

The Omniscience of God

Joe Nesom

The Founders Journal (Fall 2001 ppg 3-8)

Several months past found the popular "evangelical" magazines giving some prominence to the latest doctrinal controversy. At issue was the question of how much the Lord knows. A number of "evangelicals" had begun to oppose the historic doctrine of the Omniscience of God. The most prominent of these was Greg Boyd of Bethel College and Seminary in St. Paul. His disbelief in the historic Christian Doctrine created a whirlwind of activity in the Baptist General Conference.^[1]

In what appeared to be an effort to solve, or at least soften the "problem of evil," Boyd and others had begun to teach that God creates people, but the people create their own decisions, and therefore God cannot know what they will be, until they come to pass. Reactions have included the strange and novel as well as the orthodox. Some of Boyd's defenders concluded that he was merely being "Arminian" and therefore within the pale of evangelical acceptability. Others, who proved themselves better historians, pointed out that Arminians, along with Calvinists, have always affirmed the doctrine of God's Omniscience. The Baptist General Conference (Swedish Baptists) affirmed Boyd's "orthodoxy" by a close vote of 270-251. The controversy goes on.^[2]

Theological Treatment of the Doctrine

The word *Omniscience* is not, strictly speaking, a Biblical term. The word itself is not found in the Bible. It is a philosophical/theological word that has come into wide usage because, like the word *trinity*, it correctly describes the Biblical evidence. The word means: *to see or know all things*. For God, if this Doctrine is true, everything is eternally "present." I have recently been going through a box of old newspaper clippings from earlier years. To my astonishment, I had forgotten, not only many things that happened to me, but many of the people involved. Time dims our remembrance of much that has happened. God is not like that. He always knows what is past, present, and future, if He is Omniscient.

Many theologians, past and present, perhaps the great majority of them, have either made a short affirmative statement that God is all-knowing, or they have treated the Doctrine as a "given," something which is so obvious in the Scriptures as to be commonly received. I agree with that position.

However, down through the years, particularly in times when there was a greater tendency to reflect on the whole counsel of God than is often the case today, a number of theologians took pens in hand to set forth a systematic presentation of this and related Truths. We will begin by examining the work of one of the best representatives of reformed theology, Francis Turretin.

The Omniscience of God and Turretin: a Biblical and Logical Defense of the Doctrine

One of the best treatments of the Orthodox Doctrine, in the face of opposition (both contemporary and historical), is that of Francis Turretin. In his discussion of the Doctrine of God, he addresses the question of God's Knowledge under the heading of God's Intellect, Will, and Power. The historical and theological context is the denial of Socinus that both "singulars" and "future contingencies" are known to God. Against that position Turretin wrote,

“Concerning the intellect of God and the disquisition of his knowledge, two things must be attended to above all others: the mode and the object. The mode consists in his knowing all things perfectly, undividedly, distinctly and immutably. It is thus distinguished from human and angelic knowledge: perfectly because he knows all things by himself or by his essence (not by forms abstracted from things--as is the case with creatures--both because these are only in time with the things themselves, but the knowledge of God is eternal, and because he can have no cause out of himself)”.^[3]

Turretin then proceeded to affirm that God's Knowledge is *undivided* because it is not something acquired by "ratiocination" but is intuitive. Anthropomorphic language may appear in the Scriptures representing God as questioning or reasoning, but this is clearly the *lisp*ing of the Scriptures for our benefit. It may be described as *distinct* because it is not a gathered collection of *diverse predicates of things* which has been brought together by God's *diverse conception*. No, God sees all things *at a glance* and the smallest thing does not escape him. Finally, the Lord's Knowledge is *Immutable* because God never changes.^[4]

Turretin was aware that among the "fathers" there were those who thought it beneath the dignity of the Deity to concern Himself with such lowly questions as *how many gnats are born or die every moment* (singulars). Nevertheless, the testimony of God's Word *leaves no room for doubt*. If the Savior taught that the hairs of our head are all numbered and that God knows and wills the fall of the sparrow, then surely He knows all such things. Such knowledge in no way demeans our glorious Creator.^[5]

The question that looms largest is that of future contingent things. The Socinians sometimes talked as if they believed in the full Knowledge of God still many often also denied Foreknowledge of future contingent events. In this way, they thought to make a strong argument for the freedom of the human will from all things necessary. The Socinians denied that all things, which will take place, come under the Sovereignty of God. The relationship of this viewpoint to that held by those who deny the Omniscience of God, in our day, seems clear.^[6]

