

Being A Brief Treatise on the Most Glorious Doctrine of Divine Providence, With Due
Consideration Given to the Stark Contrast Between the So-Called Relational Theism of
John Sanders and the Reformed, Orthodox, and Apostolic Teaching of Bruce Ware, With
Most Careful and Earnest Exposition on the Implications of these Weighty Matters in the
Life of the Covenant People of God

by Tim Berglund

Evaluated by D.G. Tomlinson, M.Div.

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Student ID #61534

Box #79

In *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* and *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*, authors John Sanders and Bruce Ware present starkly different conceptions of Christian theism. Sanders is motivated by a commitment to libertarian human freedom and a the notion that give-and-take interaction is an essential characteristic of authentic relationships; as such, he proposes modifications to the classical doctrine of God to allow for God's ignorance of future events. Ware seeks to systematize the relevant Scriptures with a model of the human will and a view of divine immutability that allow for authentic relationships between God and human beings while preserving a doctrine of meticulous providence.

Sanders and Ware In Brief Summary

Sanders seeks an approach that is exegetical rather than systematic or philosophical, claiming that his commitment to libertarian freedom is not a controlling belief, but instead one derived from neutral exegesis.¹ (He is elsewhere parenthetically disapproving of “philosophy” over against Scripture.²) To his point, his treatment of some OT and NT texts does resolve some hermeneutical tension. The golden calf narrative of Exodus 32-34 is easily understood in terms of his “relational theism,” with Moses conversing with an indignant Yahweh about the idolatry of the Hebrews, and eventually prevailing upon the Deity to honor the previous covenant with Abraham and not blot the Hebrews out of existence.³ Separately, Sanders’ view of predictive prophecy (that it is not truly predictive) relieves the pressure of the often confounding “apostolic hermeneutic” in Mt. 2:15: Matthew is only applying Hos. 11:1 in an allegorical or typological way, since it never could have had any predictive intent to begin with. Interpreters need not be

¹ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 222.

² Note the brief but pregnant asides in Sanders, pp. 51, 67, 69, and 213.

³ *Ibid.*, 63-66.

troubled with how Hosea might possibly have intended his words to mean anything about Jesus, since they *a priori* could not have made any predictions about future events.

Sanders seeks to build a theology that is more biblical than systematic, but he does not avoid all philosophical or systematic discussion in the process. He engages in some discussion of the nature of human freedom, arguing that the libertarian model—that an action is free only if the actor could have chosen otherwise⁴—comports best with the biblical evidence, and is well-supported by the theological and philosophical tradition.⁵ He also argues, quoting W. H. Vanstone, that “love is an activity for the sake of another that does not control the other,” and that “lovers grant the beloved a power over themselves.”⁶ Thus a God who is himself love must allow for reciprocal relationships and openness to future events. Moreover, he states or implies on perhaps dozens of occasions that a “genuine,”⁷ “real,”⁸ or “true”⁹ relationship with God will require some kind of mutual reciprocity or give-and-take¹⁰ of the kind seen in the face reading of Exodus 32-34.

Relational theism is also presented as being more consistent with the way believers naturally relate to God, being exculpatory of the divine character in a world of evil and suffering, and having axiological advantage over the classical model. Sanders notes that prayer seems to presuppose a system of “give-and-take dialog” and “genuine response.”¹¹ There can be no argument that the linguistic forms of impetratory prayer—and probably the mental states that underlie it—appear to proceed as if under this assumption. More importantly, Sanders proposes relational theism as a helpful framework for understanding—if not completely eliminating—the

⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁵ Ibid., 142-146.

⁶ Ibid., 176-177.

⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁹ Ibid., 161.

¹⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹¹ Ibid., 195.

problem of evil. Evil and suffering are not things God intends to happen, but are necessary risks he has taken given the nature of his loving, authentically relational project with his creatures.¹² It is also noteworthy that Sanders presents his model as being axiologically advantaged with respect to classical theism, asking rhetorically “what is more magnificent about” a God of sheer omnipotence who “can run a world of exhaustively controlled beings” over against the omniscient God who resourcefully responds to changing and unforeseen circumstances.¹³ Clearly Sanders’ God is presented as a more glorious Deity.

