

Toward a Reformed Theology of Prayer and Spiritual Direction: A Response to John Sanders

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I read with great interest Dr. John Sanders' article on open theism, in which he explains how he came to this belief as well as his understanding of this theology. What caught my eye immediately was his desire to find a theology of prayer which led him to open theism, which he states comes out of the freewill theistic tradition of the church. Since open theism is not a subject with which I am very familiar, this prompted a fair bit of study and theological reflection.

In the first half of the article, Dr. Sanders explains his belief system and contrasts it with theological determinism, as he understands it. The second part is a discussion of people and events in this debate, and his movement within it as a participant. Since I am most interested and competent in the area of prayer and ministry, rather than the academic debates, this review will focus on the first section.

As I understand Dr. Sanders' theology, he believes that God is all-powerful and always in relationship with us. God (in the trinity) has almighty power and is sovereign over all. God intends for us to enter into a loving relationship with Him, as well as with other creatures. We are in genuine interaction with God in a dynamic give and take. Nevertheless, it is our choice to freely seek God in this relationship.

God has all power, but chooses not to override our free will, so God restrains the use of such power in some situations. To quote Dr. Sanders, "God has, in sovereign freedom, decided to make some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions." God is genuinely influenced by what we do. Sanders quotes 1 Cor. 13 to explain why God has decided to make some of God's actions contingent upon our behavior, citing God's love that does not force its way upon us.

This implies that God changes and therefore is temporal and also experiences duration. God is competent and resourceful (sort of a divine therapist?) in working with those who are recalcitrant in sinful choices. God exercises general providence rather than meticulous providence in that He allows the space for us to operate, be creative and resourceful. The nature of God does not change, but the plan of God might. God's action is sometimes unilateral, but usually God works with us to decide what the future will be. God's plan is more of a broad intention than a detailed script. Sanders reiterates that what people do and believe makes a difference in God's action. God is omniscient, has an exhaustive knowledge of the past and present, but God's knowledge of the future is partly closed and partly open. God has foresight and is not surprised by our actions

and choices. Sanders believes that God has unchanging purposes, however God invites us to collaborate with Him to bring the open part of the future into being.

Sanders interprets what he calls “Theological Determinism” (which is the Calvinist/Reformed view) to say that God is strongly immutable and strongly impassible. In layperson language, this means that God never changes and is never affected by his creature’s behavior or actions. God is always and only self-moved. Freewill theists, in contrast, believe that God has given us freedom and does not control every detail of our lives. In this view God is weakly immutable and weakly impassible. God’s character does not change, but God’s plans, thoughts, and emotions might change. Our feelings and actions do make a difference in what God chooses to do, or not do.

In open theism, the notion of God’s relationship to time contrasts to that of theological determinists. Sanders believes that God is timelessly eternal, but his relationship to time is temporal. God has succession in his experience, a before and after, therefore God is temporal and has a history. On the issue of knowledge of the future, Sanders believes that God can declare the future with certainty for the events that are determined, *and* God can change his mind about those events that are undetermined. Divine knowledge (omniscience) has both indefinite and definite beliefs.

I am a Reformed church minister, pastoral counselor, and spiritual director, a practical rather than an academic theologian. Though I grew up in the RCA, over the last thirty years I have had diverse experiences in many different denominations and faith traditions, both as a student and as a church member. I graduated from an interdenominational seminary, have attended several Episcopal churches, and most recently took my training in Spiritual Direction from a Catholic Institution. All these places and various traditions have shaped my theology, though the Reformed tradition remains my theological home. Therefore, I respond to his theology out of my own experience and tradition.

I found some areas of agreement, but also many questions. He believes that God is all-powerful, but that sometimes God chooses not to exercise this power. Our interaction with God is genuine, a real relationship with dynamics of give and take. Therefore, God is actually influenced by what we do and believe. This seems contradictory; God is sovereign but in this sovereign freedom has chosen to make *some* of her actions contingent upon what we choose. Doesn’t this by nature then make God less than all-powerful, if *some* of God’s decisions are based upon human actions and beliefs? How do we know *which* decisions God will make unilaterally and which will depend on our choices? What does “give and take” mean in a relationship between Creator and creature? The nature of God does not change, but his plans are sometimes adjusted according to contingencies, *some* of which take our decisions into account? God’s decisions are *sometimes* unilateral, but not always? So, what we do makes a difference in God’s action? God’s plan is not a detailed script but a broad intention for people in

history? God's purpose is unchanging, but she invites us to collaborate, or work with her to bring the open part of the future into being?

