Brethren in Christ U.S.

A Report of the BIC U.S. Conversation on Open Theism

This is my attempt to provide additional information to the summary that is provided in my report to the annual meetings of BIC U.S. Regional conferences.

Excerpt from the National Director report to Regional Conferences

The subject of Open Theism has been discussed in some parts of the church for the last few years. The conversation seems to have started in 2012 or 2013 when several pastors in the Midwest Conference discussed several theological issues they felt were important or may become important for the Church. The Midwest pastors communicated with the Commission on Ministry and Doctrine and in 2017 the annual meeting of the Midwest conference asked the church to consider "Is Open Theism compatible with the Brethren in Christ understanding of God's nature and with the Brethren in Christ Articles of Faith and Doctrine?"

Open Theism is a term to describe the way in which a person understands the relationship between God's sovereignty, providence, knowledge, and transcendence over time and space, and human freedom. Our conversation about Open Theism has been hindered by the fact that there is not one accepted definition of the term. The BIC U.S. Articles of Faith and Doctrine (AFD) declare:

> *We believe in one sovereign, true, and living God, creator and preserver of all things. God knows all things, is all-powerful, and transcends time and space.*

The AFD also state,

> *The image of God in each person includes the capacity to make moral choices. We can choose good or evil, to obey or disobey God. The freedom to choose makes us responsible for our decisions and liable for their consequences. We understand from Scripture that while God grants humanity this freedom of choice, God also knows the end from the beginning and in His wisdom and grace is working out His eternal purposes within human history.*

BIC U.S. continues to affirm all statements in the AFD regarding the person and nature of God and also the nature of the world that God has created. Specifically, a world in which humankind has been created and gifted by God with the capacity for freedom of choice as well as the responsibility and accountability that comes with this freedom. We acknowledge that fully comprehending and explaining the relationship between Almighty God and his creation is beyond the ability of any human.

The lack of a clear, consistent, and agreed definition of the term "Open Theism" has hindered our ability to have clear conversation about this view. However, what is clear is that if a person uses the term to mean that Almighty God in his nature or person is in anyway lacking or deficient and is incapable of perfectly knowing the future, this would be inconsistent with our understanding of God's nature and with our Articles of Faith and Doctrine. If, on the other hand, a person uses the term to mean that Almighty God in his perfect and complete sovereignty, providence, power, and knowledge, and in his transcendence over time and space, has chosen to create a world where the future is open because each person is made in the image of God with the capacity and freedom to choose good or evil, to obey or disobey God, this is consistent with our understanding of God's nature and humankind, and is consistent with the AFD.

The Commission on Ministry and Doctrine remains committed to the examination of persons who desire to be credentialed as BIC ministers to make sure their views meet the expectations of the church. Therefore, to help the credentialing process in this particular regard, a new question has been added to the Doctrinal Questionnaire that will ask how a person understands the important issues related to the nature of God and human freedom. This new question is as follows:

Please explain your understanding of God's sovereignty, knowledge, power and transcendence over space and time as it relates to humanity's freedom of choice.

Additional Information

As this conversation unfolded and developed we learned the following:

1. Some people misunderstood why the conversation was taking place and thought it was because the Church was thinking about changing our Articles of Faith and Doctrine. This was not and is not the case: the BIC U.S. remain committed to our Articles of Faith and Doctrine and there has not been any conversation about changing them. The conversation about Open Theism did not originate with Leadership Council or the Commission on Ministry and Doctrine, but rather was brought to them for conversation and discussion.
2. The conversation has been complicated and was hindered by the fact that Open Theism is a term that has been used to describe several different views that fall along a wide spectrum. In the conversations that have occurred there has not been one single agreed definition that has been used or agreed. This has made it difficult to have clear and helpful conversation.
3. It is not helpful to simply use the term Open Theism because of the variety of understandings that people associate with it. It has been unhelpful for those involved in the conversation, including CMD and LC, to use the term without clear and consistent definition as to what its usage was intended to mean. This unfortunate and regrettable

lack of clarity and specificity has created space for some of the confusion that has occurred.

