



# Associated Baptist Press

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July 12, 2002

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(02-62)

Nashville, Tennessee JUL 23 2002

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- Evangelical scholars square off in debate over 'openness' of God**
- Voucher battle moves to Congress, states**
- Teens share faith on California road trip**

## **Evangelical scholars square off in debate over 'openness' of God**

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- What does God know, and when does God know it?

The question has of late heated up in conservative evangelical circles with the rise of a group of scholars who describe themselves as "open" theists. They say God doesn't know exact details of the future, because it will be shaped by human decisions. Thus the future is "open" rather than predetermined.

That flies in the face of traditional theology, particularly among disciples of a resurgent Calvinism, which emphasizes God's sovereignty, foreknowledge and predestination.

Christian teaching describes God as "omniscient" -- having perfect knowledge of all things. But it also says humans have free will, setting up the classic paradox: If God already knows what I'm going to decide to do tomorrow, do I really have freedom of choice?

The debate bubbled to the surface in the Southern Baptist Convention with revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message" adopted in 2000. A sentence added to the 1963 version's article on God says: "God is all-powerful and all-knowing; and his perfect knowledge extends to all things past, present and future, including the future decisions of his free creatures."

More recently, the Evangelical Theological Society voted overwhelmingly to reject open theism. The society of theologians and scholars last fall approved a resolution that states: "We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future, including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents."

That prompted a counter-statement by a group of evangelical scholars deploring what they viewed as a tendency to "define the boundaries of evangelical faith and life too narrowly."

Stanley Grenz of Carey Theological College and Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia; Roger Olson of George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University; and Jonathan Wilson of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif., said evangelicals shouldn't be so hasty to close the door on debate about open theism.

Describing theological debate as a sign of "vitality," they urged evangelical leaders "to make room for reverent exploration of new ideas and reconsideration of old ones without assuming too quickly that we know what Scripture clearly does and does not teach."

Advocates of open theism say it provides answers to serious questions such as what happens to God

when people pray. They point to various Scripture passages referring to God changing his mind and being grieved by human actions.

Detractors say it departs from classic Christian understandings of God's all-knowing and unchangeable nature. They say some problems, such as evil and suffering, are divine paradoxes that can't be grasped by finite minds. Open theism, they argue, reduces a transcendent God to a human scale.

Like most "-isms," both sides have trouble narrowing their arguments into a tidy package.

"There is no single, universally agreed-on definition of open theism," said Olson, professor of theology at Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas. Olson says he is not an open theist but takes the approach seriously.

"Generally speaking, however, it is the belief that God is truly personal and interactive with people, such that the 'effectual, fervent prayers' of God's people can make a genuine difference in the way God acts," Olson said. "Scripture portrays God as changing his mind in response to such prayers.

"Open theism says that God has freely chosen to limit himself so that he does not foreordain or cause all that happens. The future is partly open because it depends on what human persons decide to do."

Wallace Roark, professor of Christian studies at Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, said it is also a pragmatic approach.

"Open theism is an effort to bring our doctrine and our practice into harmony," Roark said. "Open theism is the theology most Christians actually live by, that unconsciously we believe."

"We live believing the good news that the future is open," Roark said. "It is dependent on how we decide to relate to God. We are free to repent of our sinful ways and turn to God, whose arms are 'open wide.' Our future is open. It is not already in and done from all eternity."

Appraisals of open theism by opponents range from "it is inadequate" to "it is heresy."

At the Evangelical Theological Society meeting last fall, Bruce Ware, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said open theism undermines the deity of both God and Jesus.

Some of the harshest criticism of open theism has come from bastions of Calvinism such as Southern Seminary. Calvinism, based on the 16th century reformer John Calvin, strongly emphasizes God's sovereignty. Open theism offends Calvinists' belief that God has predestined human history and already chosen or "elected" people who will become Christians.

Ware said substitutionary atonement -- the belief that Jesus' death on the cross substituted for the eternal punishment that all humans deserve -- is invalidated by open theism. That's because Jesus could not have known who would be conceived and later sin in the future, he said.

A.J. Conyers, professor of theology at Truett Seminary, also faults open theism, saying it oversimplifies some vital but complex ideas about the nature of God.

"It obscures the fact that Christianity begins in a paradox, namely the incarnation of God in Christ," Conyers said.

Although humanly illogical, God could have exhaustive, definite foreknowledge of events and be never changing, even while giving humans freedom and experiencing a loving, personal relationship with them, he insisted.

Proper handling of divine paradox -- Jesus being fully human yet fully divine; God being all-knowing and unchanging yet interactive with humanity -- is the key to Christian theology, and open theism fails at this point, Conyers said.

Nevertheless, open theists say they still believe God is completely sovereign over all creation and deny their view diminishes God's power or knowledge.

John Sanders, professor of religion and philosophy at Huntington College in Huntington, Ind., author of a best-selling book, "The God Who Risks," summarized open theism with five principles:

-- Sovereign God freely determined to create humans capable of experiencing God's love.

-- Although totally free and sovereign, God's love for people led God to base some actions on what people do.

-- In divine wisdom, God exercises "general" rather than "meticulous" providence -- or control -- over the future.

