

Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger.
The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God.
Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

John Sanders.
The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence.
Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

Reviewed by David L. Paulsen and Matthew G. Fisher

Throughout most of the Christian era, the dominant view of God has been that he is all-determining and all-controlling. Richard Rice gives a concise definition of this view:

This traditional, or conventional, view emphasizes God's sovereignty, majesty and glory. God's will is the final explanation for all that happens; God's glory is the ultimate purpose that all creation serves. In his infinite power, God brought the world into existence in order to fulfill his purposes and display his glory. Since his sovereign will is irresistible, whatever he dictates comes to pass and every event plays its role in his grand design. Nothing can thwart or hinder the accomplishment of his purposes. God's relation to the world is thus one of mastery and control. (11)

This understanding of God has been widely challenged in the last quarter of the twentieth century by a group of Christian theologians and philosophers who have proposed an alternative to the conventional view. The critique and the positive proposal offered is now a recognized movement in Christian theology known variously as free will theism or openness theology. Expositions, defenses, and critiques of this new movement abound on the contemporary theological landscape in the form of journal articles, academic colloquia, and full-length books, including the two books reviewed here.

The Openness of God is coauthored by five men considered by many to be the prime movers of openness theology: Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. Together they offer a concise and accessible introductory overview and defense of the concept. Sanders's *The God Who Risks* is a much more focused approach to openness thought, setting out what he calls a "risk" model of providence. Both

books are marked by admirable scholarship; both offer ideas that bear scrutiny, whether by theologians, philosophers, or interested Christian lay people. Both books offer an understanding of God that resonates closely with that of Latter-day Saints. We, especially, should acquaint ourselves with and ponder the view of God these books advance and consider the light they may shed on what may be regarded as the Hellenic origins of the Great Apostasy.

The Openness of God

As the subtitle, *A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, indicates, openness theology challenges the conventional Christian understanding of God. The five authors of *Openness* designed the book to read like a “five-course dinner prepared by five chefs” (10). First, Richard Rice presents a biblical case for the openness of God. Then John Sanders provides a historical account of how the traditional view of God emerged and became entrenched, showing that it was deeply impacted by neo-Platonic philosophy. Next, Clark Pinnock presents a theological model for the open view of God, which is followed by William Hasker’s philosophical defense of the model. David Basinger concludes by delineating some of the practical implications of the model for Christian life and devotion (10). We will review separately each of these five perspectives on openness theology.

Biblical Support for a New Perspective: Richard Rice. Richard Rice begins by laying out the traditional view of God, which emphasizes God’s impassibility and immutability. “God is not affected by any outside influence when he decides something, particularly not by human input” (12). He never changes, and “God’s plans or intentions also appear changeless” (14).

Rice’s treatment of the traditional portrait of God is profoundly relevant because it presents a fundamental contradiction to conventional Christian worship practices. It would appear that God cannot be both impassible and immutable while at the same time engaging in loving, responsive give-and-take relationships with his human creations. We live our devotional lives in a way that presupposes a loving God who is involved in our daily activities. We plead with him and include him in our daily decisions; we interact with him as if our input were significant. Such a dynamic would not be possible were God impassible and immutable.

Appealing to biblical examples, Rice effectively mounts the openness challenge against the conventional model, pointing out two biblical convictions that underlie the “open” conception of God. The first is that “love is the most important quality we attribute to God”; the second is that “love is more than care and commitment; it involves being sensitive and responsive as well” (15). He explains:

These convictions lead the contributors to this book to think of God's relation to the world in dynamic rather than static terms. This conclusion has important consequences. For one thing, it means that God interacts with his creatures. Not only does he influence them, but they also exert an influence on him. As a result, the course of history is not the product of divine action alone. God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too. (15–16)

At the outset of this section, Rice acknowledges that “nearly all of the biblical descriptions of God fall within the broad designation of ‘metaphor’” (17) and warns against a sharp division between literal and figurative theistic language. Many Christians make the mistake of dismissing metaphoric language in the Bible as mere anthropomorphisms, not closely related to the reality of God's nature or character. Rice maintains that many metaphors have a close resemblance to reality: “They are closer, so to speak, to the intended object—and they play a more prominent role within the overall biblical account of God” (17). Like openness theology, the Latter-day Saint tradition parts company with conventional Christianity with regard to the understanding of metaphorical and anthropomorphic language in scripture. While not all scriptural metaphor should be taken literally, it does, no doubt, bear closer on reality than conventional Christianity will admit.