All these statements seem to minimize both the power and sovereignty of God. If this is what we believe, then how can we fully trust such a God, who sometimes acts in one way and other times acts differently? How can we surrender to a being whose action toward and with us is changeable and sometimes dependent upon what we do? To a being who knows all of our past and present, but not all our future? How exactly can our future be partly open and partly closed?

His discussion of freewill theism vs. theological determinism stirred up some theological ruminations from seminary, but also a deeper pondering of my own theology of prayer. Throughout the M.Div. and M.A. in Marriage and Family Therapy as well as my program of study and training for Spiritual Direction my calling has always been to minister to and with others in what I call the "sacred spaces" of life. As a marriage and family therapist, specialized minister in the RCA, mother, partner, friend, mentor, and pastoral counselor and now as a spiritual director, that calling has taken many different shapes. Yet, the core is always the same: to create safe space for others in which they are invited to know God and themselves more deeply. In this place, they may find comfort and strength in a God who both invites our presence and delights in our desire to draw near. Our longings for intimacy with God and for wholeness are met in that resting within the heart of God.

Therefore, what is my practical theology of prayer? Upon what theological fundamentals does my practice rest? I believe in One God, past, present, and future, a God who created us out of love to be in relationship, first with God-self, and then with others. This God is present in all time(s) and holds the whole of our lives in his loving care. God by nature is a being in relationship (Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit) and thus lives in relationship with us, as well as within us. As we allow and invite this indwelling of God-self, she moves with us in the dance of our lives. God is all present and all knowing. God knows us, indeed has always known us, since the beginning of time. The knowledge God possesses is beyond our comprehension or understanding – a deep and complex mystery. God holds all of our lives (past, present and future) in his hands.

We are created in God's image and are free as created beings to make choices in our lives; we have been empowered to think, to create, to will, and to choose. As created beings of the Creator, our relationship is one characterized by humble respect. God holds all power, yet has empowered us to be fully human, rather than puppets controlled from above. We communicate with God by speaking and listening, and that communication is mutual and dynamic. Our prayers, thoughts, and longings do affect and matter to God. However, God's movements and actions are not, as Sanders claims,

contingent upon our actions or prayers. As creatures of this all-powerful God, though our communication and respect may be mutual, our understanding is not. I believe that this relationship of God/us/life is a mystery, and in this life, we might never be given full understanding. The Scripture tells us that now we see dimly, as through a glass, but when all things are made new we shall see God face to face. Someday when our oneness with God is complete, perhaps it will all make sense. However, for now, yes, we do wonder and our curiosity is something to be held in tension; it is a dynamic of our lives as human creatures. All our wonderings are held within the belief that God is all-present, knows all, and is consistently in relationship with us as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

The Bible also says that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the essence of what is not seen. Our faith is based upon a promise and a presence. We pray in the words Jesus taught us: Your will be done, Your kingdom come, here on earth as it is in heaven. We believe in the history of God's action in the world as the stories in the Bible remind us. The movement of God is dynamic (past, present, and future) and is the culmination of our faith and God's nature and love for his creatures. We are charged to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. The purpose of our being is to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

As Reformed believers, our theology of prayer is informed by the incarnation, by mystery, and by the faithfulness of God. Our prayer is shaped by the essence of God's character, which is love, mercy, compassion and peace. Our past and our future together shape the present, both because of the history of God's character and God's action in the world. All of our movement is the culmination of faith in God's nature and God's love. We pray not because it changes God, but because it changes us. Our prayers are not measured by results but by our faithfulness, which is born out of our humility with and reverence of God, our Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer. This relationship is dynamic because our prayers and thoughts *do* matter to God and our longings *do* affect God, however God's actions are *not dependent* or conditional on our thoughts or prayers. God is merciful not only in response to our prayers; God is always merciful no matter what our prayer. Sanders' theology, in striving for a relational dynamic between God and humans, reaches too far and ultimately undermines the very faith that allows us to trust fully in that same God.

When I was very young, in Sunday school class we learned (and memorized!) the Heidelberg Catechism, now those word of the Reformed confession come to mind in summarizing my response to Sanders' theology of open theism: "Question 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong-body and soul, in life and in death not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.

Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." I end with a quote from the Belgic Confession, article #18: "We, on the contrary, adoring these mysteries with godly reverence, exclaim with the Apostle: *O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him, through him, and to him are all things. To him be glory forever, Amen.* (Romans 11:33-36).