4. The conversation about Open Theism has also highlighted the fact that across the Church some people seem to hold differing understandings of what is meant when other theological words or terms are used. For example, what does it mean to say God is sovereign, or all-powerful, or that God transcends space and time, and that humans have freedom to choose good or evil? In these conversations it has become necessary to clarify that in addition to the Anabaptist stream of theology that has always been part of the BIC, we also stand within the stream of historic Christian theology that is often called "Arminianism" or "Wesleyan-Arminian." These words are often used to differentiate between "Arminianism" and another stream of historic Christian theology that is often termed "Reformed" or "Calvinistic." These different streams of Christian theology share much in common, but they also have opposing views on several issues. For example, the Brethren in Christ, consistent with Arminian theology, remain committed to our belief in the knowledge, sovereignty, and providence of God, but our understanding of these aspects or attributes of God's nature, person, and work does not mean that God has meticulously and exhaustively determined every aspect of the entire universe, including every human's choices and decisions. Rather, we believe that humankind is created in the image of God and has been given the freedom to make choices. This freedom however remains within God's sovereignty and purposes. Likewise, consistent with our Arminian theology, we do not believe in a limited atonement where Christ died only for those God pre-determined for salvation, or that a person has eternal security regardless of his or her personal relationship with Jesus.
5. Because God is "other" and because all humanity is finite and fallen, God can never be fully comprehended or understood by humanity nor can God ever be fully described by human language. God has accommodated his revelation of himself to human understanding and language so that we might know him, but our knowledge of him is not, and cannot, be complete. Truly we know in part. God has revealed himself to us in creation, in history, in the divinely inspired Scriptures, and preeminently through his Son, Jesus Christ—the "Word made flesh." We must all exercise great care when we attempt to understand and describe God. We must read and study the Scriptures in community and with the help of the Holy Spirit, but we must do so in humility and with the understanding that there will be many things that we simply do not and cannot understand. We must not make the mistake of limiting God Almighty to our finite and fallen human comprehension.

In view of all that has been learned in this conversation, I suggest the following conclusions:

A. It is best to avoid using complex theological terms and labels without also providing clear and helpful definitions as to what we mean. Some terms and labels are too complex to be reduced to simple summaries without losing important aspects of what is

meant. For example, we can all agree that labels such as "Christian," "Protestant'" "American," "Republican," "Democrat," "Conservative," "Anabaptist," "Evangelical," "Wesleyan," "Pietist," "Arminian," "Reformed," "Calvinist," "Open Theist," etc., do not describe any one singular reality. Rather, they are terms used to label complex and varied realities and there can be significant disagreement on how the terms are used and what they mean.

B. We must not allow labels given to a person, or ones they choose for themselves, to define and categorize what we think a person believes. None of us like to be inaccurately or inappropriately labeled. Therefore, we must do the diligent work of getting beyond the label to understand what a person (or a view) does or does not believe. This has been the way in which the Leadership Council and the Commission on Ministry and Doctrine have done and continue to do their work. Our credentialing documents, including the Doctrinal Questionnaire, seek to avoid labels of any kind and instead ask the person what he or she actually believes on certain issues. The responses of the individual are then assessed by our commitment to and understanding of Scripture and our Articles of Faith and Doctrine. The Church, in keeping with the expectations outlined in the Manual of Doctrine and Government, expects all credentialed ministers to affirm sincere belief in the Articles of Faith and Doctrine.

C. In order to help the credentialing process, a new question has been added to the Doctrinal Questionnaire that will ask specifically how a person understands the important issues related to the nature of God and human freedom. This new question is as follows:

> Please explain your understanding of God's sovereignty, knowledge, power and transcendence over space and time as it relates to humanity's freedom of choice.

D. The Church reiterates its historic and continued commitment to the divinely inspired, authoritative and reliable Scriptures found in the Old and New Testaments and the Church's commitment to the Articles of Faith and Doctrine. As one of our core values states,

> *We value the Bible as God's authoritative Word, study it together, and build our lives on its truth.*

E. All of us, as brothers and sisters in Christ who seek to follow Jesus in humility and honor one another in love, must be careful how we represent the views of others as well as our own views, especially in theological conversation. We have been concerned and disappointed by the way in which some people have engaged in this conversation. We have become aware of verbal comments and/or preaching and teaching and/or written documents that have been distributed that have not been accurate and true, and do not demonstrate the spirit of Jesus and the call for his people to be a witness to the world through our love for one another. Brothers and sisters, we live in a world that is fractured and divided and where false accusations and innuendo are commonplace. If

we who claim to follow Jesus are also guilty of this, we demonstrate the sinful spirit of the age more than the spirit of our Savior and Lord.

F. Specifically concerning the variety of views sometimes labeled as "Open Theism" or "Openness Theology" the Church will continue to attempt to get beyond the label in order to better understand a person's beliefs and understandings of the nature and work of God. Our goal will be to maintain the Church's commitment to our understanding of the nature and work of God and at the same time our understanding of humankind as created in God's image and gifted with the freedom to make choices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through this conversation BIC U.S. has affirmed its continued understanding of the nature, person, and work of God as described in the Articles of Faith and Doctrine. We have also affirmed our continued understanding of the nature of humankind as persons with freedom of choice. We acknowledge that we as finite and fallen humans do not, and cannot, fully and completely understand the nature and work of Almighty God who is "other", and we must resist the temptation to assume otherwise and/or to reduce God to our understandings. Rather we humbly acknowledge our smallness and inadequacies before our infinite Almighty God.

With these affirmations and with our confession, we acknowledge that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ and that he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore his ambassadors, a community called to demonstrate we are his disciples by our love for one another and seeking to make disciples of all nations by helping people to know, love, and follow Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:18-20: John 13:35: Matthew 28:18-20).

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