Rice traces the Old Testament narrative, calling on the works of Terence E. Fretheim to explore some neglected themes in Hebrew scripture that seem to support an open view of God. The first of these passages concerns the wide range of emotions attributed to God throughout the Old Testament. Rice contends that one of the most telling descriptions of God's inner life involves his interaction with Israel: “The Hebrew prophets speak of God in familial terms, drawing on the relations of parent and child, husband and wife” (23). By way of illustration, Rice points to Hosea's metaphor of Israel as the unfaithful wife of God: “This powerful poem tracks a succession of intense feelings, from jealousy and anger to hope and joy,” Rice states. “God's response to Israel runs the same gamut of emotion a betrayed husband would feel, with the significant exception that God longs for reconciliation beyond rejection”(23).

Next, Rice introduces the reader to the idea of divine repentance. Simply put, this is the idea that God can and does change his mind or his course of action, an essential tenet for anyone who subscribes to a theology of openness. For Rice, God's plans “are not ironclad decrees that fix the course of events and preclude all possible variation. For God to will something, therefore, does not make its occurrence inevitable. Factors can arise

that hinder or prevent its realization. Consequently, God may reformulate his plans, or alter his intentions, in response to developments” (26). Rice appeals to various Old Testament passages to support this idea. He cites Jonah’s mission to Nineveh as the most familiar example. Jonah warned the people of Nineveh of God’s threat to overturn the city; in response, the people prayed and fasted. “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10, New International Version). In yet many other instances in the Old Testament where God considers new developments, he changes his course of action, or as Rice puts it, “repents” (26). The question is not whether such scriptural accounts exist but rather whether such instances should be taken as literal or figurative.

Rice confidently proclaims, “I believe the New Testament extends and intensifies the dynamic portrait of God we found in the Old [Testament]. It, too, supports the open view of God” (39). He cites the incarnation of Jesus as the best example. “The incarnation reveals many things about the character of God. The fact that God chose to express himself through a medium of a human life suggests that God’s experience has something in common with certain aspects of human experience” (39). Further, “it would therefore seem that God, like us, is personal existence. If so, then God enjoys relationships, has feelings, makes decisions, formulates plans and acts to fulfill them” (39).

Rice is careful not to ignore the many biblical passages that seem to call into question the theory of divine openness, such as the idea of divine changelessness. “The notion that God is changeless is perfectly compatible with the open view of God. In fact, it is just as important to this position as to the conventional alternative,” Rice argues. “The difference between them is not that one views God as changeless while the other doesn’t. The difference is that everything about God must be changeless for the traditional view, whereas the open view sees God as both changeless and changeable” (48). He continues, “When we distinguish between God’s unchanging nature and his dynamic experience, we can make sense of a wide range of biblical evidence. . . . We do not have to dismiss them as ‘anthropomorphisms’ or ‘anthropopathisms,’ which have no application to his real life” (48–49). He concludes that “the open view of God does justice to a broad spectrum of biblical evidence and allows for a natural reading of the Bible” (49).

Historical Considerations: John Sanders. John Sanders approaches the concept of God from a historical perspective. He offers an excellent summary and treatment of the historical figures and philosophies that influenced the developing Christian concept of God and ultimately led to

the traditional model. He begins by documenting how “the Greek metaphysical system ‘boxed up’ the God described in the Bible and the tremendous impact this has had in shaping the Christian understandings of the nature of God, the Trinity, election, sin, grace, the covenant, the sovereignty of God, prayer, salvation and the incarnation” (60). Sanders continues:

While Greek philosophy did not reject religion, . . . it did seek to purify it by submitting it to the constraints of an abstract and impersonal notion of ultimate reality. Utilizing the methods of natural theology, philosophers deduced their understanding of deity from the concept of ‘perfection’ since nothing less than perfection would be appropriate for God. (61)

Because God is perfect, Plato argued, change is impossible; if he changes at all, he can change only for the worse.¹

Like Plato, Aristotle also influenced the conventional Christian concept of deity. He introduced the concept of the “unmoved mover,” a concept brought about through seeking the highest form of being in the universe that causes all else to move, “a substance which is eternal and unmovable . . . without parts and indivisible . . . impassive and unalterable” (66). Sanders concludes, “Though this God may not be religiously satisfying, several aspects of Aristotle’s unmoved mover have found their way into the Christian tradition” (66).

