

Unpacking (biblical) Relational Theology

Paul Marston
www.paulmarston.net

Part 1
Background on Theology and Theological Systems

I am following on from Greg Boyd's first session on relational theology for Bible Stream last month. My theology is not much different from Greg's, but I would define the key term 'Relational Theology' somewhat differently and not restrict it (as he seemed to) to the Kenotic theology of Thomas Jay Oord.

I will set out various alternative theological systems which theologians have constructed, try to give some biblical assessment, and also some practical implications for lifestyle.

I cannot, of course, speak for Roger Forster but you will be aware that we wrote 13 books together over 50 years, so during that time we discussed theology a lot. Had we not been in fundamental agreement on theology this would have surely have been impossible.

God is Relational

In 2000 in Reason, Science and Faith Roger and I wrote:

A Trinitarian view of God maintains interpersonal communication and reaction as central to personhood.

Around 2000 Roger and I published together two major books.

In Reason, Science and Faith we wrote:

A Trinitarian view of God maintains interpersonal communication and reaction as central to personhood.

We also explored how this reflected in humans made in his image.

God is Relational

In 2013 in *God's Strategy in Human History* 3rd Ed vol 2 Roger and I wrote:

The biblical God in whom we believe is relational with those made in his image. He himself acts, reacts, and interacts with us. He is not immovable, impassive, immutable and locked in rigid timelessness where nothing ever happens. Rather he can be angry, disappointed, glad, well pleased and may change his mind according to the reactions of those with whom he is in relationship. In short, he is a person who is able to love and feel emotion.

The much expanded and improved 2nd edition of *God's Strategy in Human History* also came out around 2000

I give here, though, a paragraph from the third edition in 2013 in two volumes that Joe Laycock helped to edit.

The biblical God in whom we believe is relational with those made in his image. He himself acts, reacts, and interacts with us. He is not immovable, impassive, immutable and locked in rigid timelessness where nothing ever happens. Rather he can be angry, disappointed, glad, well pleased and may change his mind according to the reactions of those with whom he is in relationship. In short, he is a person who is able to love and feel emotion.

This is really a key to what we may understand and explore as biblical relational theology.

God is Relational

We continued:

We agree that the picture in the Bible is of a “risky” universe, that God is truly personal and relational and so *reacts* and *changes his mind* according to human responses and actions. We agree that God is probably not “timeless” in the traditional Augustinian sense, though we might want to discuss more the nature of his time-relation, whether it is time or just sequence.

We continued:

We agree that the picture in the Bible is of a “risky” universe, that God is truly personal and relational and so *reacts*, and *changes his mind* according to human responses and actions. We agree that God is probably not “timeless” in the traditional Augustinian sense, though we might want to discuss more the nature of his time-relation, whether it is time or just sequence.

God is Relational

We went on. . .

The approach is also practical, because God calls upon those who love him, who are called according to his purpose, to be co-workers with him in his world in the power of his Spirit.

Some theologians have only interpreted the world in various ways – the point is to change it! Jesus' commission was about making disciples, not belief systems.

We went on. . .

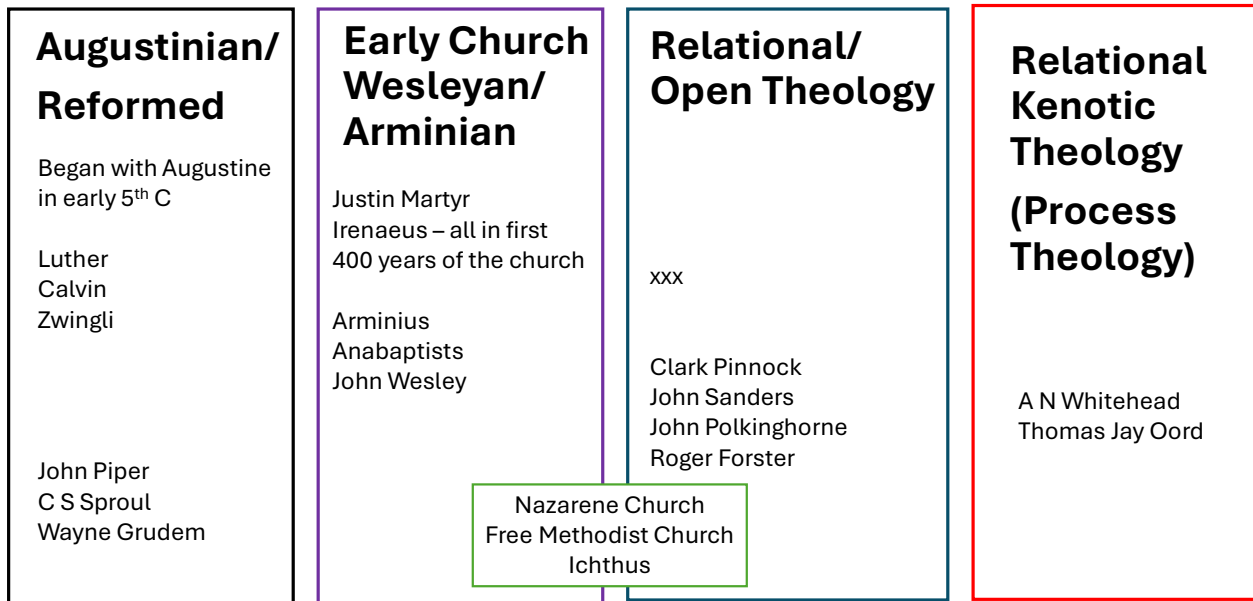
The approach is also practical, because God calls upon those who love him, who are called according to his purpose, to be co-workers with him in his world in the power of his Spirit.

Some theologians have only interpreted the world in various ways – the point is to change it! Jesus' commission was about making disciples, not belief systems.

Later we can also explore some of the implications of this both in our thinking and in how we live.

This would be a biblical Relational Theology.

Overview of Alternative Theologies



I intend to look various differing theological systems. They are not all equal in terms of numbers, neither are all of them reasonable versions of biblical Christianity.

But first two important warnings:

1. **This is a simplification.** Theologians (and ordinary believers) do not fit neatly into the categories, and some people try to make differing views ‘sides to the truth’.
2. **People can be inconsistent with their theology:** Some theologies can have a poor picture of the God of Jesus - but some who claim to follow these are much better than their theology and are loving servants of God. On the other hand, there are those who have a very good theology but behave badly.

It would be easier if this were not so, but life is not that simple!

Roger, as you know, worked together with other servants of God whose views were not always the same as his own. People like R T Kendall have a theology we do not share, but I know Roger worked with them. Billy Graham and Alpha do the same.

I have put a few representative names up for the varying views, but of course there are myriads of others, especially in the first three listed

If someone just read through the Bible what basic points would they see?

1. Yahweh is a personal God who has feelings and emotions.
2. Yahweh is a God who acts in power but does not always get what he wants.
3. Human beings are mortal, have been given freewill, and the ultimate end of the determinedly unrepentant will be divine judgment and destruction

I want to begin, though, by asking a basic question... ***If someone just read through the Bible what basic points would they see?***

I am not a biblical literalist, and neither were the early Christians or Jewish commentators. But just reading through the Bible, Old and/or New Testament, these would be to me obvious conclusions:

1. Yahweh is a God who has feelings and emotions
2. Yahweh is a God who acts in power but does not always get what he wants
3. Human beings are mortal, have been given freewill, and the ultimate end of the determinedly unrepentant will be divine judgment and destruction

Maybe not everyone would see this, but let us look through these three points.

If someone just read through the Bible what basic points would they see?

1. Yahweh is a God who has feelings and emotions

- Anger – Psalm 7:11; Deuteronomy 9:22; Romans 1:18
- Compassion – Psalm 135:14; Judges 2:18; Deut 32:36
- Pleasure – Matt 17:5; Rom 12:1-2; 14:13; Phil 4:8; Col 1:10; 1 Tim 5:4 (also Job 1:8 by implication)
- Deeply troubled heart – Gen 6:6
- Grief – Genesis 6:6; Psalm 78:40; Eph 4:30
- Love – 1 John 4:8; John 3:16; Jeremiah 31:3
- Hate – Proverbs 6:16; Psalm 5:5; Psalm 11:5
- Jealousy – Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:14; Joshua 24:19
- Joy – Zephaniah 3:17; Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 32:41
- Unexpected disappointment – Isaiah 5:4; Ezekiel 22:30

1. Yahweh is a God who has feelings and emotions

These are all the things said about Yahweh, the God of Israel.