Ware presents an exegetically informed argument that is organized according to theological and philosophical categories. He attempts to assign controlling authority to the biblical material addressing the nature of God, rather than to the dubious (to him) inference of the libertarian nature of human freedom.¹⁴ He concludes that God’s control of all things “extends from the large and the small, both to all that is good and all that is evil, and it encompasses occurrences in nature as well as the free choices and actions of people.”¹⁵ Against the argument that scripture presupposes libertarian freedom, he adduces Luke 6:43-45 in support of the idea that “our wills function, according to Jesus, as agents of our hearts.”¹⁶ We do not possess freedom of indifference, or the freedom always to choose otherwise than we do, but “freedom of inclination,” or freedom to choose according to the strongest net inclination of our hearts at the moment.¹⁷ Thus can Ware make a strong link between character and behavior, which he claims better comports with the biblical witness.¹⁸

¹² Ibid., 257-268. See also pp. 57, 83, 93, 160, 171, and 202 for other treatments of evil and Relational theism. Note especially the comments in pp. 214, 216, and 261-263 on the troublesome problem of gratuitous evil.

¹³ Ibid., 215.

¹⁴ Bruce Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 67.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67. Supporting biblical citations are given in the original text. They are omitted here for readability.

¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 81.

Having arrived exegetically at the conclusions of meticulous sovereignty and the “freedom of inclination” model of the will, Ware proceeds to provide some philosophical tools with which to reconcile the difficult (and time-worn) tensions between the two categories. First he explains the view of “compatibilist middle knowledge,” in which God ordains the free choices of his volitional creatures by ordaining the circumstances that give rise to those choices through the divinely predictable operation of the human will.¹⁹ Second, Ware makes critical clarifications to the oft-distorted doctrine of divine immutability. Immutability for Ware is not a thoroughgoing state of divine inertia, but rather is limited onto to God’s ontological or ethical qualities.²⁰ God can and does change his attitude or position with respect to his creatures—not least when repentant sinners pass from being under God’s wrath to being adopted as his sons.²¹

Ware also seeks to preserve real and authentic Divine-human relationships, avoiding any stark neo-Platonic theologies with their impassible, un-relatable gods. He attempts to address seriously the biblical witness to God’s emotional life, and does not dismiss it as mere anthropomorphic language incompatible with an impassible divine nature.²² To accomplish this, he introduces the idea of *omnitemporality*, in which God is present in time in a manner similar to his omnipresence in space.²³ Together with the quality of relational mutability, omnitemporality is offered as a part of a philosophical framework to accommodate genuine relationship with God in the context of compatibilist freedom and meticulous providence.

Sanders and Ware In Contrast

¹⁹ Ibid., 113-114. This differs from classical Molinism, which affirms libertarian freedom (112). Ware’s version retains his compatibilist “freedom of inclination.”

²⁰ Ibid., 140-141.

²¹ Ibid., 142.

²² Ibid., 146.

²³ Ibid., 136.

Given their dramatically different conclusions, it should come as no surprise that Sanders and Ware choose very different starting points for their theologies. Sanders begins with anthropology, or at least at the nexus of anthropology and theology proper, by considering first the nature of the divine-human relationship.²⁴ Through this lens, he concludes that libertarian freedom must be an accurate account of the nature of the human will, then proceeds to find it further supported in the biblical text. Ware, on the other hand, begins with theology proper. He says, “we must listen to God’s self-revelation to learn both the nature of his sovereignty and the nature of the volitional capacities we have as human beings.”²⁵ Sanders is listening to “God’s self-revelation” also, but he builds a very different foundation: that of the divine-human relationship. In Sanders’ defense, our relationship to God might seem to have primacy on existential grounds—after all, it precisely this relationship which we experience, not God in his essence, which would be fatal—but this approach is unlikely to yield a faithful methodology when wielded as the open theist wields it. More likely, given God’s passion for his own glory—and God’s nature as the supreme object of value in the universe²⁶—a theology that begins with God himself will bring us closer to the truth.