Sanders names Philo of Alexandria as the individual most responsible for the subsequent marriage of Christian thought with Greek philosophy. “Philo rejects or significantly modifies Hellenistic formulations in defense of the biblical revelation. Nevertheless, in the end philosophical presuppositions are placed over the God described in the Bible and so serve as the preunderstanding that guided his reading of Scripture” (69). From Philo begins a whole chain of early Church Fathers who struggled to appropriate Greek philosophy within Christianity. Sanders gives a helpful condensed account of the influence of such figures as Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, and Clement. The Church Fathers did not have an easy task; Greek philosophy was such a prominent part of the intellectual landscape of the time that it was difficult indeed to control the confluence of Greek and Christian thought. Sanders quotes H. P. Owen: “So far as the Western world is concerned theism has a double origin: the Bible and Greek philosophy” (72). Sanders adds, “Despite different attitudes taken by the fathers toward philosophy, the influence of Greek philosophical notions of God is universal, even among those who ‘repudiate’ philosophy” (72).

Sanders makes sure not to pass lightly over Augustine, the last of the Church Fathers whose influence on conventional Christian theology cannot be understated. Augustine espoused the traditional list of God’s

attributes: “self-sufficient, impassible, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, timeless, ineffable, and simple” (80). Of Augustine, Sanders says this:

The neo-Platonic notions of God as creative force rather than one who fashions the world, the immutability of ultimate reality, seeking the truth by turning inward into our souls, and evil understood as a lack of goodness (connected to mutability and finitude) all vied with Augustine’s biblical sensibilities for preeminence in his thinking. (80)

Sanders concludes that while “the tradition, with good intentions, employed immutability and impassibility in order to protect God’s freedom, they were taken too far and left no room for speaking of divine openness where God, in vulnerability, binds himself to others in love” (100).

Systematic Theology: Clark Pinnock. In the third chapter, Clark H. Pinnock’s design is to “propose a more biblical and coherent doctrine of God” (101). He wants to overcome any distortions caused by “excessive Hellenization” and allow biblical teachings to operate more normatively. His aim is “to do greater justice to mutuality and relationality in both the triune God and the God-human covenant” (101).

Pinnock begins by emphasizing the absolute essentiality of a proper concept of God. He expresses his concern that “unless the portrait of God is compelling, the credibility of belief in God is bound to decline” (101). His next move is to construct a systematic theology that will leave us with a religiously compelling, yet biblically faithful, portrait of God. It bears mentioning that while Latter-day Saints do not claim to have a systematized theology, we certainly resonate with Pinnock’s insistence on understanding the correct nature of God. Joseph Smith taught that “it is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God.”²

The first thing to keep in mind, according to Pinnock, is that we are not dealing with a God who, as theologians and philosophers of the past have argued, remains at a safe distance, worrying about his own honor, but rather one who “bares his holy arm and rescues humankind through sharing their distress and affliction. We are not dealing with an unapproachable deity but with God who has a human face and who is not indifferent to us but is deeply involved with us in our need” (102). Pinnock points out that most Christians in practice do not have a problem with acting as if God were open. The problem, he says, “lies more in systematic theology than it does in religious experience. For some reason, when we do theology we lose sight of the openness of God that we experience. There is resistance to conceptualizing it, even though it is existentially familiar” (105). This resistance he blames on tradition: “Theology emphasized one set of divine properties to the neglect of another and disturbed the delicate balance between them” (105). He says it is important to recognize that the Bible defines this balance:

God . . . is both transcendent (that is, self-sufficient, the Creator of the world, ontologically other than creation, sovereign and eternal) and at the same time immanent (that is, present to the world, active within history, involved, relational and temporal). Combining the two, we say that God is so transcendent that he creates room for others to exist and maintains a relationship with them, that God is so powerful as to be able to stoop down and humble himself, that God is so stable and secure as to be able to risk suffering and change. (105)

Pinnock ably and plausibly continues in his task of correcting the balance between transcendence and immanence as he treats the doctrines of the Trinity, the Creation, and God's attributes of power, immutability, impassibility, and knowledge. He sums up, "The open view of God stresses qualities of generosity, sensitivity and vulnerability more than power and control. It allows us to think of God as taking risks. Instead of locating God above and beyond history, it stresses God's activity in history, responding to events as they happen, in order to accomplish his purposes" (125).

A Philosophical Perspective: William Hasker. In his chapter, William Hasker attempts to "provide a philosophical explication of the issues in this discussion—to exhibit the rational coherence of the theology of divine openness and to show where it is superior to competing ways of understanding God and his works" (126). Hasker identifies several of the philosophical malpractices that lead to a skewed concept of deity, including "perfect being" theology. This is the practice of deducing God's attributes from the assumption "that God is an absolutely perfect being—in Anselm's phrase, 'the being than which nothing greater can be conceived'" (131). Hasker does not deny that perfect being theologizing sometimes works well; he even says that the belief that God is perfect is "proper and correct" (131). He goes on, however, to say that "difficulties have arisen because people have been too ready to assume that they can determine, easily and with little effort, what perfection *is* in the case of God—that is, what attributes a perfect being must possess" (132).

Hasker acknowledges that it is out of the question for anyone to "prove" that a particular concept of God is the correct one (154). Yet, a thorough investigation concerning the biblical, historical, and certainly philosophical considerations is not only appropriate but also necessary. Through the course of the chapter, Hasker offers a cursory yet philosophically satisfying treatment of some of the more important issues surrounding the openness theory.

Practical Implications: David Basinger. We think it highly appropriate that *The Openness of God* ends with a chapter concerning the practical implications of the proposed model. Here David Basinger asks how the open model influences our daily life. In particular, he delineates how an

open view of God affects the efficacy of petitionary prayer, the discernment of God's will, the appropriate Christian explanation(s) of evil, the appropriate Christian responses to social problems, and Christian evangelistic obligations.

Petitionary prayer is one of the best examples of the openness model in action. Most Christians pray to God believing that their prayer will in some way have an effect. However, Basinger points out that some Christians—some Calvinists and others sympathetic to the Reformed tradition—affirm what he labels “specific sovereignty,” or the belief that God “has total control over everything in the sense that all and only that which God wants to occur will occur” (156–57). This is not to say that the individual agent lacks the ability to make a free decision; rather, it means that God unilaterally influences the decision-making process so as to ensure that the agent makes the exact decision that God would have him or her make (157). Basinger questions whether such an agent can justifiably maintain that petitionary prayer has an effect on God (158). A significant difference between specific-sovereignty models and the openness model is that proponents of the open view are justified in claiming that “petitionary prayer initiates unilateral divine activity that would not have occurred if we had not utilized our God-given power of choice to request such divine assistance” (160). This position implies that God's plan is open to the extent that our free decisions lend to its unfolding. God does not necessarily ensure that we freely make a given decision, for that would limit our freedom not to make that decision.

Basinger boldly asserts another practical implication of openness theology: “We maintain . . . that God possesses only what has come to be called ‘present knowledge’” (163). This is to say that God knows “all that has occurred in the past and is occurring now. Moreover, God does know all that will follow deterministically from what has occurred, and can, as the ultimate psychoanalyst, predict with great accuracy what we as humans will freely choose to do in various contexts” (163). It follows that God can predict an event with great accuracy, but according to the open model, “God can know only what can be known and that what humans will freely do in the future cannot be known before-hand; hence, God can never know infallibly what will happen in any context involving human freedom” (163). This position seems to place significant emphasis on the free will of the decision-making agent. The open view of God requires that the agent consult God concerning short-term decisions; moreover, it implies that the agent's long-term future is essentially unwritten and open.