.....

Obviously the Bible sometimes speaks anthropomorphically – using human terms of God which are not literal. The ‘arm of the Lord has been revealed’ (Isaiah 53.1), but Israelites did not believe that God had arms and legs. The metaphorical meaning is plain enough.

But all the attributions of feelings to God surely cannot be dismissed as anthropomorphic? After all, humans are made in his image, and a human without any of these would be a dehumanised robot.

If someone just read through the Bible what basic points would they see?

2. Yahweh is a God who acts in power but does not always get what he wants and changes his actions depending on human choices

Jer 32 17 'Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.'

But later in the chapter he says the actions of Israel/Judah provoked him to anger; he says it 'did not enter my mind' that they would behave like this and they would not listen to his instruction.

In **Jer 18** God is portrayed as a potter, but he says he will alter what he intends to do depending on human behaviour

2. Yahweh is a God who acts in power but does not always get what he wants and changes his actions depending on human choices

The prophets continually compare the power of the God of Israel to powerless or non-existent pagan gods.

Jeremiah 32 says something like this proclaiming the creation power of God for whom nothing is too hard. But later in the chapter we find that |Go dis angry because they did not behave as he wanted, and he dramatically says it never even entered his mind they would behave badly like this. I guess it may in one sense it have 'entered his mind', but he means he really did not expect it.

Then in the same book of Jeremiah in chapter 18 it asserts God's power but indicates that people often do not do what he wants. It says that the Potter (God) will alter his mind about what to make of the clay depending on its reaction.

The early church universally concluded that this was because God had given humans freewill to choose whether or not to obey him and enter relationship with him.

Al this is not based on a few verses, but is repeatedly made plain.

If someone just read through the Bible what basic points would they see?

3. Human beings are mortal, have been given freewill, and the ultimate end of the determinedly unrepentant will be divine judgment and destruction.

Mortality: 1 Tim 6:15-16 he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.

1 Cor 15:53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

Destruction: Obad 1:15–16, 18; Mal 4:1–3; Matt 7.13; Matt 19:28; John 3.16; Phil 3.19; 1 Tim 6.9; Heb 10.39; James 4.12 2; Pet 3.7

3. Human beings are mortal, have been given freewill, and the ultimate end of the determinedly unrepentant will be divine judgment and destruction.

Only God is immortal. Human beings are mortal, and if they determinedly choose not to repent and turn to God then they will be destroyed. The NT word *appolyimi* is both explicit and is repeated throughout. Some OT verses even explain this, to be destroyed means that it is as though they had never been (Obadiah 1:16)

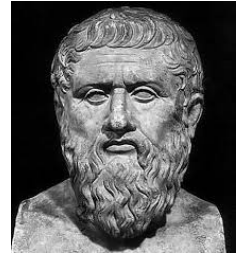
All these understandings are clear in the teachings of the earliest great Christian theologians Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. For the first 370 years church leaders were unanimous in saying that humans had been given libertarian freewill, able to choose whether or not to accept God's offer of free, undeserved, grace and salvation.

But then . . .

But then... ideas from Greek philosophy about humanity and the divine started to creep in.

God was 'immutable' (unable to change) and 'impassible' (not able to suffer or feel passion/emotion).

Humans were immortal – so if judged would either eventually all repent or some would suffer everlasting torment.



But then, the Greek idea of a lofty, impassible, unchanging, emotionless God grew in influence. Not of course the randy flawed Zeus of legend, but the detached God of Plato or Aristotle or the Stoics. This kind of God was considered more elevated – an impassive God beyond emotion and feeling.

There was also philosophical idea that because God was perfect there could never be any change in God.

These ideas competed with the biblical God who clearly showed emotion, and whose Logos was incarnated in time and experienced being human. This created a tension.

Then, Plato had given five logical arguments (in Phaedo) to prove the human soul was immortal. It seemed lofty to incorporate this with theology. And if human souls were immortal, then eventually either everyone would have to repent (universalism as in Gregory of Nyssa), or those who did not would suffer interminably (eternal torment).

By the time we get to about 400 CE these Greek ideas were common – and this influence has stayed with much theology ever since. The motives for introducing it were good – to elevate both God and humanity – but theologians struggled to reconcile this with the actual God described in Scripture.

c400 CE a brand-new theology!



Augustinian/ Reformed

Began Augustine 5th C

Luther
Calvin
Zwingli

John Piper
R C Sproul
Wayne Grudem
Paul Helm

- God is immutable, unchangeable and impassive.
- Human souls are immortal so the unrepentant will suffer forever without hope
- **God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens.**
- Human 'freewill' is compatibilist not libertarian
- Humans are all totally depraved, unable to respond
- God sovereignly decides whom to 'elect', and then uses irresistible grace which makes them have faith.
- Jesus died for the sins only of these elect
- The unelected will suffer hell's unending torment
- God foreknows everything because he is outside time or because he predetermined it.

In the year 354 a christian lady called Monica (married to a pagan) gave birth in North Africa to a son she called Augustine. In his youth he was drawn to the Manichaeian faith, and later to the Hellenistic philosophy of Neoplatonism. He was converted to Christianity and baptized in 387 CE. For the next 13 years his theology was fairly similar to other early church figures, believing eg in human libertarian freewill. But around 400 CE Augustine developed a radical new theology. To the Greek idea of a lofty, impassible, unchangeable, emotionless God, and the immortality of the human soul, Augustine added a new key doctrine **God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens.**

The Bible says that people do not always do God's will – some Reformed theologians speak of his 'revealed will' (what he says he wants) and his actual or 'effectual will' (what he really wants). But surely God cannot lie? He must tell us what he really wants? (re Isaac this was a command not a statement of what God really wanted).

Augustine's new starting point also required a whole realignment of various other parts of theology as shown here below it.

Augustine was a philosophical genius to have invented this system. It was, of course, not without contemporary opponents who wanted to keep the classic Christian faith. But he encouraged state persecution of any dissenters which is partly why it became so influential.

Let us look at some of his novelties which follow his basic assumption

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Augustinian/ Reformed

Began Augustine 5th C

Luther
Calvin
Zwingli

John Piper
R C Sproul
Wayne Grudem
Paul Helm

God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens.

- **Human 'freewill' is compatibilist not libertarian**

The early church believed God was rightfully sovereign over all the earth, but Augustine made this an absolute direction = God always got everything he wanted.

All early church figures before Augustine believed that God had given humanity libertarian freewill (a major theme in our GSIHH) to accept or reject his offer of undeserved forgiveness and salvation.

The Augustinian/Reformed theology says it is only 'compatibilist freewill' which means no external compulsion in choosing how to act. However, dogs, mice and worms have compatibilist freewill .

So both sovereignty and freewill were redefined.

The first implication or connected new idea is that the nature of freewill was redefined.

The early church believed God was rightfully sovereign over all the earth, but Augustine made this an absolute direction = God always got everything he wanted. But if this was so, then any apparent choices or rebellions against him by humans must really be what God actually intended.

So God had not given humans the libertarian freewill to decide whether or not to accept his offer of free, undeserved, forgiveness and salvation. The Augustinian/Reformed theology says human freewill is only 'compatibilist freewill' which means no external compulsion in choosing how to act. No real choice is involved though, they could not have decided differently. They had no choice but to follow their internal deterministic pre-programming.

However, dogs, mice and worms have compatibilist freewill - humans are no longer unique as the early church thought.

So both sovereignty and freewill were redefined by Augustine.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Augustinian/ Reformed

Began Augustine 5th C

Luther
Calvin
Zwingli

John Piper
R C Sproul
Wayne Grudem
Paul Helm

God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens.

- **Humans are all totally depraved, unable to respond God sovereignly decides whom to 'elect', and then uses irresistible grace which causes them to have faith**

The early church generally did not believe that freewill implied the possibility of living an ethically perfect life, but it was freedom to choose whether or not to accept God's offer of undeserved forgiveness and salvation. Augustine said that, unless God forced them to it, they could not even respond to his offer of salvation.