As a casual observer of the Open Theism debate in recent years, I had perceived that it was primarily an exegetical debate over the meaning of the OT “repentance” texts, in which God was said to change his mind or regret past courses of action. Sanders’ book has helped to refine my formerly crass view of the discussion. Certainly an understanding of the “repentance” texts is key to resolving the conflict, but now the methodological differences between Sanders and Ware are more obvious to me: Sanders misreads these passages because he begins with them before developing a properly informed doctrine of God. Knowing *a priori* as we do the enduring

²⁴ Sanders, 222.

²⁵ Ware, 67.

²⁶ A concise summary of this biblically pervasive theme may be found in Is. 42:8.

difficulty of the debate over the freedom of the will and the nature of divine sovereignty, Sanders' method seems ill-conceived and unlikely to yield true results.

Both Sanders and Ware are quick to reject a particular caricature of the doctrine of immutability: that God is utterly impassible and absolute incapable of any change in any way. Sanders sees this primarily as an innovation introduced by Augustine²⁷ and later reinforced by Aquinas.²⁸ Ware does not elaborate on its origins, but finds shades of it in Berkhof's view of the eternity of God.²⁹ Where Sanders replaces the extreme, Platonic view of ultimate impassibility with an uncertain deity who is forced frequently to shoot from the hip, Ware proposes a modified doctrine of immutability that distinguishes between God's ontological, ethical, and relational qualities in such a way as to preserve the orthodox doctrine of God without admitting to the problems that plague the Platonic or Thomistic doctrines.³⁰ Prior to engaging these ideas, I knew that there were problems with the idea of an eternal, immutable God relating to a temporal, mutable creation, but I had not arrived at a satisfactory solution to the problem (and I was not particularly inclined to reject immutability altogether). Ware's proposal has informed my theology to the point that I can say that I now embrace his view.

It is clear by Sanders' frequent mentions of the problem of evil and his specific treatment of the issue in the penultimate chapter that he intends relational theism to function as theodicy to one degree or another. Also his use of terms like "domineering,"³¹ "domination,"³² and "manipulating"³³ with regard to the divine influence on the human will suggest that he sees something unbecoming about a God who freely and immutably ordains all things that come to

²⁷ Sanders, 147-151.

²⁸ Ibid., 152-153.

²⁹ Ware, 135.

³⁰ Ibid., 140-147.

³¹ Sanders, 39. Also on 213.

³² Ibid., 156.

³³ Ibid., 215.

pass—regardless of Sanders’ claims of the priority he places on exegesis over philosophical preunderstanding. Ware, on the other hand, straightforwardly embraces a definition of providence that seems to tread uncautiously over the problem of evil and any aesthetic that values absolute human liberty.³⁴ Sanders’ sensitivity is troubling in that it fails to raise objections anticipated and answered by biblical authors when addressing similar themes. When speaking of the divine election of Israel (and very likely applying this notion to the election of believers in Christ), the apostle Paul writes, “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”³⁵ Similarly, Ware points out that Isa. 47:7 seems rather unconcerned that the reader might take offense at the idea that God is in some sense—not even a qualified sense, according to this verse—responsible for “calamity.” “If we’re interested in removing God from control of the evil that happens in our world,” Ware says, “evidently God does not share this concern.”³⁶ Indeed, the biblical material does not seem to share Sanders’ sensitivity to the idea of a God who may ordain suffering.

Finally, Ware seems more comfortable than Sanders with the fact that he is doing systematic theology. As documented above, Sanders seems to harbor some bias against philosophy and systematics, perhaps preferring to see himself as a biblical theologian correcting the excesses of the philosophically fettered systematians of yore. Sanders is, in fact, addressing systematic and philosophical concerns frequently, and he does a fairly thorough job at it, but the reader is left with the impression that he would rather not be pushed into it. Ware begins with an enthusiastically systematic treatment of providence and continues through the book without apparent embarrassment. This contrast is particularly ironic, since Sanders’ view of love—which

³⁴ Ware, 17-18.

³⁵ Romans 9:19-20 (ESV). Sanders’ suggestion that the ensuing potter metaphor “highlight[s] God’s creativity...and ongoing involvement in the project,” rather than supporting exhaustive sovereignty, does not seem to be a recommended reading of the text.