Turretin denied this Socinian error by appealing to the Words of Scripture. Does not the Word of God say, "**Lord, thou knowest all things? (John 21:17)** and "**God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things" (1John 3:20).**^[7] Did not the writer of Hebrews teach us that "**All things are naked and open unto his eyes" (Hebrews 4:13)?**

Did not the Lord tell Jeremiah "**Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee**" (Jeremiah. 1:5)?^[8]

A further appeal was made to the reality of *prediction* as an indication of the true Deity. The idols were challenged by the Lord to, "**Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods**" (Is. 41:23). The prophet Isaiah in another passage confesses that "**He declares the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things that are not yet done**" (Isaiah 46:10).^[9]

Turretin also appealed to the Perfection of God and the Doctrine of Providence. If God is to be regarded as the perfect Being, then surely He must know all things past and present, and those things that are future, whether contingent or necessary. The Doctrine of Providence teaches us that He, as the Omnipresent Lord, is guiding and shaping the decisions of His creatures "before they move or direct themselves." Moreover, if God "immutably decreed either to effect or to permit" He must surely know all things that will happen.^[10]

Shorter theological treatments from the Reformers and their heirs fall into the same sort of pattern. For example, William Ames (1576-1633) taught that God's Understanding is without "composition, argument, or classification." This is the same as Turretin's description of God's Knowledge as "undivided." Ames also affirmed the unchangeable nature of God's Understanding, and that the Lord's Knowledge is infinite and eternal.^[11]

The test of these things, for those who believe in the Authority of the Word of God, is still an appeal to the perspicuous teaching of Holy Scripture. What does the Bible teach us about God's Knowledge of all things? Many years ago, I was warned by a teacher of theology, that to appeal to the direct statements of Scripture as the foundation of a theological treatise was to be less than modern. He named a well-known evangelical theologian and said, "*Only a man like that does theology that way!*" But how else can one "do theology" if one is committed to the Truthfulness, Authority, and Sufficiency of the Scriptures?

Omniscience, the Word of God, and Our Experience

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me, You know when I sit and when I rise...You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways (Ps. 139:1-2a & 3).

The assertion here is that God, having brought us under His Omnipotent Gaze, knows everything we do. In verse one, David speaks to the Lord and acknowledges that God has looked deep into his heart, and discovered the truth of all that is there. When the Psalmist moves from place to place, and even when he takes his seat or rises from it, God is not caught unaware. He knows everything we do.

There is a very good example of this in the New Testament. Was not the Lord most surely aware of every circumstance in the life of the Apostle Paul when he sent an angel to tell His Apostle that not one person's life on board the ship would be lost? (Acts 27:21-25). How could God have His messenger say such a thing if He did not know all that would take place?

Did he not also know that Paul would do the responsible thing and tell the soldiers that if the sailors did not stay with the ship, they could not be saved? Surely, the Lord knew that the soldiers would make the right decision. The Lord was not waiting to find out what they would do. Though there are passages that indicate that the Lord tests us, and "awaits" our obedience, these are certainly anthropomorphic. There are far too many affirmations in Scripture that God knows all things, from the beginning, to think otherwise.

You perceive my thoughts from afar (Ps. 139:2b).

Does God know everything that we are thinking and can He "read our minds" without being present with us to observe our mood, or our visage? Indeed the Lord can do such a thing, and that is part of David's Confession of Faith. He knows everything we think. Does not this aspect of the Knowledge of God undergird the teaching of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount? We cannot be content with a show of outward obedience to the Law, because there is a God above Who sees into the very heart of man. This is the view of the writer of Hebrews. **"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account"** (Hebrews 4:13).

Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord (Ps. 139:4).

As I write, I do not know precisely what I will say in the next sentence or paragraph. In fact, thanks to word processing I will no doubt easily revise my words repeatedly, hopefully for the better each time. I do not know what I shall say, but the Lord knows each statement, each change, and the outcome, though I do not. This is the testimony of the Word of God. God knows everything that we will say before we say it.

For practical purposes, is this not the definition of the Omniscience of God? He knows all things, past, present, and future, and therefore He knows all that we do (which includes the remembrance of all that we have done), all that we think (and the record of those thoughts), and all that we say.

The Omniscience of God and the Incarnation

To deny the Omniscience of God is also to play havoc with the central verities of the Faith. The clear testimony of Scripture is surely enough to convince us of the Truth that God is All-Knowing, but it is the Incarnation and the Cross of Christ that reveal this Attribute in its most wondrous demonstration.