Predestination was redefined from being about a future destiny given believers to being a sovereign decision by God which totally depraved individuals he would single out to receive irresistible grace.

Another Augustinian innovation is that humans are all totally depraved, unable to respond positively to God. People can only have any inclination at all to do good because God gives them 'prevenient grace' (which means 'grace that goes before') otherwise no one would ever even want to do any good.. But this prevenient grace is not enough for them to be able to repent. God selects who to make 'the elect' and gives only these the 'operative grace' to make them repent - an irresistible justifying grace given only to the elect

Why does God not give it to all? Augustine replies *God's 'judgments are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out*, so we must not even ask.

Predestination in Scripture is God 'setting out a horizon' for those who will accept salvation. But in much Augustinian/Reformed theology it is not about the destiny of those who repent but about determining who should be made to do so by irresistible grace.

His concept of 'prevenient grace' was adopted not just by his Reformed followers, but by eg Arminians and Wesleyans as well. They kept the doctrine of 'total depravity', but for Arminians and Wesleyans God gave everyone prevenient grace (albeit individually) which enabled them to accept or reject his offer of free salvation. This was their freewill choice.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Augustinian/ Reformed

Began Augustine 5th C

Luther
Calvin
Zwingli

John Piper
R C Sproul
Wayne Grudem
Paul Helm

God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens.

- **Jesus died for the sins only of these elect**

It is logical that if only the elect are selected to be saved, then Jesus must have died just for their sins. So 'the world' in 'behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' must just mean all kinds of people.

It is logical that if only the elect are predestined to be saved, then Jesus must have died only for the sins of the elect, not for everyone.

In the famous 1610 statement of Reformed theology TULIP, the 'L' stood for limited atonement.

So the words about Jesus dying for the sins of the world cannot mean everyone, but just all kinds of people.

Reformed theologians have used various different terms to describe this, but it essentially amounts to the same thing.

If it were true one could not look at someone and say 'Jesus died for your sins'. We could only say 'Jesus may have died for your sins but we can't be sure until after the resurrection when we discover if you were elected and have been given the gift of perseverance.'

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Augustinian/ Reformed

Began Augustine 5th C

Luther
Calvin
Zwingli

John Piper
R C Sproul
Wayne Grudem
Paul Helm

God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens.

- **The unelected will suffer unending torment without hope to give God glory**

Augustine did not invent the idea of eternal torment, but who God would save and who leave to suffer it rested solely on the selection of God.

Why not elect and save all of us?

The Augustinian God led later Reformed followers to conclude that this must be to give God glory because it contrasts with those he elected, and the eternal torment of others makes those he irresistibly saved more grateful.

Justin Martyr and Irenaeus believed that in the final judgment the unrepentant would simply be destroyed – cease to exist. This is what the New Testament explicitly and repeatedly says (as I showed in my last solo book *Hellfire and Destruction*). But, as already noted, the increasing neo-platonic belief in human immortality meant that either the unrepentant would all in the end be saved (as Gregory of Nyssa believed) or they would have to suffer for time without end.

Augustine did not invent eternal torment, but he and his followers believed in it, and what was novel was that it was simply God's divine choice which decided which way people would go. We should just be grateful he happened to pick us and not them – and modern Reformed theologians like John Piper say this explicitly.

I find it hard to see how if filled with the love of Jesus I could look on an unending suffering without hope of friends, relatives, and indeed enemies, and be jolly glad that God (who could have picked all of us) picked me but not them.

Overview of Alternative Theologies

Augustinian/ Reformed

Began Augustine 5th C

Luther
Calvin
Zwingli

John Piper
R C Sproul
Wayne Grudem
Paul Helm

God's almighty 'sovereignty' means he directly predetermines everything that happens

- **God foreknows everything because he is outside time or because he predetermined it.**

One version of this developed the philosophical idea that God was outside time (Philo – Boethius – Augustine)

Augustine's version was that the timeless God is ordaining everything. Some later Reformed theologians reinterpreted 'foreknown' in regard to predestination to mean 'chosen in advance'

But there were also theologians who accepted the timelessness of God but believed that this was consistent with libertarian freewill.

Of course if God predetermines everything then he foreknows everything. But there also developed a philosophical idea that God was outside time – coming from 1st C Philo – 5th C Augustine – and 6th C Boethius. Augustine's timeless God was also ordaining everything. There were, though, some later theologians who accepted a timeless God who therefore foreknew everything (though this knowledge is actually timeless), but did not necessarily ordain it. So there were some theologians who believed that the timeless God was consistent with libertarian freewill.

New meanings:

A number of key theological words and phrases have been redefined or reinterpreted by Augustinian theologians:

Changed his Mind (*nacham*)

*Freewill - biblical term 'willing' (*ēthelēsate*)*

*Love (*agapē*)*

*Almighty (*pantokratōr*)*

*Foreknowledge (*prognōsin*)*

*Predestination (*proōrisen*)*

*Destruction (*apōleian*)*

A number of key theological words and phrases have been redefined or reinterpreted by Augustinian theologians:

As already noted, throughout the OT God is said to have changed his mind or regretted something. *Nacham* is used in this way in: Gen 6:6-7, Ex 32:12-14, Deut 32:36, Judges 2:18, 1 Samuel 15:11, 2 Sam 24:16, Jer 18:8-10 etc.

In 1 Samuel 15:29 it says: *He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.*” But it had already said in 1 Samuel 15:11 that God changed his mind (regretted) making Saul king. It used the same term. When God made Saul king he gave him a new heart and gift of prophecy, and never intended to remove his lineage. But Saul’s disobedience made God change his mind. The point is that unlike humans God is never fickle, but if humans react unexpectedly then he may change his mind and behave differently towards them.

Reformed theologians write this off as anthropomorphism. God is immutable etc!

But to many, a change in attitude depending on the reaction of another person is central to relationality. The Augustinian God, splendid in immutable unchanging absolute power, cannot really have a relationship with anyone. They are all his puppets. You can’t have a real relationship with a puppet.

New meanings:

Some key theological words and phrases have been redefined or reinterpreted by Augustinian theologians:

Changed his Mind (nacham)

Freewill - biblical term 'willing' (ēthelēsate)

Love (agapē)

Almighty (pantokratōr)

Predestination (proōrisen)

Destruction (apōleian)

Other concepts are also redefined in Augustine.

The libertarian freewill accepted throughout the early church becomes merely compatibilist freewill – no external compulsion but no real choice. The Bible says that people do not always do God's will – some Reformed theologians speak of his 'revealed will' (what he says he wants) and his actual or effectual will (what he really wants)

Because everything is compulsion, Augustine says that because God 'compels them to come in' in the parable of the wedding feast, the state shows love by using punishment and pain to compel Donatists (Baptists) to come to the Catholic church. Also, God 'loves' the world, but not with the kind of predestinating love to save them.

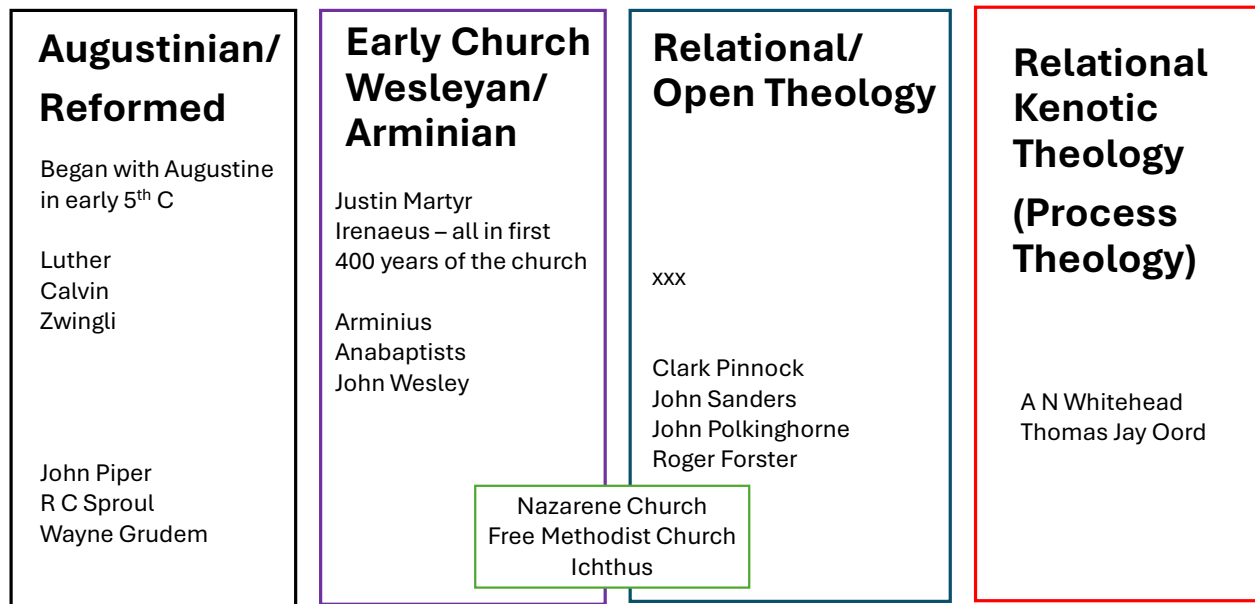
Almighty – a word used mainly in that book of battles Revelation – becomes literally almighty – no one else has any power to do anything.