-- God has given people the freedom necessary to establish "a truly personal relationship of love" with God.

-- God, who indeed is omniscient, "knows all that can be known or all he wants to know."

Like other conservative Christians, open theists cite both biblical and theological reasons for their beliefs.

"The main line of biblical argument in favor of open theism is all the instances in which God relents in response to prayer," Olson said. "For example, God granted King Hezekiah more time to live after declaring he would die very soon. God changed his mind in response to prayer.

"Open theists interpret this very literally -- God changed his mind in response to prayer."

Sanders said that at least three dozen biblical texts report God changing his mind.

The Old Testament repeatedly says God changed his mind in response to his people, Roark added. "Love is always open and dynamic and thus open to change its course in its genuine involvement and interaction with the loved one."

Olson said the main thing going for open theism is that "Scripture portrays God as loving and personal, and to be both loving and personal is to interact."

"A being who cannot be acted upon -- who cannot be affected by other persons -- is neither truly personal nor loving," Olson said. "The God of the Bible is a God who goes on a journey through history with his people. He remains superior to them in his omnipotence, but he condescends to allow them to affect his smaller plans and ways."

Open theists contend that if God is immutable -- or cannot be changed -- as traditional Christian belief asserts, there is no reason for intercessory prayer. Why pray for people and causes if the future is determined and God will not change it?

"After 25 years of digging into Scripture, researching theology and philosophy, and reflecting on our spiritual lives, especially prayer, I've concluded that we actually can affect God," Sanders said.

"Hence, what most evangelicals live out in piety is correct," he added, advocating a "biblically faithful, logically consistent and spiritually helpful view of who God is and the nature of God's relationship with us."

"Open theists argue that their view of God and God's foreknowledge is consistent with the ordinary Christian's prayer life," Olson stressed. "Christians pray as if their prayers can make a real difference in the way God acts."

Open theists also say their approach helps explain evil and suffering. Since freedom is a necessary component for reciprocating divine love, they contend it can be misused to do evil. That is the price humanity pays for the opportunity to experience God's love.

Conyers faults open theism as being "off target" in trying to simplify paradoxes of the Christian faith. "It leads to a less mature and satisfactory Christianity," Conyers said, "but not to heresy per se."

Ware, on the other hand, has called open theism "unacceptable as a viable, acceptable model within evangelicalism."

But Olson said evangelicals and traditional Baptists should make room for dialogue with open theists.

"The open theists are not arguing against Scripture; they are arguing against a traditional interpretation of Scripture," he said. "Their unanimous appeal is to Scripture itself and not to philosophy or experience or tradition. While they respect and use those sources and norms, they do not rely on them over or against the Bible."

"Open theism will always remain at most a 'minority report' within evangelical Christian and Baptist circles," Olson said. "Rather than get all worked up about it and go on a witch hunt to root out open theists, let's keep discussion about it open, civil and constructive."

-30-

-- Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard in Dallas.

## Voucher battle moves to Congress, states

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Proponents of school "vouchers" -- where governments give scholarship grants to students in low-performing public schools that can be redeemed at private schools, including religious ones -- won a philosophical battle last month when the Supreme Court said such programs don't necessarily violate the separation of church and state.

Now the debate is expected to move to the voting booth, where voucher proponents might face an even tougher battle.

Voucher plans haven't fared well when removed from the realm of constitutional theory and put before the public in the form of ballot referenda.

Since 1972, voters in seven states have been presented with voucher ballot initiatives on eight different occasions. On all eight occasions, vouchers have lost, by wide majorities. In Michigan, they lost twice.

The two most recent statewide voucher referenda took place in 2000. California voters defeated a voucher program by a 71 percent-to-29 percent margin. Michigan voted down its voucher proposal by a more than 2-1 margin.

Voucher proponents say their research indicates that support for such programs is growing, particularly among African Americans. Opponents, however, cite their own research, which they claim indicates the opposite is true.

Exit polls two years ago in California showed African Americans voting against vouchers at the same rate as other races. In Michigan, African Americans actually opposed vouchers at a rate higher than the general electorate.

While a handful of state legislatures have successfully instituted vouchers in recent years, voucher programs have been defeated in 26 state assemblies.

On the federal level, President Bush hastily abandoned a voucher proposal in the early stages of debate over his education bill last year, in response to strong opposition in Congress.

None of that, however, is stopping voucher proponents, newly invigorated by the Supreme Court's June 27 ruling that a school-voucher program in Cleveland doesn't violate the Constitution.

President Bush immediately called on Congress "to move quickly to build on the momentum generated from this decision," and to enact a voucher-like proposal that would provide tax credits to parents who send their children to private schools.

The very day the court handed down its long-awaited Cleveland decision, House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) introduced a bill that would allow children from poor families in the District of Columbia to receive vouchers that could be spent at religious or other private schools.

"It's time for Congress to do its part on behalf of low-income parents that simply want a better education for their children," Armey said. "Needy children in the District and across the country have waited long enough."

A spokesperson for the Baptist Joint Committee, which strongly opposes vouchers for religious schools, said she doubts pro-voucher forces will find much immediate success in the wake of the Cleveland ruling.