God did not await the decisions of men before announcing the specifics of His future Purpose. Isaiah, for example, tells us that the Lord had revealed to him that the servant of God would be "smitten" "pierced" and "crushed." Isaiah, long before the coming of the Messiah, knew that, following his humiliation, he would "see the

light of life and be satisfied" and that **"by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53).**

The Omniscient God sent an angel to the mother of our Lord to reveal a specific Program. **"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:30b-33).**

The Lord could make such assertions only because He knew all His Holy Will that He had purposed to do. None of the angelic language suggests that God might have been waiting to see what angels or men would do, before announcing a course of action.

The Omniscience of God and the Doctrine of Salvation

If the Omniscience of God is denied, the Biblical Revelation of God's Sovereign Work in saving undeserving sinners makes no sense. Paul told the Ephesians that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (**Ephesians 1:3-4**). The Lord could not have done this if He was under the constraint of waiting and watching to see who would decide to choose Him.

In addition, according to Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost Christ was handed over to wicked men by God's set Purpose and Foreknowledge. There is every indication in this early Christian sermon that the Lord knew that the Cross would be the Destiny of the Son, and that He would be raised in Power on the third day. The Father clearly knew the outcome of the great battle that was joined with the forces of evil at Calvary.

In the same way, the Lord was able to reveal what had been a mystery concerning the people of God. That the Church would be composed of both Jew and Gentile and that the Gospel would be preached to all the nations was something that the Lord foreknew, but only revealed in fullness at the coming of Christ. These things were known by God, from all eternity, but only given partial and shadowy announcement in the Words of Old Testament Prophets.

The Infinity of God and Omniscience

The Baptist Confession of 1689 gives us one of the most profound summaries of the Doctrine of God. That summary contains two very important observations about the Infinity of God.

Beginning with these words:

"The Lord our God is but one only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of himself, infinite in being and perfection..."

The confession goes on to say that

(1) God is in "every way infinite" and that (2) his knowledge is "infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain."

To speak of God as in *every way Infinite*, is to confess what the whole testimony of Scripture assumes from **Genesis** to **Revelation**. When Sarah doubted that she would bear a son, the Lord reminded Abraham, "**Is anything too hard for Jehovah?**" (**Genesis 18:13-14**).

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the eternally existing God Who, by His Being, defines what Infinite Attributes are. This is assumed repeatedly by the writers of Holy Scripture. Jeremiah prayed, "**Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you**" (**Jeremiah 32:17**).

If we are to love God with our minds, the logical route that we must take starts with the Infinity of God, and moves to think of Him as infinite in Holiness, Wisdom, Freedom, and Power. He is without the constraint of limitation. In this, He is unique; there are no angels or men who can say the same. That is the God of Scripture. If He is Infinite in all things, this is true of His Knowledge as well. To speak of God as something less than Omniscient, is to deny His God-ness, for His God-ness includes all things that God is, and infinitely so. Thus to speak of a "god," who does not *know* all things, is to substitute a false god for the True and Living God as revealed in Creation and in the Scriptures. It is the same error that the Apostle Paul attributes to the pagan world (**Romans 1:18-20**). Men had denied the eternal Power and Divine Nature of God and created for themselves "gods" of their own choosing.

These "Invisible Qualities" of our God (and that includes His Knowledge) have been clearly seen since the creation of the world. We must have a verbal Revelation to know the Gospel. It must be proclaimed and is essential in the salvation of sinners. But Creation, and God's Stamp upon His creatures, as well as the Scriptures, teach us that God exists, and that He is Infinite in Knowledge, in Presence, and in Power.

Happily, Article II of *The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 Edition* is very clear on the Omniscience of God.

"God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures."[\[12\]](#)

To deny these things is to do what the pagan world did long ago. It is to substitute a "god" of our making (a "god" after the likeness of man, who has limited knowledge) and thus become idolaters. "Evangelical" credentials, by the ballot of "evangelical" Church bodies, mean nothing. To deny the Omniscience of God is to depart from Faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to proclaim a "god" with limitations who can never be the true and living God of the Scriptures. He knows all things, and knowing the beginning from the end, is able to accomplish all of His most Holy Will.

Notes:

¹ Edward E. Plowman, "What does God Know?" *WORLD*, 17 July 1999.

² *Ibid.*

³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1997), 1:207.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹¹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), 87.

¹² *The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 Edition* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2000), Article II.