

God's Exhaustive Foreknowledge is Essential

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This article argues that God's exhaustive foreknowledge is an essential, or in theological triage a first rank, doctrine.

What This Article Is and Isn't

This article is:

- **Not about Soteriology, it is about Foreknowledge.** On Libertarian Free Will, the Molinist stands apart from the Calvinist. On Exhaustive Foreknowledge, the Molinist¹ stands together with the Calvinist.
- **Not against a System, it is against a Doctrine.** Systems have baggage. One may not want to be associated with Calvinism, Molinism or Open Theism because of different convictions or interpretations with components in that system. Although I often refer to Open Theism², this article's scope is on exhaustive foreknowledge.
- **Not on whether the doctrine is True, it is whether it's Essential.** The question "Does God have exhaustive foreknowledge?" is distinct from "Is God's exhaustive foreknowledge essential?" If the answer to the latter question is true, then the stakes for the former question are great.³

In short, this article seeks to:

define and defend God's exhaustive foreknowledge as essential.

Defining Exhaustive Foreknowledge

In 2000, the Baptist Faith and Message revised Article II to include:

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.⁴

The contention is not whether God knows all future possibilities.⁵ The contention is whether God knows all future decisions.⁶

Also the contention is not how, but *whether*. To illustrate: As long as we reach KL, it doesn't matter how we get there: bike, car, plane, or a swim. Similarly, if we affirm God exhaustively knows every future decision, it doesn't matter⁷ whether we get there by God's decree (Calvinism), God's decree (Molinism) or God's perfect⁸ ex-

¹ "The debate over the nature of God's foreknowledge is primarily a debate about the scope or perfection of God's knowledge. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Gregory Boyd espouses a view that threatens to undermine divine omniscience... Since Boyd affirms divine omniscience and yet denies that God knows future contingents, he must hold that such propositions are not true. If such propositions are true, then Boyd's view undermines divine omniscience." — William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, 2001, 55.

² because they are the only proponents of dynamic omniscience: "God knows everything, all things, in it's entirety! ... *as it happens*".

³ e.g. the mode of baptism is a non-essential doctrine. The truth of paedobaptism vs. credobaptism is at a lower stake than trinitarian vs. unitarian.

⁴ <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000>

⁵ a.k.a. God's Natural Knowledge.

⁶ a.k.a. God's Free Knowledge.

⁷ for the purposes of this article.

⁸ 100% accurate, not 99.9999% accurate.

trapolation of his exhaustive knowledge of the past and the present.

Exhaustive means all: the entire spectrum of great and small events at every single decision point. Exhaustive foreknowledge covers everything from the rise and fall of nations and kings to the number of hairs you had, have and *will have*.⁹

Making the Concise Case that it is Essential

In his book "Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage", Gavin Ortlund introduced Erik Thoenne's eight criteria to rank the importance of a doctrine.¹⁰ Below is a concise attempt to answer each criteria with respect to God's exhaustive foreknowledge.

1. **Biblical Clarity.** It is clear from the Bible that God considers knowing the future an essential attribute of divinity (see Item 4 below). The contention becomes: "Is it clear what God means by 'knowing the future'?" Both sides claim yes.
2. **Relevance to the character of God.** Omniscience¹¹ is a core character of God alongside omnipotence, omnipresence and others.
3. **Relevance to the essence of the Gospel.** Here are some salvific-related questions: Does God know how many will be saved? Who will be saved? What grounds the believer's assurance of salvation?
4. **Biblical Frequency and Significance.** The best way to answer on biblical frequency is to count the references. Someone did.¹²

Steve Roy, a doctoral student and faculty member at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has conducted a comprehensive biblical survey of passages relating to divine foreknowledge. As categorized, the summary of results is as follows:

- (a) 164 texts explicitly teach/affirm God's foreknowledge;
- (b) 271 texts explicitly teach/affirm other aspects of God's omniscience (e.g., knowledge of past or present or possible states of affairs);
- (c) 128 texts offer predictions of what God will do through nature;
- (d) 1,893 texts state predictively that God will do something or other in or through human beings;
- (e) 1,474 texts state predictively what human beings will do, apart from God directly acting in or through them;
- (f) 622 texts state predictively what unbelievers will do or have happen to them;
- (g) 143 texts affirm God's sovereign control of human choices;
- (h) 105 texts of apparent counter-evidence.

Whatever one thinks of the 105 apparent counter-evidence, this survey shows the Bible frequently speaks on the topic. As to significance, Isaiah 41:21-23 states (emphasis mine):

⁹ Luke 12:7. Presumably your *decision* to use which hair products will affect the abundance of your heady glory.

¹⁰ <https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/books/theology/54642-what-doctrines-are-essential-to-the-gospel.html>

¹¹ Traditional omniscience means to know all things including future decisions. Dynamic omniscience means to know all things that are logically possible to know and this excludes future decisions. Both affirm omniscience (as per their definition) to be a *core* character of God.

¹² Bruce Ware, "God's Lesser Glory"

Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, *that we may know that you are gods*; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified.