The prospect of God's having less than absolute knowledge of the future and the idea that even for God the future is partly unsettled have surely been popular criticisms of the open view. The nature of God's

knowledge is variously conceived even among Latter-day Saints. Some have thought that God increases endlessly in knowledge as well as in glory and dominion. On this point, faithful Latter-day Saints often (and sometimes passionately) disagree. All would no doubt agree, as Joseph Smith clearly taught, that God is eternally self-surpassing in glory, dominion, and kingdom. Some very influential Latter-day Saint thinkers, including Presidents Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff, have affirmed that God is eternally self-surpassing in both knowledge and power. For instance, President Woodruff explained, “God himself is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end.”³ If it is true that God progresses in his knowledge, then he cannot have exhaustive, specific foreknowledge, for this omniscience would logically preclude his acquisition of “new” knowledge.

Other Latter-day Saints, including President Joseph Fielding Smith⁴ and Elder Bruce R. McConkie,⁵ hold to the more traditional view that God’s knowledge, including his foreknowledge of future free contingencies, is exhaustive and complete.⁶ “Despite these differing [Latter-day Saint] views, there is accord on two fundamental issues: (1) God’s foreknowledge does not causally determine human choices, and (2) this knowledge, like God’s power, is maximally efficacious. No event occurs that he has not anticipated [at least as possibility] or not taken into account in his planning.”⁷

Openness thinkers have certainly offered one possible approach to the nature of God’s knowledge that seems to emphasize God’s flexibility in working with free moral agents in a plan that may work itself out in various ways but will unconditionally end in God’s fulfilling all of his purposes and promises.

The God Who Risks

John Sanders continues in the “openness project” by offering a scholarly and accessible treatment of the open model. While the basic architecture is well defined in *The Openness of God*, Sanders goes a step further, offering a book that deals with the theology of providence: *The God Who Risks*. For the purpose of his book, Sanders places all the views of providence under one of two basic models: the “no risk” view and the “risk” view: “Either God does take risks or does not take risks in providentially creating and governing the world. Either God is in some respects conditioned by the creatures he created or he is not conditioned by them” (10).

Sanders approaches the book from two different sides: biblical and theological/philosophical. He does this in an attempt to create a treatment that is true to the two different approaches without creating a hybrid that is ultimately unhelpful to either discipline. He also makes it clear that this

book is not a “general treatise on the doctrine of providence covering all the topics normally examined”; rather, it is an examination of divine providence “through the lens of divine risk taking” (14). While his study is not designed to settle “all the disputed issues,” the reader will find that it offers a model that proclaims a personal God who enters into a genuine give-and-take relationship with his creatures, and while this book is not about the problem of evil, implications can be drawn out of it to help deal with that age-old issue.

The Bible. In propounding an open view of God and a “risk” view of providence, Sanders dedicates two chapters to material from the Old and New Testament that supports a relational view of God involving risk. Admitting that the Old Testament can be read to support a risk-free picture of providence, Sanders nevertheless sets out to show that a better case can be made for divine risk by examining the “nature of the divine project—what God is working toward and how God goes about accomplishing this goal” (39–40). Sanders makes his case by appealing to the Old Testament scriptural narrative, and thus the reader will find that Sanders’s argument deserves deep consideration, especially by those whose reading of the Old Testament has been influenced by traditional pre-understandings.

The open model of providence holds that God has created a world in which his creatures are free to make decisions and guide their lives with their imperfect knowledge and abilities. Within these sometimes non-ideal circumstances, God works for the ultimate success of his goals, and, due to the uncertainty inherent in a world of morally free agents, risk becomes a factor within God’s plan.

