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### Does God Have a Future? Debate on Divine Providence, Review

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Christopher A. Hall and John Sanders, *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003).

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Openness theology was the subject of a lively e-mail dialogue between Christopher A. Hall (Eastern University) and his friend John Sanders (Huntington College) that appeared in *Christianity Today* in 2001. The present volume, of which the original letters comprise a sixth, is the complete correspondence. Although the authors are theologically sophisticated, they invariably write with non-specialists in mind. For more technical matters, an appendix, a glossary, and two tables are valuable aids. The lack of an index is an unfortunate oversight in an otherwise well-planned book.

The debate concerns the relation between God and human beings. Historically, Christian theology was dominated by the idea—commonly called classical theism—that divine perfection requires that God be conceived as, *in all respects*, unchangeable (immutable), unaffected by the created order (impassible), and outside of time (eternal). The deity, infinitely transcending its creation, exercises “meticulous providence”—the unfolding of events is in detailed conformity with a divine blueprint. Moreover, as the primary cause of all things, God is aware, in a timeless fashion, of all that occurs.

Openness theology (questioned by Hall and defended by Sanders) is one of the most controversial alternatives to classical theism. According to this view, God and the creatures—especially the human ones—exist in a give-and-take relationship. Because human beings have significant freedom, God takes the risk that events will not unfold precisely as God wills. To be sure, God exercises “general providence,” but the future is, *in some respects*, “open.” Those aspects of the future as yet uncreated by God or the creatures, are knowable, *even to God*, only as probabilities, as might-bes or maybes.

The weight of Christian tradition is on Hall’s side, and he makes much of this fact. Sanders counters that church tradition is often slow to change but it is not static nor is it monolithic. For example, the idea that unbaptized children go to hell went unchallenged for thirteen centuries but was finally rejected (186). Sanders also highlights a certain ambivalence in the tradition on the subject of divine impassibility. Not knowing how to reconcile impassibility with divine love, Justin Martyr exclaimed, “But God is not a stone!” (65). Interestingly, Hall echoes this sentiment. He is “unwilling to let it

[impassibility] go” (61), but he says, “I don’t believe that [216] God is a stone pillar. God does respond to us, though how God does so remains a mystery to me” (146).

On questions of exegesis, Hall has an easy time interpreting passages that speak of God’s changelessness, perfect foreknowledge, and providential control. Sanders’ view is supported by passages where God is moved by the suffering or waywardness of the creatures, responds to prayers, is affected by human decisions (to the point of surprise), tests people to see what they will do, and changes plans in light of human decisions. The evangelical parameters of the debate are evident in the fact that neither author entertains the idea that there is no single biblically correct portrayal of God.

Hall valiantly tries to avoid the dilemma that he is either inconsistent in affirming impassibility and God’s passionate concern for the creatures, or that his view makes of world history a puppet show where even wickedness is divinely ordained. Both authors must struggle with the question of anthropomorphism. For instance, by what principle(s) does Sanders accept talk of divine repenting as “basic information about what God is like” (68) but dismiss talk of God’s sense organs as not basic? In one way, Sanders has the advantage, for Hall continually flirts with extremes. Classical theism holds that God is *in no sense* passible. Openness theism, on the other hand, affirms that nothing can cause God to be less than perfectly good but it also says that God is affected by creaturely joys and sorrows and responds to them in an ideal manner (69).

Readers familiar with the works of A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne will recognize a family resemblance between their ideas and openness theology. This is because the openness of God to creaturely influence is the centerpiece of *any* version of process theology. Hartshorne’s work was arguably the single most important factor in dissolving the consensus that classical theism should be considered normative. A number of open theists (excluding Sanders) are directly indebted to Hartshorne on precisely the question of “openness” even as they emphasize, as he did not, the authority of the Bible. Indeed, the philosophical aspects of Sanders’ discussion are largely an unwitting exercise in recapitulating Hartshorne’s arguments. Nevertheless, process theology only comes in as a rhetorical foil by way of contrast with openness theology (190). Sanders takes the hostility of one prominent process thinker to openness theology as indicative of a widespread attitude even though others have weighed in on the issue in more positive ways. Also of note is that Hartshorne saw open theists of the past (e.g. Jules Lequyer) more as allies than as foes.

This book is as interesting for what it says about the tenor of controversy in evangelical circles as for what it says about theology. The endorsements on the cover emphasize the charitable spirit of the debate, which raises the question whether this is

uncommon. More than once [217] Sanders mentions the harsh treatment he has received from other evangelicals (47, 75, 174-75); he also notes that critics have vigorously tried to have open theists fired from college posts and expelled from their denominations (188). According to Sanders, “Presently, evangelicalism is witnessing the resurgence of a fundamentalist spirit—a meanness of heart and a drawing of narrow doctrinal boundaries” (193). The authors close with a joint statement appealing to fellow evangelicals to practice charity in disagreements and to embrace constructive theological debate as a sign of vitality rather than decline. Whitehead’s words come to mind: “A clash of doctrines is not a disaster—it is an opportunity.”