves as a paradigmatic example in understanding the relationship between human free will and divine sovereignty. When God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac his only son from Sarah in their old age as a

sacrifice (Genesis 22:1–19), Abraham’s response revealed the complex interplay between human will and the will of God.

Theoretically, Abraham had the freedom to choose to offer Ishmael, the son born of Hagar, his servant, rather than Isaac. However, Abraham chose to surrender his will and his freedom to choose by submitting in obedience to God’s command. The conversation between Abraham and Isaac marked a crucial moment that tested the firmness of his decision.

When Isaac asked, “*Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*” (Genesis 22:7), Abraham responded with a conviction that reflected his faith: “*God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son*” (Genesis 22:8). This response demonstrates that although Abraham possessed will, freedom, and choice, he chose not to exercise that freedom autonomously but rather to submit to the will of God.

Hebrews 11:17 records: “*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son.*” Although Scripture does not describe Abraham’s inner struggle, this moment of decision shows that Abraham responded to God’s call by placing his human will under divine will.

Genesis 15:6 states: “*And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*” Abraham’s obedience proves that God is sovereign over the human will, and this obedience itself is a gift of grace. God chose Abraham by His grace to determine the future of the nation of Israel, highlighting the primacy of God’s will in the history of salvation.

Christology and the Will: A Gethsemane Analysis

A second figure who provides deep insight into the relationship between human and divine will is Jesus Christ, particularly in His prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion. Conservative theology affirms the Christological doctrine that Jesus is fully human and fully divine 100% man and 100% God implying that He possesses both a true human will and a perfect divine will.

According to McKinley (2016), human beings were created with a will that is essential to authentic human existence in facing temptation and expressing obedience to truth. A key theological question arises: could Jesus, in His humanity, have sinned when tempted?

Conservative theology answers that Jesus could not sin (*impeccability*) because His divine will overruled His human will. While Jesus possessed a genuine human will and the capacity for free choice, His human will was in perfect harmony with His divine will, eliminating any potential for conflict or deviation.

This is clearly implied in Jesus’ prayer: “*My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done*” (Matthew 26:42). This verse affirms that Jesus had a true human will since God cannot be tempted (James 1:13), while Jesus was truly tempted in every way (Hebrews 4:15).

A God Who Depends on Humanity?

Open Theism believes that God experiences time as humans do. In other words, God is not in control of the future and does not even know the future in exhaustive detail. Within this paradigm, God is depicted as dependent on humanity in terms of His plans, will, and freedom. This conception results in an image of God who lacks absolute sovereignty.

In Oord’s (2015) *Open and Relational Theology: An Introduction to Life-Changing Ideas*, it is not made explicitly clear whether this concept of free will applies only to believers or also to non-believers. God gives humans

and all living things free will and agency. This freedom includes the risk of evil, since God does not coerce anyone or anything to do what is right.

According to Open Theism, the human will, freedom, and future are closely tied to human existence. From creation, God made humans good (*posse peccare* able to sin), because they were not created with the perfection of God. When humans placed their own will above God's, their disobedience led to the fall, and since that moment, humanity has existed in a state of *non posse non peccare* not able not to sin.

A Critique of Divine Sovereignty in Open Theism

A fundamental question arises: how can human free will, already tainted by sin, manage its own future apart from the authority of God? In Open Theism, divine sovereignty is subordinated to human free will, requiring God to adjust His will to align with human choices. As a consequence, the future is entirely placed in human hands.

Rice (1985) asserts that “*God is not responsible for everything that happens in the world*” (p. 15). This suggests that after creation, everything that happens in the world becomes humanity's responsibility. This view leans more toward Deism than Orthodox Christian theology.

However, Rice (1985) also affirms that after creating humanity, God still desires a personal relationship with His creation and never abandons it whether the universe or humankind. These two ideas appear contradictory and highlight an inconsistency within the doctrine proposed by Open Theism theologians.