A fascinating implication of the open model and the risk view of providence is the idea that God “works with what is available.” Sanders points to the story of baby Moses and his mother’s attempt to keep him safe from the Pharaoh’s decree to kill all baby Hebrew boys: “One Hebrew woman does not want her baby drowned, so she places him in an ‘ark’ and has her daughter stand guard by it. This mother does not ‘leave everything in the hands of God.’ Indeed she takes active steps to ensure the well-being of her child” (56). The Pharaoh’s daughter, unlike her father, takes pity on the boy. She hires the boy’s mother to nurse him and takes him into her own home to raise him as her son (56). By the end of the narrative, it becomes clear that God did not script the role of each of these women; rather, he made use of their freely chosen actions in order to bring about deliverance. Sanders writes, “Consequently, God takes a risk, since these people could have failed—they could have acted differently and let the boy die. If so, God would have to find another means of liberating his people and the story of Exodus would be different from what it is” (56–57).

Again Sanders makes it reasonably clear that the relationship God has chosen to share with his creatures is one of interaction and reciprocal love: “It is a world in which he grants integrity to his creatures and singles out human beings for a special relationship involving genuine give-and-take dynamics” (88). The Old Testament sustains other significant implications of his model. He treats the topics of divine repentance, divine wrath, and divine mercy while describing a God who loves enough to share responsibility in his plan and sovereign enough to ensure that his plan will prevail:

The type of relationship that God offers his people is not one of control and domination but rather one of powerful love and vulnerability. God establishes the relationship in such a way that he risks the possibility of rejection. . . . The Old Testament reveals God’s actions and God’s incredible persistence in seeking to bring his project to fruition. (89)

Divine Relationality in the Christian Tradition. Sanders goes beyond the biblical proof regarding his model and next appeals to the Christian tradition for support. He writes, “The notion that God enters into reciprocal give-and-take relations with us and genuinely responds to our prayers permeates the sermons, prayers and devotional literature of Christians throughout the ages” (140). As we saw in his treatment of historical considerations in *The Openness of God*, Sanders clearly understands that, during the time of the early Church Fathers, the Christian tradition gave way to many nonbiblical teachings that conflict with Sanders’s present model of providence. He incorporates this conflict into his argument this way:

Since certain aspects of theological tradition challenge my proposal, I shall address it to see whether there are elements in it that may be retrieved toward the establishment of relational theism. I will argue that the model of providence defended here finds agreement with the intentions and functions, though not always the material content, of the theological tradition. (141)

He next skips ahead to address the presence of divine risk theology in modern thought:

Modern theology has witnessed a remarkable reexamination of the divine-human relationship as well as of the attributes of God. The contemporary scene manifests a wide spectrum of views on the subject. On the one hand are those who deny that we can have a personal relationship with God at all. Others claim that though we can have a relationship, it cannot be reciprocal. Next are those who maintain that God is necessarily dependent on creatures for what God wants to achieve. Finally, some affirm that God freely enters into reciprocal relations with us. (158)

In the chapter “Risk and Divine Character,” Sanders explores certain attributes of God in relation to the concept of divine risk taking: “God is

sovereign over his sovereignty and so did not have to create a world in which humans have the freedom to enter into a personal relationship of love with himself. God sovereignly created the conditions of all creaturely working: God alone establishes the rules of the game” (170).

Love is the guiding force behind God’s plan: “One of the central, if not *the central*, aims of the creation was to produce significant others who could experience the divine love and reciprocate that love both to God and to other creatures” (176; italics in original). It is in God’s loving his creatures enough to give them space to freely participate in fellowship with him that he allows for an element of risk in his plan. “God has demonstrated in history that he has all the wisdom necessary to work with the sort of world he decided to create, despite the fact that things do not always go as God desires (for example, Israel’s defection),” Sanders believes. “The divine wisdom is not defined by our standard of success but by the way God works to bring about the fruition of his project” (181–82). In establishing such relations, God indeed takes risks, but this risking must be understood within the framework of the project God has undertaken. It is not risk for risk’s sake but the quest for loving, faithful, and free relationships with the creatures (206).