Election/predestination means deciding who will be made to have faith.

'Destruction' does not mean destruction but putting into unending torment without hope.

Augustinian/Reformed theology was never without its critics, so we will turn now to some of those who wanted a return to early church ideas.

Overview of Alternative Theologies



This was my earlier overall schema.

The middle two here overlap, and in a sense both could be called ‘relational theology’, though I will try to make a distinction.

I don’t like to call Augustinian theology ‘classical theology’ (as Greg did) because it was unknown to the early church for about 370 years, and it always had those dissenting from some or most of it.

But the two best known movements rejecting most of it are those named after Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) and John Wesley (1703-1791). Their theologies were fairly similar (and not dissimilar from some in the early church) so I am grouping them together.

John Wesley did not mince words about the Reformed (Augustinian) doctrine of election:

‘[This doctrine] destroys all his (God’s) attributes at once: it overturns both his justice, mercy, and truth; yea, it represents the most holy God as worse than the devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust.’

Rock on John!

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. **God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen.**
2. **Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)**
3. **God takes the initiative. ‘Prevenient grace’ is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.**
4. **God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.**
5. **Accepting a gift is not a ‘work’ and earns nothing.**
6. **God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.**
7. **God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.**
8. **God himself is immutable and impassible.**

So here is an overview of the most basic ideas in Arminius and Wesley, sometimes labelled as ‘Wesleyan-Arminian’.

Within this general category there are of course variations within each church group.

But let us just go through together these points.

The first five represent dissent from Augustinian theology. I will give some verses but these points do not hang on a few ‘proof texts’, rather they can be arrived at by anyone simply reading the NT with some idea of its background and without assumptions derived from Greek philosophy.

The denial of these points requires great philosophical and exegetical agility and innovation!

The last three points involve some retention of Greek-influenced early church ideas and the philosophy of time developed by Philo, Augustine and Boethius. Arminius and Wesley both retained these, but not all those who are in their school or tradition do, as we shall see. Relational theology as usually defined does not accept them.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

- 1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen.**
- 2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)**
- 3. God takes the initiative. ‘Prevenient grace’ is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.**
- 4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.**
- 5. Accepting a gift is not a ‘work’ and earns nothing.**
- 6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.**
- 7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.**
- 8. God himself is immutable and impassible.**

The first point is essentially a denial of the main beginning assumption of Augustine.

As already noted, it is obvious from any straightforward reading of the Bible. Arminius, the Anabaptists, Erasmus, Wesley, and many others began from this.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen..
2. **Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)**
3. God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. God himself is immutable and impassible.

Christ died for the sins of the world (cosmos)

The word world (*cosmos*) can either mean the physical world or everyone in it. We have looked earlier at attempts to redefine it, but let us reprise on its real meaning.

So John 1:10 says that the incarnate Word 'was in the world and the world knew him not'. Then 1:29 that the lamb of God will die to 'take away the sins of the world' 3:16 says that God loved the world so much that he gave his son so that 'whoever has faith' will have eternal life. 1 John 2:2 repeats explicitly that Jesus died as propitiation 'not just for our sins but also for all the world'.

To take 'all the world' to mean 'all kinds of people' undermines the heart of our gospel and the early church would have been aghast at the suggestion,

Titus 2:11 reads: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,* Arminius, Wesley, and any in their tradition take it that God offers salvation to all, and does not select to whom to give irresistible faith. God is not willing that any should be destroyed but all come to faith. If God only brought it to offer to those he had pre-elected individually, this would radically alter the meaning of this. Again, though, it is not just this verse, but the whole tenor of Scripture.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen..
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. **God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.**
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. God himself is immutable and impassible.

'Prevenient grace' was a term invented by Augustine. Augustine described free will without the spiritual aid of grace as, "captive free will" and 'prevenient grace' was necessary to make human freewill a "freed free will" (Latin: *liberum arbitrium liberatum*). However, Augustine **also** said that prevenient grace was insufficient to enable a person to repent. What he called "operative grace" was given only to the elect enabling belief and kindling justifying faith. (in Reformed theology 'effectual calling'.)

In 529 CE the Council of Orange affirmed that faith, though a free act of man, resulted, even in its beginnings, from the grace of God, enlightening the human mind and enabling belief. In a sense this is prevenient grace. But it did not affirm Augustine's doctrines of operative faith given only the elect.

Arminius held that *Free will is unable to begin or to perfect any true and spiritual good, without grace* - so the initiative was God giving prevenient grace. But the decision to accept justifying grace was a freewill one.

Wesley said: "*prevenient grace elicits the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning His will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against Him.*" (Sermon #85). But this enables people to believe without forcing them to do so.

To Wesley and Arminius this grace is individual but does not irresistibly lead to conversion and is given to all. United Methodists, Nazarenes Church, Free Methodists etc adopt this idea of prevenient grace. God takes the first initiative not man, but leaves man then free to accept or reject salvation.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen.
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. **God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.**
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. God himself is immutable and impassible.

If I am perfectly honest, I am not sure what biblical verses assert this doctrine. I understand the motivation to magnify God, but does the Bible actually teach it?

Yes Jeremiah 17:7 says: *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?'* But this is poetic hyperbole in a chapter where God pleads for people to turn to him. God does not (through Jeremiah) add that they are able to do so only because he has given them prevenient grace. It may seem logical to suppose that if God asks them to then he assumes that they can. When Joshua said: 'Choose you this day whom you will serve' (Josh 24:15) he assumes they can but makes no comment on why they can.

Paul says: *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.* But he does not add 'without the prevenient grace of God I would not even want to do right.'

Could a person want to do right if God were not urging them to? I am not even sure the question is meaningful, any more than asking 'What would happen if God stopped being God?'

So, personally, I am not sure that Arminius and Wesley taking over a term Augustine invented is particularly helpful. But if it helps you then praise the Lord.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen..
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.
4. **God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.**
5. **Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.**
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. God himself is immutable and impassible.

This is a central restoration of universally held early church belief. The freewill enabled by God is assumed to be 'libertarian freewill' which is how all the early church before Augustine understood it. It is a real freedom of choice, not just an absence of external compulsion as in so called 'compatibilist freewill'.

Arminius Disputation #9.23 [God] has employed that form of administration which allows intelligent creatures not only of their own choice or spontaneously. but likewise freely, to perform and accomplish their own motions and actions.

The acceptance of a free gift is not a work and earns nothing. Arminius uses the analogy of a rich ruler giving a free gift to a beggar. The beggar extending his hand to receive the gift is not a work and earns nothing.

Wesley is similar.

There are specific verses on this like: Luke 7:30 *but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.*) Plus Jesus' lament in Matthew 23:37 about how often he wanted to gather them but they would not. Our books cite some of these. But the doctrine is not based on isolated verses, but on the whole of the way Scripture talks about God's dealings with and relationships with people.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some are not what he wants.
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. **God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.**
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. God himself is immutable and impassible.