The Inconsistencies of Open Theism

Open Theism emphasizes that human beings can experience a loving relationship both with God and with one another. Human free will and the ability to reciprocate God's love are seen as real choices, not predetermined or unavoidable actions. According to this view, God cannot make decisions on behalf of human beings, since they possess the capacity to choose for themselves.

“We say we have free will, but then we say God is in unilateral control. We say God is relational, but then we say God is outside of time and humans cannot affect God.”

This statement reflects Open Theism's attempt to resolve theological dilemmas, yet it simultaneously exposes a fundamental inconsistency within its theological system. The effort to affirm both divine relationality and human freedom, while denying classical attributes such as God's timelessness and exhaustive foreknowledge, leads to unresolved tensions within the framework of Open Theism.

Conservative Theological Perspective: The Unchanging Sovereignty of God

The Doctrine of God's Immutability

Conservative theology affirms that God is immutable unchanging because immutability is an essential attribute of God and part of His divine nature. Calvin extends God's role as Creator to encompass His absolute control over everything that happens in the universe, from the smallest to the greatest. This concept of the sovereignty of God was Calvin's most central doctrine. When God created the universe and humankind, He remained the same God; the act of creation brought no change within God Himself, for He is eternal and unchanging. As Turretin (1992) wrote: “*Creation did not produce a change in God, but in creatures*” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.3.11.5). It is creation that changes not God.

Free Will in Reformed Theology

The theological doctrine of divine foreknowledge is often considered to be in conflict with free will, particularly in Calvinist circles: if God knows exactly what will happen including every choice a person makes then it would seem that the “freedom” of these choices is questionable. John Calvin denied that human beings possess free will in the sense of having a neutral ability to choose between good and evil. However, the Bible tells a different story. For example, the people of Nineveh are described as not knowing the difference between their right and left hands (Jonah 4:11). Although humans may not have libertarian free will, this does not imply that God forces human actions. A comparative analysis between Open Theism and conservative theology regarding free will and God’s sovereignty reveals fundamental differences in understanding the nature of God and the God-human relationship. Open Theism, particularly as developed by Thomas Jay Oord, tends to place human free will as a limiting factor on divine sovereignty, resulting in a portrayal of God as dependent on human decisions. In contrast, conservative theology upholds God’s absolute sovereignty without denying human moral responsibility. Through the cases of Abraham and Jesus Christ, it becomes clear that human free will operates within the framework of divine sovereignty, not as a force that limits or conditions it. The inconsistencies within Open Theism especially its attempt to balance human free will with divine involvement in the world highlight a fundamental weakness in its theological system. Conservative theology, with its emphasis on God’s immutability and sovereignty, offers a more coherent framework that aligns with the biblical witness to God’s unchanging nature.

What Does the Bible Say About the Future?

Conservative theologians believe in God’s sovereignty over the future because God is omniscient. *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope”* (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV). How can one worship a God whose knowledge is more or less equal to that of human beings? *“There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off”* (Proverbs 23:18, NIV).

Only by humbly acknowledging God’s sovereignty and submitting to the written Word of God can we gain true wisdom and understanding of who God is and how His sovereignty works: *“Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise”* (Proverbs 19:20, NIV). Despite Oord’s idea that God does not know or only knows after human decisions are made, in the lived reality of human experience, the future is real and unavoidable.

Whether that future is bright or bleak, humans are powerless to change it once it unfolds. God remains omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent; humans are not. *“In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps”* (Proverbs 16:9, NIV). As someone who calls himself a Christian, Oord should consider: *“A person’s steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand their own way?”* (Proverbs 20:24, NIV). Even the great prophet Jeremiah declared, *“Lord, I know that people’s lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps”* (Jeremiah 10:23, NIV). Though Oord insists that humans have free will, when people finally face their future and encounter real-world problems, they ultimately lack the power to resolve them on their own.