Applications to the Christian Life. In “Applications to the Christian Life,” the last chapter of *The God Who Risks*, Sanders evaluates his model by assessing the practical implications of a risk view of providence and, more specifically, the implications of the general view of sovereignty. Sin is the first topic he takes up. He reminds the reader:

According to general sovereignty God does not control every single detail that occurs. Some things happen that God does not want to happen but permits to occur. God takes a risk in creating the sort of world in which he desires a relationship of love but love cannot be forced. This relational, or fellowship, model produces an understanding of sin, election, grace and salvation that is quite different from the manipulative model [that is, specific sovereignty]. (243)

At the outset of this book, Sanders acknowledges that although this theory cannot solve the problem of evil entirely, it does allow the reader to place the issue in the proper context of God’s project. In dealing with this issue, many Christians appeal to what is known as the “freewill defense.” Sanders, going one step further, offers what he refers to as the “logic-of-love defense”:

God has established the structures within which the divine project is possible. God made human beings capable of responding to the divine love with love of their own. God is solely responsible for bringing this possibility about, yet what God desires is a reciprocal relationship of love.

Love is vulnerable and does not force itself on the beloved. Thus there is the risk that the beloved may not want to reciprocate love. (257–58)

Thus “the structure of love coupled with general sovereignty yields the conclusion that there is gratuitous evil. Horrible events happen that God does not specifically want to occur. This was a risk God took in establishing these structures” (267–68).

Sanders concludes by reminding the reader of the inherent hope and freedom this model offers. He suggests that God’s will is not a specific blueprint that we are obligated to follow. Further, it is not “a list of activities regarding vocation, marriage and the like. Rather it is God’s desire that we become a lover of God and others as was exemplified in God’s way in Jesus” (276). According to Sanders’s model, God’s will for us resides in personal and genuine give-and-take relationships with him. These relationships allow for freedom on both ends and require genuine and reciprocated love. The price for this relationship is risk.

Conclusion

Sanders’s study has examined the biblical, historical, philosophical, and practical issues surrounding the risk view of providence and the open view of God. Along with the four other authors of *The Openness of God*, he offers this view as an intelligible alternative to other nonrisk or traditional views of providence. This study of God’s openness should be of special import to Latter-day Saint readers, for the Latter-day Saint tradition also rejects many absolute elements in the classical view of God and providence (immutable, impassible, timeless, ineffable, simple, invisible, all-controlling, completely transcendent). The Latter-day Saint portrait of God as found in scripture reflects a loving, sensitive, responsive, and concerned God who suffers when his children turn from him and is elated when they seek his fellowship. We read about a God who has endowed his children with significant freedom that allows for free choices, both good and bad. This, too, is how God is understood in openness thought.

Much has been written concerning the breadth and depth of the dividing Latter-day Saint and conventional Christian theologies and in many cases the divide is, indeed, both wide and deep. However, in dealing with God’s relationship with his creatures and his providential project, the openness model as offered in both of these exceptional books enjoys striking similarity with the Latter-day Saint view of divine relations and providence.

Many scholars, it seems, were interested in the spirit of the project taken up by Steven E. Robinson and Craig L. Blomberg in *How Wide the*

Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation.⁸ Many have recognized the value of engaging in these types of mutually beneficial conversations. In a cordial letter to David Paulsen, Clark H. Pinnock writes:

You have got me interested in the Mormon-evangelical dialogue further to *How Wide the Divide* (ch 2–3). Are we (in your opinion) co-belligerents as it were in the struggle against pagan influences in classical theism? Can we benefit each other? My sense is that we are closer to each other than process theists are to either of us. . . . Clearly we have much in common. I have always hoped with respect to your faith that Mormon thinking might draw closer to Christian thinking (or ours to yours) and not drift farther away.⁹

It is in this spirit that these books should be read. Latter-day Saints do in fact have much in common with the views offered in these two pieces, and we can benefit a great deal by carefully studying and contemplating them.

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1. Plato, Republic 381, in *Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937).

2. King Follett Discourse, Nauvoo, Ill., April 7, 1844, in *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 295.

3. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 6:120, December 6, 1857.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, comp., *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:6–7.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” *1980 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), 75.

6. Very recently, Elder Neal A. Maxwell has suggested that God exists outside of time. “God lives in an eternal now where the past, present, and future are constantly before him (see D&C 130:7).” Neal A. Maxwell, “Care for the Life of the Soul,” *Ensign* 33 (May 2003): 70.

7. David L. Paulsen, “Omnipotence of God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1030.

8. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

9. Clark H. Pinnock to David Paulsen, personal letter, August 9, 1999.