Our next point is that **God foreknows all things but this does not imply that these are foreordained or caused to occur by this knowledge.**

Arminius held that God foreknows everything, but says: '*a thing does not come to pass because it is foreknown or foretold; but it is foreknown or foretold because it is yet to come to pass*'. (Works ii p 368). However Arminius also says that events *would not be future unless God had decreed either to perform or to permit them* (Works v 2)

Wesley said: *the sun does not shine because I know it, but I know it because he shines. My knowledge supposes the sun to shine; but does not in anywise cause it. In like manner, God knows that man sins; for he knows all things: Yet we do not sin because he knows it, but he knows it because we sin; and his knowledge supposes our sin, but does not in anywise cause it.* (Sermon 58)

Those who hold that God knows everything rely on verses like Psalm 139.4&16 *Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. . . Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.*

But the Psalms are worship and poetry, is this a poetic exaggeration or an analytical theological statement? David also says there that he 'was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.' Really? Literally?

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen.
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. **God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.**
8. God himself is immutable and impassible.

This view that God is somehow outside time can also form part of a Wesleyan-Arminian theology, as I have hinted already.

The 1st C Jewish philosopher Philo began the idea that God created time, and 5th C Augustine developed it in a sophisticated way. Then, the neo-platonic Christian Boethius later in the century took a similar view, though did not believe it exactly right to say all events were 'present' to God because to him there is no present. Boethius also did not follow the idea that foreknowledge implied causality.

The French Franciscan Peter Auriol (ca. 1280–1322), who believed strongly in human freewill, took a similar timeless view of God.

Arminius took a similar view.

On 1 Pet 1:1-2 Wesley wrote: *Strictly speaking, there is no foreknowledge, no more than afterknowledge, with God: but all things are known to him as present from eternity to eternity.* (also sermon 58 on Romans 8:29-30)

Modern scientific views of time give some support to a belief that time is much less simple than once supposed, and the idea that God is somehow outside of time can form part of either a Reformed or Wesleyan-Arminian theology.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen.
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. **God himself is immutable and impassible.**

In the 1980's H P Owen wrote: "As far as the Western world is concerned theism has a double origin, the bible and Greek philosophy." As early as Ignatius (who died 107CE) he said God was timeless and impassible, . The early fathers struggled between God as immutable, impassible etc and the recognition that there was eternal relationship in the Trinity and that God interacted with humans.

Augustine developed this into a God who is immutable, impassible, and unchanging in any sense – because in any case he dwells in eternity. But many with theologies different from Augustine have felt this kind of immutability was elevating God.

Arminius is quite explicit on the attributes of God: *He is immutable, always the same, and endures forever; "his years have no end." (Psalm 102) Nothing can be added to him, and nothing can be taken from him; with him "is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." (James i. 17.) (Works i.326)*

Wesley was not really concerned with the kind of disputational theology of systematic theologians, but he does include in the articles that God is immutable and impassible.

But how can we compare these ideas of God as immutable and impassible with the one in the Bible?

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Early Church Wesleyan/ Arminian

Justin Martyr
Irenaeus – all in first
400 years of the church

Arminius
Anabaptists
John Wesley

Methodists ?
Salvation Army ?
Free Methodists ?
Nazarenes ?
Ichthus?

1. God does not foreordain all events, and some things that happen are not what he wants to happen.
2. Christ died for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Salvation is offered to all (Titus 2:2)
3. God takes the initiative. 'Prevenient grace' is grace before conversion, enabling acceptance of the gift.
4. God enables humans libertarian freewill to accept or reject his undeserved gift of salvation.
5. Accepting a gift is not a 'work' and earns nothing.
6. God foreknows all things but this does not imply they are caused to occur by this knowledge.
7. God is in some sense outside time, having direct experience of past, present and future.
8. **God himself is immutable and impassible.**

The word 'impassible' means 'incapable of feeling or emotion'. Whilst this may fit the various versions of God in Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, it is hard to see how it can fit with the God of the bible. Augustine writes off all expressions of God feeling anger, sadness, disappointment and longing as anthropomorphic. But this in reality depersonalises God.

The idea that God is in some senses unchanging has more biblical support than the idea that he is without passion. The NT Says: *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* (James 1:17). *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.* (Heb 13:8).

But surely this refers to his unchanging character? James sees God as creator of the unchanging stars, and without a kind of shadow (or eclipse) because 'in him is no darkness at all'. But this does not mean there is no change in terms of experience. Light, after all, can assume different qualities and still be light. The character of Jesus Christ is unchanging, but surely during his lifetime he had new experiences?

We will consider in part ii, how those within the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition who have questioned whether this kind of immutability really reflects the God of Scripture. .

**A break here
so that we can
all be relational!**



At this point there is a break, so please all be relational.

In Part ii I will look at the meaning and basis of Relational Theology, and how what is now called 'Open Theology' develops it further.

Unpacking (biblical) Relational Theology

Paul Marston
www.paulmarston.net

Part 2
Varieties and Implications of Relational Theology

People in most theological schools – Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Wesleyan-Arminian or Reformed, talk about having a relationship with God. But they don't always mean the same by it.

The term 'Relational Theology', though, emphasizes interpersonal relationship and inter-reaction as at the heart of God and his dealings with humanity.

This definition still includes a variety of views, and maybe some that we would not regard as in any real sense biblical Christianity. But even though the idea is neither new nor uniform, it is worth exploring some of its aspects.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)

John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

1. Relationship is central to the being of God
2. Relationship is central to mankind in his image
3. God is not impassive but has grief, disappointment, anger, and passion.
4. God uses humans in relationship with him to achieve his plan and purposes
5. God is perfect but can experience change.
6. God can 'change his mind' in reaction to human acts
7. So God, it seems, did not foreknow their actions.
8. God is 'omniscient'- he knows all there is to know, but some parts of the future are not yet determined.
9. God knows, though, what he intends to do, and what the overall future pattern will look like.

I have put together 'relational theology' and 'open theology' in this section. Both, in some sense, move away from the image of the immutable, unchanging, impassible God.

I believe that the term 'Relational Theology' can be applied to all these points, whilst the last four form an 'Open Theology' version of it. The basic point is that in 'Open Theology' is a version of 'Relational Theology' which asserts that God does not foreknow all the future. It would be possible to have a version of Relational Theology that did not include this.

Greg last month seemed to restrict the term 'Relational Theology' to Thomas Jay Oord's kenotic theology (which neither Greg nor I believe is anywhere near biblical). Actually, although Oord claims to be a leader in Relational Theology, he does not restrict the term to his scheme – and neither will I. The term itself may have been invented by Open Theist John Sanders in the 1990's but the idea is not new. Eg in 1972 Nazarene theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop make relationship central in her view of sanctification.

The 'Relational Theology' part of this whole theology emphasizes that relationship rather than power and rulership is the central feature of the God of whom Scripture twice says 'God is Love'. This covers the first five points, but not necessarily the last four.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

- 1. Relationship is central to the being of God**
- 2. Relationship is central to mankind in his image**
- 3. God is not impassive but has grief, disappointment, anger, and passion.**
- 4. God uses humans in relationship with him to achieve his plan and purposes**
- 5. God is perfect but can experience change.**
- 6. God can 'change his mind' in reaction to human acts**
- 7. So God, it seems, did not foreknow their actions.**
- 8. God is 'omniscient'- he knows all there is to know, but some parts of the future are not yet determined.**
- 9. God knows, though, what he intends to do, and what the overall future pattern will look like.**

Anyway, at this point we can start to look through the points.

There are some shades of differences in this category of course, and it is a natural extension of what may be called Wesleyan-Arminian views.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

1. Relationship is central to the being of God.

- The central feature of God is not power but love
- Relationship is at the heart of the Trinity
- Through eternity in the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in a kind of dance of love.

God is Love... love is in essence relational – in eternity there is the eternal relationality in unity of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The 4th C Cappadocian Fathers used a word *perichoresis*—circle dance—to describe the foundational trinity quality of God's character: relationship and communion. The Dancers go in circles, weaving in and out, faster and faster, staying in perfect rhythm and synchronization with each other. Eventually, they are dancing so quickly, yet effortlessly, that it becomes a blur.

The Trinity is a harmonious set of relationships in which there is mutual giving and receiving. This relationship is called love, and it's what the Trinity is all about. *Perichoresis is then the dance of love.* Roger in his book on the Trinity called this the 'song and dance God'.