"I think we may see a few more [voucher programs], but it's not clear that the court's decision will result in any outbreak of voucher programs throughout the country," said Holly Hollman, legislative liaison for the church-state watchdog group in Washington.

One problem facing voucher proponents is that many state constitutions are even more specific in prohibiting funding to parochial schools than the U.S. Constitution, Hollman said.

She said her organization will monitor legislative and court battles on the issue and become involved when necessary. "The BJC will continue to warn against the dangers of government funding of religious institutions," Hollman said.

Even a leading voucher proponent urged supporters to be "realistic" about the chances for immediate expansion of voucher programs.

Lawrence Patrick, president of the Washington-based Black Alliance for Educational Options, said his organization is "really happy that the Supreme Court reaffirmed the right for parents to choose the best school for their child."

"This doesn't mean that the battle is over -- we still have a very long way to go," he said. "We're very realistic about our opponents in this battle; they're very tenacious opponents."

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## **Teens share faith on California road trip**

By Lacy Elwood

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Take 12 good-looking teenagers. Load them onto a bus, drive them along the California coast and videotape them for 16 days. What do you get?

Some might imagine an MTV-style spectacle of young people competing for their 15 minutes of fame, featuring arguments, jealousy and kids gone wild.

But FamilyNet Television has a different concept of what a dozen teens on a road trip can produce -- a deeper relationship with Christ.

"TruthQuest: California" is the latest entry in reality TV. A show that aims to help teenagers share their faith during unique mission activities, TruthQuest launched its first journey July 12, when its young cast set off on the California coast.

A collaboration effort of FamilyNet and Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's official news service, TruthQuest was dreamed up after BP's assistant editor, Todd Starnes, watched a marathon of MTV's popular reality show, "Road Rules."

"Road Rules" takes six strangers, gives them a Winnebago, and sends them on a road trip to complete a series of "missions" throughout a specific location, be it the United States or abroad. Starnes' idea: incorporate missions with a Christian twist.

After pitching the idea to FamilyNet's vice president, Martin Coleman, the series became reality.

"'TruthQuest: California' is our response to what many people believe is wrong with network television," Coleman said in a press release. "There is a deep public dissatisfaction with 'reality TV,' and people obviously want Christians to step up and provide an alternative."

But is it really an alternative to the already-alternative reality TV? FamilyNet thinks so.

Spouting that the show will be "true reality, not contrived reality," FamilyNet also says the show is different from others, because "events will be documented, not directed, cast members are not humiliated, nobody gets voted off and nobody has to eat worms."

July's documented results will be edited to 13 half-hour episodes to air in October on the Christian cable channel.

TruthQuest isn't just about sharing their faith on camera. The kids have some homework to do this summer in the form of journal-style stories written for and posted on the Baptist Press Web site.

"Whatever these kids experience, it's going to be shown," Coleman said during a June press

conference. "At every stop along the way, we're going to test these kids. We're going to push them mentally, physically and spiritually."

The students are set to meet Christian celebrities, learn to surf in San Diego, scale the mountains of Yosemite National Park and hang out in a coffee shop in San Francisco. Their experiences will be a little different than usual, as the activities all involve ministries, giving the kids an opportunity to share their faith.

Stars of the show read like a "Who's Who" among Southern Baptist teens. Included in the mix are the sons of two well-known SBC pastors, Josh Merritt, son of former SBC president James Merritt, and Chip Luter, son of New Orleans pastor Fred Luter, who preached the SBC annual sermon in 2001.

Joining Josh, 16, and Chip, 18, are teens from Mississippi, Colorado, Tennessee, Ohio, New York and North Carolina.

There's Katie, 17; Janie Jo, 18; Cara, 17; Sarah, 16; and Shanna, 17 -- a mix of young women whose accomplishments include leading their schools' Fellowship of Christian Athletes groups, serving on mission trips, singing in church choirs, and even, for one, winning local beauty pageants.

Add to the young ladies seven equally attractive young men like Freeman, 18; Tim, 14; Sparky, 14; David, 18; Andy, 18; Chip and Josh, and FamilyNet has a cast sure to draw in their target youth audience.

The TruthQuesters didn't earn a spot on the show without first proving they were compatible with the camera. Each participant had to submit a screen test on home video. FamilyNet execs based their selections on each student's "Christian faith, writing ability, overall personality," and the video.

One TruthQuester admitted he was nervous about the show's task at hand.

"We're going to be representing Christians all over the world," Chip said. "People tend to base their views of Christianity on one experience."

During their June press conference, the teens' different personalities shined through as they faced reporters, but several said that their faith allowed them to bond "immediately."

"We've only met once before, but it's amazing how we immediately bonded," Cara said. "It's just amazing how God has placed each person in the group for the same reason."

But even in sharing their faith together, do the TruthQuest kids think their unique personalities will clash? Chip and Shanna agreed that they would be able to handle any conflicts in the group.

"We all realize that there's going to be some conflict. We're not perfect and we're not all going to get along," Shanna said. "But we'll handle it in a more mature, Christian way. We can show people that you can handle arguments in a different way."

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