An Arminian theologian, Roger E. Olson, has argued that Thomas Jay Oord’s perspective lacks strong biblical support concerning the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and providence as expressed in classical Arminian theology and Scripture (Olson, 2013). Whether or not Oord acknowledges divine sovereignty, conservative theology

continues to affirm that God possesses absolute sovereignty beyond the comprehension of finite human minds because God Himself is infinite.

If Open Theism refers to the future as it relates to the choices people make in the present, then it is understandable that there is a connection. Human decisions made today do affect future outcomes and carry consequences. For example, if someone chooses to study theology, that person is shaping a future as a theologian. Likewise, if someone chooses a life of alcoholism, then the future likely holds addiction and destruction.

These choices have personal consequences and also affect those around them. Yet regardless of these choices and their outcomes, there remains a power beyond human capability namely, God the Creator. This is what is meant by divine providence and sovereignty: God's ability to reverse negative situations into good, or to allow good circumstances to be tested even turned into hardship according to His will. This is an unavoidable truth in human experience and is difficult to grasp intellectually, because humanity consists of created beings, not the Creator. Human beings may possess knowledge, but not omniscience.

The future, as understood in Open Theism, is a realm of probabilistic possibilities that cannot be determined in the present. However, this very unpredictability points to divine sovereignty. A transformation from bad to good without understandable cause is called *divine grace*, and a shift from good to suffering is also divine grace an expression of divine discipline. Thus, even though humans may freely choose their paths in life, God's sovereignty still reigns.

CONCLUSION

The Future in Open Theism: A Philosophical-Anthropological, Not Theological, Outlook
In Open Theism, the concept of the future is rooted more in philosophical anthropology than in theology. This stands in contrast to the message of the well-known hymn *Because He Lives*, whose refrain reads: *Because He lives, I can face tomorrow, Because He lives, all fear is gone; Because I know He holds the future, And life is worth the living, just because He lives!*

This hymn was written by Bill and Gloria Gaither and first released on October 18, 1971. It was inspired by John 14:19c, *"Because I live, you also will live."* The song emerged during a time of social upheaval, war threats, and a crisis of both national and personal trust. It was composed following the birth of the couple's third child, at a time when headlines were dominated by stories of murder, drug trafficking, and war. In the midst of such chaos, the Gaithers made a deliberate decision to write a hymn that expressed their faith in God's sovereignty. They believed that the God they served is alive therefore, tomorrow exists.

This reveals a crucial doctrinal distinction between Open Theism and conservative (Evangelical, Reformed) theology regarding the future. Open Theism asserts that human beings contribute to shaping the future. In contrast, conservative theology holds that trusting in the future is itself a divine gift; the Gaithers' decision to write the hymn was not merely a human initiative but a result of divine grace an illumination and guidance by the Holy Spirit in the midst of life's struggles.

In a world full of uncertainty and in which the future may seem hopeless, the sovereignty of God remains central evidenced by the fact that this hymn continues to be sung even today. The future envisioned in the song is not merely limited to chronological time (*chronos*), but extends to the eternal dimension. The conservative doctrine affirms a future not only beyond the present moment, but also in the eternal life to come. As Psalm 37:23 states, *"The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him."*

Examining the doctrine of a "Relational and Open God" in relation to divine sovereignty and omniscience raises logical implications for the belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. Ultimately, it impacts whether one upholds or undermines the authority of the Bible as the inspired and infallible Word of God spoken through His Word and revealed by the Holy Spirit. Within Open Theism, if human beings with their so-called libertarian free will are free to interpret Scripture independently, it opens the door to misinterpretations that deviate from the truth of God's Word.

While Thomas Jay Oord's theology, which emphasizes human contribution, may initially resemble Arminianism, his rejection of divine sovereignty incorporates elements of liberal and process theology. As such, Open Theism particularly as formulated by Oord can be considered theologically heterodox, or even heretical.

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