"He who sent me is with me and never leaves me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29). "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will bring you into the whole truth. He will not come with a message of his own, but will tell you what he has heard. He will glorify me because he will receive from me in order to reveal it to you. All that the Father has is also mine. That is why I told you that he will receive what is mine to declare to you" (Jn 16:13-15).

Rom 8: 26 26-8 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that that in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good—with those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Come join the dance.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

2. Relationship is central to mankind in God's image

- **Gen 1:27** God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
- **Gen 2:18** “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’ (literally ‘an ally corresponding to him’.
- **Eph 5** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body.

How come we can join the dance? Humans were made in God's image, a unity in a love relationship.

The word here in Gen 1:27 ‘helper’ (*ezer*) does not mean a servant but an ally. The term *ezer* is most often used of God himself (Psalm 70.5, 115.9 etc).

Gen 3:8 has the lovely picture of God walking in the garden in the coolness of the day, looking for relationship with the humans he created – but they hid!

Human relationships were destroyed by the fall, and relationship turned to a blame game. . . As a result, God prophesied to the woman the sad news: *Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.*”

Some theologians take this as an instruction for Christian wives to be ‘joyfully submissive’ to husbands. But the same term is used in Gen 4:7 when Cain is told sin in crouching at the door but he must ‘rule over’ it. God didn't expect sin to be ‘joyfully submissive’! **Men** – rule over sin but in Christ you are redeemed from the curse of ruling over your wives.

My wife is an ally corresponding to me in a relationship. To love her as Christ loved the church means to want her to fully develop as a person. Maybe things will change when our honeymoon period is over – but so far we have only been married 54 years so it hasn't finished yet.

In Matthew 19 Jesus made clear that God's intention was for marriage to be a monogamous, heterosexual, and lifelong relationship. In relationship theology such marriage is a relationship of allies not an autocracy. Any ‘being subject’ (Ephesians 5) is in a context of a single body union and unity.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

2. Relationship is central to mankind in God's image

- **Gen 1:27** God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
- **Gen 2:18** “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’ (literally ‘an ally corresponding to him’.
- **Eph 5** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ··· He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body.

Part of this human marriage relationship was meant to be sex. The term for having sex in Genesis is to ‘know’ (*yada*). This centralises relationship and love. Heb 13:3 says ‘honourable [is] the marriage in all, and the bed undefiled, and the sexually immoral and adulterers God shall judge’. Paul says husband and wife each own each other’s bodies, and should abstain from sex only on a parallel with a time of fasting. Augustine, in contrast, taught that human concupiscence meant sex was always shameful, should only be done in marriage to produce children – and then try not to enjoy it. Virginity and monastic abstinence were elevated.

The picture of Christ and the church as bride in Revelation contrasts with the beast and the harlot. One is all about using the other one for self gratification or selfish gain, the other about the self giving of bride and groom in love to please the other. In English we use ‘be intimate with’ in a similar sense to the biblical word know. It is a height in human love relationships.

Of course single people, widows and widowers, are of equal value amongst the children of God. Paul also makes this clear in 1 Cor 7 and notes that being unmarried (as he was) can have some advantages, particularly in some situations. For those who are without a spouse deep friendships with others in God’s family should be there to make relationship central too in their lives.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

2. Relationship is central to mankind in God's image

- **Rom 12 :4-5** For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
- **1 Cor 12:25-6** - there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.
- **Gal 3: 26-28** So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,. . . There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In some senses the church family is also meant to represent humanity in the image of God. Our relational God wants a relational church.

The people of God are meant to be a community, a family, and a unity. These well known biblical passages reflect this. Many persons are within one body of the church. Hermit monasticism is an aberration – however good were some of those who went into it. Good people can be led astray by mistaken doctrines.

We were not meant to overcome human conflict by escaping community, but by the community being transformed by the fruit of the Spirit and the oneness of the church body. Alas, we all know too well this does not always happen!

In the Quran 5:18 it says *The Jews and the Christians said, "We are the children of God and His beloved." Say, "Why then does He punish you for your sins? Rather, you are humans among others He has created." He forgives whom He wills and punishes whom He wills. To God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth and what is between them.*

It also says that most humans will remain in a fire of hell forever (98.6)

Yahweh wants friends and family, so we are his children, but according to the Quran Allah has no children but only servants. Our God is a fundamentally relational God wanting a relational people.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

3. God is not impassible but has grief, disappointment, anger, and passion.

- Anger – Psalm 7:11; Deuteronomy 9:22; Romans 1:18
- Compassion – Psalm 135:14; Judges 2:18; Deut 32:36
- Pleasure – Matt 17:5; Rom 12:1-2; 14:13; Phil 4:8; Col 1:10; 1 Tim 5:4 (also Job 1:8 by implication)
- Deeply troubled heart – Gen 6:6
- Grief – Genesis 6:6; Psalm 78:40; Eph 4:30
- Love – 1 John 4:8; John 3:16; Jeremiah 31:3
- Hate – Proverbs 6:16; Psalm 5:5; Psalm 11:5
- Jealousy – Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:14; Joshua 24:19
- Joy – Zephaniah 3:17; Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 32:41
- Unexpected disappointment – Isaiah 5:4; Ezekiel 22:30

Sometimes the Bible speaks anthropomorphically of God – God does not have a literal ‘arm’ (the arm of the Lord). But it is hard to see why the Bible would use such emotive terms as in these OT verses for God if actually he is emotionless and impassible. So Eg Gen 6:6 The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his ‘heart was deeply troubled’. Deeply troubled? How can an impassible emotionless being be ‘deeply troubled’? The God of the Bible is not the Greek classical theist immutable impassible being.

In the NT, Jesus said that he who has seen me has seen the father – Jesus shows us what God is like. Jesus showed sadness, disappointment, and a great lament ‘Oh Jerusalem how often would I have gathered you under my arm as a hen gathers her chicks, and yet you would not.’

The Holy Spirit also can be grieved: Eph 4:30: And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption

Some theologians claim God is never disappointed in us because he has no expectations of us. It is true that there is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus, and that if we confess our sins he will forgive us. He will never give up on us, and always loves us. But surely any father, however much he loves his children unconditionally, will feel disappointment or sadness if they badly let him down? Did the father feel no sadness at his sons’ reactions in Jesus’ parable of the two sons? To deny this to God as merely ‘anthropomorphic’ is not to exalt him but to de-personalise and de-relationalise him.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

4. God is perfect but can experience change.

John 1:1, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . .

14 And the Word *became* flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Whatever we think about the timelessness of God, surely the incarnation - God experiencing being human at a point in time – will in some sense have ‘changed’ him? It was a new experience in time. The word *became* flesh, the Word was not flesh before and this was at a point in time.

God’s character is changeless from everlasting to everlasting – but Jesus experienced being human, hunger, thirst, sorrow (Jesus wept), and disappointment. Heb 4:15 says *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.*

Jesus was not some kind of superman or extra-terrestrial pretending to be human; the incarnation was when the divine Logos first experienced it.

James 1 says ¹⁷ *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* But if we read his context he is saying that God does not tempt with sin, but only good things come from him. In this respect there ‘is no shadow’ – there is only light and love not shade and darkness. In this respect God is unchanging. But light can change and still be light.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)

John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

5. God uses humans in relationship with him to achieve his plan and purposes

- Noah was told to build an ark
- Abraham was told to leave the comfort of UR. Through him all nations of the earth would be blessed. God also decided to let his friend Abraham know his judgment on Sodom.
- Moses was called to lead out the Israelites
- Etc (think of your own examples...)
- God inspired humans to write Scripture, but in relational context of their own language and culture.
- The church is meant to be in *koinomia* with each other and with God.

With figures like Noah, Abraham and Moses, God sought friendship and cooperation with humans to bring in his purposes..

Scripture is God-breathed, but written in the style and language of the people with whom he was in relationship, and in context of their culture. This is why in exegesis we need to look at the culture and relationships in which it was given, and reapply the principles in our own time and culture.

The church is to share *koinomia* (fellowship or partnership) with each other and with God. This is a word meaning sharing, partnership, and close relationship. It means a bond with a shared goal. 1 John 1 says that the key is the word of Life in Christ, and he writes: *so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.* Walking in the Light, and walking in the way of love is central, he says, to fellowship both with God and each other. Confession and forgiveness are central to our relationship with the Trinity.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

5. God uses humans in relationship with him to achieve his plan and purposes

Relationship and Knowing Someone

Am 3:2: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

Jon 4:2 : I know that you *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in love, one who relents from punishing.