God is explicitly revealing through Isaiah that telling what is to come is not just *significant*, it is an *essential* mark of divinity.¹³

5. **Effect on other doctrines.** Sovereignty of God: Is God able to fulfil his far future promises? Wisdom of God: Is God trustworthy to know what is best for us? Eschatology: Does God know the exact details of the end of the age or does he just know the broad strokes, i.e. he wins?

The high frequency of God telling the future impacts thousands¹⁴ of interpretations, and thus doctrines, directly or indirectly.

6. **Consensus among Christians (past and present).** Historically:

This [Open Theism] view of God's knowledge of the future is unique in that it is at odds with every other Judeo-Christian tradition. – Tim Challies¹⁵

Meanwhile, John Sanders asserts that dynamic omniscience "has now become a widely held view by biblical scholars, philosophers of religion, and theologians from a wide range of denominational and theological traditions."¹⁶

Theologians from various traditions oppose dynamic omniscience, e.g. John Frame (Calvinism), Thomas Oden (Arminian), William Lane Craig (Molinism). Denominations have rejected open theism, e.g. the Baptist Faith & Message revision.

At worst, a denial of exhaustive foreknowledge is a full repudiation of both historic and orthodox Christianity. At best, it is a repudiation of historic but a growing acceptance in contemporary Christianity. It is clearly not a consensus nor widely regarded as an acceptable alternative to traditional omniscience.

7. **Effect on personal and church life.** Gregory Boyd lists the effects on seven practical areas including how a Christian interprets the Bible, views God, prays and responds to suffering. Bruce Ware describes the effects in three full chapters titled: "Harm to the Christian's Life of Prayer", "Weakening of Our Confidence in God's Guidance", and "Despair amid Suffering and Pain".

Therefore, both proponents and opponents see a significant effect on personal and church life. Neither consider it as peripheral.

¹³ Gregory Boyd sees this text as affirming God will know the final outcome but not necessarily the outcome of each and every intermediate step. Putting aside his and opposing interpretations, the point is God does not place high stakes (divinity) on just any attribute. Here, God places high stakes on telling the future. So it is incumbent on us to see the stakes as God sees it and thus determine what type of omniscience God means.

¹⁴ if Steve Roy counted them correctly.

¹⁵ <https://www.challies.com/articles/challenges-to-the-church-open-theism/>

¹⁶ <http://drjohnsanders.com/affirmed-dynamic-omniscience-open-future-history/>

8. **Current cultural pressure to deny a teaching of Scripture.** Frame quotes Pinnock, a proponent of dynamic omniscience:

I admit that modern culture has influenced me in this matter. The new emphasis upon human freedom requires that I think of God as self-limited in relation to the world.¹⁷

I observe that the current culture exalts human freedom. Ware in his concluding chapter writes:

The exaltation of human freedom in open theism, then, ironically harms those whom it seeks to serve. It wishes to help Christian people and others by commending to them the importance of their choices, their actions, their contributions, their planning, their prayers.¹⁸

It is clear that the current culture is more accepting of dynamic omniscience than traditional divine foreknowledge. While the culture's acceptance does not (in)validate a doctrine, by acknowledging the cultural air we imbibe, we can determine if it has unduly influenced the doctrine's acceptance over and against the Bible.

High Stakes Demand Our All

In the final page of his book, Bruce Ware urges:

In closing, I urge readers to weigh carefully the diminished view of God and the distorted view of our good proposed in open theism. What is here lost in so many places and in so many ways is the infinite supremacy of God, and this loss is unimaginably great. Nothing less than the uncontested deity of God, his absolute lordship over all space and time, his universal, unrivaled, and inviolable sovereignty, his flawlessly wise and meticulous providence, his undiminished and infinite perfection, and his majestic and incomparable glory—all this and more has been compromised by open theism. We have here, then, a fundamentally different god, not merely a different version of God. For the sake of the glory that is God's alone we have no choice but to reject the openness model.¹⁹

I argue that God's exhaustive foreknowledge is a first rank issue. Without exhaustive foreknowledge, God is not the God as revealed in the Bible. Practically, I will withdraw membership from a church that teaches or accepts a denial of God's exhaustive foreknowledge, even as I continue to love the people in that church.²⁰

Thus, if I am wrong, I humbly seek to be shown otherwise.²¹ Please! But if I am right, then I urge anyone who holds or tentatively entertains a denial of God's exhaustive foreknowledge to see the high stakes, do a proper and rigorous study and reach a truly deeply biblical conclusion.

¹⁷ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 26.

Frame later writes, "Certainly it is not wrong for us to reread the Bible in response to cultural challenges, to see if we have perhaps been reading it wrongly. But Pinnock does seem to be saying that modern culture requires a certain exegesis of Scripture, and that should never be."

¹⁸ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 227.

¹⁹ One could protest Ware and I(?) have conflated a denial of traditional omniscience with an acceptance of the openness model, implying that there are other models that have not been considered. Even if true, Ware's weighty conclusion remains: Too much is at stake.

²⁰ Sadly, disagreeing is too often conflated with loving such that I'm invariably forced to explicitly state that my disagreeing with you does not mean I don't love you.

²¹ Perhaps it is a second rank issue, after all. That would ease the burden in my heart.