Matt 7:22-23 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name . . . and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

1 John 2:4, 3:23 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar. . . his **commandment**, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another

'Knowing' someone in a love relationship is not just about knowing about them. But surely it must involve knowing something about them and wanting to do what pleases them?

It is God's special relationship with them in Amos that makes their betrayal the more heartbreaking and sinful.

Jewish prophets knew what the heart and nature of God was. Jonah ran away from pronouncing judgment because he knew his God, and that God would change his mind and show mercy if he could.

So, we talk about the Christian life as a relationship with God, but surely knowing him involves knowing what is in his heart? If I know my wife well I know what is in her heart! It is a mystery to me how someone can write a 352 page book about knowing God but then conclude that God arbitrarily decides who to leave for eternal torment. But we can never see what is in someone's heart if their theology goes wrong – only God can.

Matthew's warning – and parallel ones in Matt 25 – are sobering. Of course this is not denying that salvation is by grace, but it does tell us that real relationship with God influences behaviour. If we really know and love God we will keep his fundamental commandment to love him and love others.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

We will now look at the points which are more specific to the 'Open Theology' version of Relational Theology.

The next slide will give a fuller set of beliefs, but a central point is that God does not foreknow all future events.

The term 'Open Theology' dates from the 1990's, but the idea itself is not new. It was there when the Reformation brought biblical reconsideration of longstanding Roman Catholic theology.

- John Owen in 1642 notes some Arminians believed it
- Many 19th Century theologians believed it
- Gordon Olson (1941) of YWAM
- Clark Pinnock and others from 1990's.

We will now look at the points which are more specific to the 'Open Theology' version of Relational Theology. The next slide will give a fuller set of beliefs, but a central point in Open Theology is that God does not foreknow all future events.

This view has a long history. For example:

In 1642 the Calvinist John Owen stated in his *A Display of Arminianism* that some of the latter believed: *God 'can have at best but a conjectural foreknowledge of what is yet for to come, not founded on his own unchangeable purpose, but upon a guess at the free inclination of men's wills.'*

In 1868 Methodist minister William Taylor wrote: *'God hath a perfect knowledge of all existing things. . . But the unborn acts of the human will are not existing things as yet.'*

Other 19thC Methodist theologians, and some Lutheran and Catholic ones held the same views. – and this continued in the 20th century.

Gordon C Olson (one of the founders of YWAM) wrote a book *The Foreknowledge of God* (1941) which holds these views.

The term 'Open Theology' came in the late 20th century, with people like Clark Pinnock (whom Roger and I later met at a conference – he bore an uncanny resemblance to Doc in *Back to the Future!*) also John Polkinghorne, who linked this with science, and others. But the idea was not new.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Gordon Olson (1941)

Clark Pinnock (1994)
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

6. God can 'change his mind' in reaction to human acts (and human intercession)

1 Sam 15:29: [God] *does not lie or change his mind (**nacham**); for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind (**nacham**); ."*

1 Sam 15:11 *"I regret (**nacham**) that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions*

+ Exodus 32:12-14; Judges 2:18; Psalms 135:14;

God is not fickle like humans – but does seem to change his mind. This is what the word means – it does not mean 'altered what he said he would do' (and in any case God cannot lie).

The picture of God as a potter in Jeremiah 18 is explicit that he changes his mind according to how people behave and react.

In Jonah – both prophet the king knew that God could 'relent' (**nacham**)

Abraham (Gen 18) and Moses (Exodus 32) both saw God change what he said he would do in judgment as they interceded with him.

A starting point is that Scripture clearly asserts that God can change his mind

We noted earlier In 1 Samuel 15:29 it says: *He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind."* But In 1 Samuel 15:11 it says God **changed his mind** (regretted) making Saul king. The point is that unlike humans God is never fickle, but if humans react unexpectedly then he will change his mind and behave differently to them.

The term *nacham* is used a number of other times in the OT. Jonah and the Nineven king both know that God can change his mind – though Jonah is rather cross when he does.

God is pictured as a potter, but this does not mean that humans have no choice. Jeremiah 18 is quite explicit that God as potter will decide the future of a pot depending on the reaction of the clay itself.

It does not say 'God changed what he had earlier told people that he would do' but 'God changed his mind'. The 'arm of God' is anthropomorphic and we know it means God used his power). But 'God changed his mind' has no sensible purely metaphorical meaning.

Abraham and Moses both saw God change what he would do through their intercession – though God did not make the Sodomites or the Israelites repent and believe. What does this tell us of intercessory prayer?

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Clark Pinnock
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

7. So God, it seems, did not foreknow their actions.

This is the central point of what is now called ‘Open Theism’.

It concludes that God either does not foreknow or does not choose to foreknow all future events.

But he does foreknow all the possibilities.

And he knows the end point is certain because it is what he intends to do.

So this is the central point of ‘Open Theism’.

If God can ‘change his mind’ as the bible says depending on human attitudes and reactions, then surely he cannot know in advance what they will choose to do? As already mentioned, it seems forced to try to take God ‘changed his mind’ to really mean he ‘changed what he said he would do’ without making God dishonest.

We may also note that when Abraham decided to sacrifice Isaac as asked, God said in Gen 22:12: *‘Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’* Is this just anthropomorphic or is it real?

But all this means that God either does not foreknow or does not choose to foreknow all future events – especially involving humans making freewill choice.

Open theologians believe that God foreknows all the possibilities of the future, but until humans have used their freewill he does not know which of these possibilities will actually come to be.

And he knows the end point is certain because it is what he intends to do.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational/ Open Theology

Some Arminians 1642

William Taylor 1868
+ others in 19th C

Clark Pinnock
John Sanders
John Polkinghorne
Roger Forster
Greg Boyd
etc

8. God is 'omniscient'- he knows all there is to know, but some parts of the future are not yet determined.
9. God knows, though, what he intends to do, and what the overall future pattern will look like.

Rev 21:3-4 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place[a] of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

So to repeat...

God is 'omniscient'- he knows all there is to know, but some parts of the future are not yet determined.

God knows, though, what he intends to do, and what the overall future pattern will look like.

There are shades of variation amongst Open Theologians. The views on how God relates to time or to sequence vary – and Roger and I were cautious in committing to the full 'Sanders' view.

The general understanding is that God is 'omniscient' and knows all there is to know, but some of the future depends on human freewill actions and God knows all the possibilities (so he is never caught unprepared) but not which one will occur. Greg and others have suggested that this is a greater view of God, not a lesser one.

There will be a redeemed group of people whose destiny is set to rule with Christ, but God does not determine who these will be, and his 'foreknowledge' of them is corporate not individual. God knows, though, that he will create a new reality, a new heaven and earth where his will happen.

- Last month Greg Boyd was critical what he called ‘Relational Theology’ and defended what he called ‘Open Theology’
- But he said he was not sure what ‘Relational Theology’ meant, and then effectively identified it with the ideas of Thomas Jay Oord.

- I believe the term ‘Relational Theology’ includes ‘Open Theology’, and what Oord calls ‘Kenotic Theology’ is unacceptable.
- So I agreed with Greg that Oord’s theology is not really Christian, but I don’t want to give the term ‘Relational Theology’ up to Oord.

Are we in disagreement?

No. It is about terminology not substance.



In theology many labels contain a variety of differing views. For example we may call ourselves ‘evangelical’.

The term comes from Greek *euangelion* or good news. ‘Evangelical’ was adopted by the followers of Luther (those of Calvin called themselves Reformed), and also for the 18thC Pietist and Methodist revivals. As the term now, it includes Wesleyan-methodists, Reformed, people in many denominations, and of varying views about science and evolution. There are those who call themselves evangelical who accept gay marriage, and those who don’t.

Should we stop using the term? If there are some who call themselves ‘evangelical’ with whose theology we seriously disagree should we stop using the term for ourselves?

- Last month Greg Boyd was critical of what he called ‘Relational Theology’ and defended what he called ‘Open Theology’
- But he said he was not sure what relational theology meant, and then confined it to the ideas of Thomas Jay Oord with which he (and I) disagree

But should we abandon the term because Oord claims to be a ‘Relational Open Theist’?

Oord himself wrote : *Open and relational thinkers don’t agree on everything. And my emphasis on a big umbrella doesn’t mean those differences are inconsequential. Difference matters.*

A similar comment when he joint-edited a 2012 book *Relational Theology a Contemporary Introduction* encouraged contributors who do not accept his theology.

Importance of Word Definitions

I objected e.g. when people restricted the word 'creationist' to those who believed the earth only a few thousand years old. Actually there are:

- Young-earth creationists
- Intelligent Design creationists
- Evolutionary creationists

If we believe in creation we are creationists – we should not give up the term.

Likewise, 'relational theology' is a broad term, and there are:

- People who see God in Scripture as fundamentally relational
 - Those amongst them who see this as implying Open Theology
 - Kenotic theologians (Oord and a few others) who also claim to be relational
- Oord has edited and written several books on 'Relational Theology', but Open Theists like Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Greg Boyd have contributed to books edited by Oord and do not accept his theology.

'Relational theology' is a good term – we should not give it up to Oord.

I personally think that terms matter, and we should not give up a good term because there are some who claim it with whom we disagree.

To give another example of this: I objected e.g. when people restricted the word 'creationist' to those who believed the earth only a few thousand years old. Actually there are: / Young-earth creationists / Intelligent Design creationists / Evolutionary creationists If we believe in creation we are creationists – we should not give up the term.

Likewise 'relational theology' is a broad term. and there are:

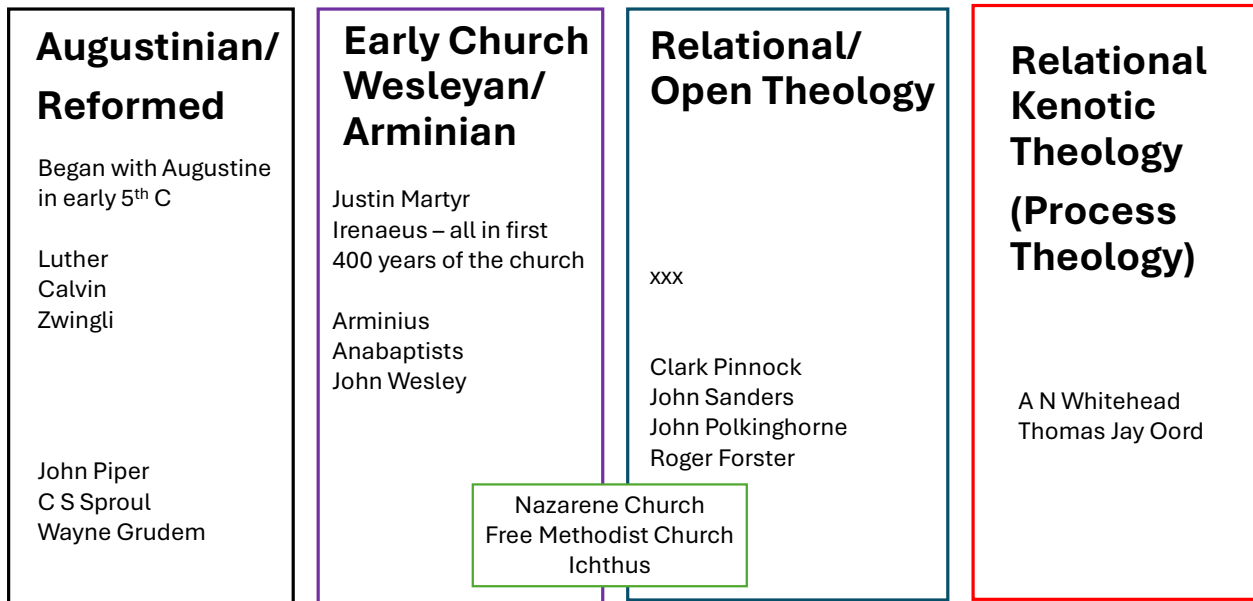
- People who see God in Scripture as fundamentally relational
- Those amongst them who see this as implying Open Theism
- Kenotic theologians (Oord and a few others) who also claim to be relational

The idea that relationship is central to the Trinity is centuries old.

Someone like Nazarene missionary theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop in her classic book *A Theology of Love* (1972) advocated (in a way that reflected Charles Finney) a dynamic, relational, and christological understanding of classic Wesleyan sanctification. Holiness would come with intensified relationship not by God altering our internal impulses. This is nothing like process theology.

Oord neither invented the idea of relational theology nor owns it. In my view we should not give it up to him.

Overview of Alternative Theologies



I warned at the start that this breakdown was schematic, with various overlaps and people who wanted elements of differing views or held them in tension.

Thomas Jay Oord was ordained in 1992 in the Nazarene church, and says he started his new theology 2 years later. He became a professor at a Nazarene university, but was forced to resign by 2018. As part of his new theology he argued that LGBT+ should be ‘fully affirmed’ and for this was (arguably rather messily) excommunicated in 2024. As now a self-publishing blogger he has presented himself as a martyr and has some following in the young. Some academic theologians have praised him, but I do not believe he represents the main thinking amongst Nazarenes or indeed most of those who gave chapters to his compendium.

I make no personal judgment on him and never met him, but he calls his new system Relational Open Theism, but actually (as Boyd pointed out) is nearer to the process theology developed by the non-Christian philosopher A N Whitehead (1861-1947).

I don’t want to spend too much time on it, but in some senses like Augustine he begins from an overriding principle. Augustine’s was that God directs and controls everything, Oord’s is (in effect) that God does not direct or control anything.

Overview of Alternative Theologies Core Beliefs

Relational Kenotic Theology (Process Theology)

(A N Whitehead)
(Charles Hartshorne)
(John B. Cobb)
Thomas Jay Oord

This is a version of ‘relational theology’ developed by Thomas Jay Oord in a way not acceptable to us. . .

- **God’s love is his absolute primary characteristic**
- **This love is non-controlling so God does not control, he seeks to influence.**
- **Freewill is a human characteristic, but in some ways is shared by all creation.**
- **So God does not control nature or people but seeks to influence it and them.**
- **God is an omnipresent spirit and influencer, creating for good – not a creator in the classical sense.**
- **Good and evil appear to be co-eternal.**

Oord also calls his theology Kenotic theology.

The term *kenosis* is used on Phil 2:7 when Jesus ‘made himself nothing’. In *Creation Made Free* (2009) he notes that some Open Theists (eg Polkinghorne) have believed that God voluntarily limits his actions, but Oord’s is what he calls ‘essential kenosis’, and so Oord somehow changes this voluntary emptying to imply God’s essential nature in non-controlling and is not a choice God makes. The various citations he makes to endorse this (including Wesley and Arminius) do not really fit within his overall theology. As the opposite of the Augustinian God who controls everything, Oord’s ‘uncontrolling God’ does not control anything, but tries to influence both nature and human decisions.

Like Greg, I cannot see how miracles (eg the resurrection) or the day of judgment can align with this, and it seems that in it good and evil are co-eternal. There seems to be no end point where the divine influence removes or destroys all evil.

Oord’s basic motive is to try to answer the problem of evil: it exists because God is unable by his very nature to control or remove it. The difficulty is that this answer is simply not the God of the Bible.

Reality (physical and theological) is complex, and just have to live with some mysteries we cannot answer. Why God does not prevent evil is one of them.

So let us stick with a Biblical Relational Theology:

- Our God is fundamentally loving and relational
- He created the universe and us and is active in it
- He wants our family life to reflect his relational nature
- He wants our church life to reflect his relational nature
- He wants us to share *koinomia* with the church family and himself as he seeks to bring in his purposes for creation and humanity
- One day there will be a post-judgment new heaven and earth



So let us stick with a Biblical Relational Theology, but not give up the term:

- **Our God is fundamentally loving and relational**
- **He created the universe and us and is active in it**
- **He wants our family life to reflect his relational nature**
- **He wants our church life to reflect his relational nature**
- **He wants us to share *koinomia* with the church family and himself as he seeks to bring in his purposes for creation and humanity**
- **One day there will be a post-judgment new heaven and earth**

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. – and love means relationship. Feel free to shout Hallelujah!