³⁶ Ware, 72.

forms one half of his justification for reading the problematic OT texts the way he does, and forming his relational theism on that basis—is only ever justified philosophically, and never exegetically.³⁷ Even without Sanders’ dubious definition of love (justified on dubious grounds, given his methodological preferences), Ware’s more consistent and more thoroughly embraced methodology would seem to be recommended.

Application to Life and Ministry

As dramatically divergent conceptions of theism, Sanders’ relational view and Ware’s slightly modified classical view should be expected to yield different applications in the Christian life. Most obviously, the counsel we give to suffering people will change. Our prayer lives should be expected to differ in particular ways, although not noticeably in all areas. Also, while our liturgy may not change overtly, the propositional content of our worship will necessarily be different under the two systems.

Evil and suffering remain perhaps the greatest intellectual challenge to the Christian faith, and are certainly the greatest existential challenge faced by believers seeking to trust a good God for his wise providential care over their sometimes difficult lives. Unlike naturalists, we are not a people who stare into an unknowing, unfeeling, uncaring universe where chance arrangements of matter and energy conspire to cause us profound, life-altering pain. The relational theist counselor, however, is not far off from this predicament when attempting to give comfort to the hurting: she cannot know with any certainty whether God will endow the afflicted’s circumstances with any redeeming purpose.³⁸ Certainly she knows God didn’t *intend* for the painful circumstances to obtain, and God *may* be trying to bring good out of evil in the situation, but his success cannot be assured. It is entirely possible that the counseled soul has simply

³⁷ Sanders, 176-177. No exegetical support for this view is known to be presented *The God Who Risks*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

suffered a gratuitous evil for which God intended no redeeming purpose and can bring no such redemption about. As difficult as it is for the classical theist to comprehend that a loving, wise, and good God may ordain unspeakable tragedies in his life, the afflicted person is left to ponder which is preferable: tearful, white-knuckled trust in the unsearchable wisdom and benevolence of the God who, though he slay us, yet will we hope in him;³⁹ or a slack-jawed, terrified gaze into the utterly unredeemed actions of irresistibly free (and unremittingly depraved) moral agents. It has already been acknowledged that the former position is difficult, but our sympathies truly must be reserved for the defenders and practitioners of the latter. To be sure, we do not do theology backwards, affirming that option as true which provides us most comfort, but clearly relational theism is bereft of the ability to minister meaningfully to broken souls.

The prayer of the relational theist is a fundamentally different thing from that of the classical theist. Prayers of praise or adoration may seem similar—although their content would necessarily diverge in places—but impetratory or intercessory prayer in the relational scheme becomes an exercise in the mere persuasion of the Deity. The relational God explicitly values our input on human affairs as would one seeking counsel, and our prayers constitute a conversation with him whose end is his determination of the heretofore un-decreed order of events.⁴⁰ While this may be presented by its proponents as the only path to authentic relationship or the only means of preserving a cherished commitment to libertarian freedom, it ought bring the self-consciously ignorant, fallible, decadent, and compromised creature no comfort to know that his input is required of the Almighty in order to maximize the good in the creation as the time line is unfolded. In contrast, the classical theist's prayer can be objectively known to be a part of the unfolding of God's infinitely wise and benevolent counsel which he himself has freely decreed

³⁹ Job 13:15 (ESV)

⁴⁰ Sanders, 272.

from all eternity. The classical theist enjoys the unmerited cosmic privilege of participation through prayer in the outworking of God's eternal decree. A seat at God's providential table may seem validating or somehow more egalitarian than the less exalted position offered to the creature by classical theism, but this ostensible privilege is an occasion for horror, not flattery. All but the most obstreperous should be content to examine just a few of their failures as active volitional agents in support of this conclusion. We are not qualified to assist God in his government.

It is not clear that a relational theist's liturgy would differ from that of a classical theist, at least not within the scope of broader evangelical worship. (This in itself may be an indictment of the evangelical worship milieu; one might reasonably expect theologically informed worship to change in proportion to differences in theology, and surely Sanders' theological innovations are perceptible.) Even if look, feel, and form were constant, however, content would not be. To wit, the relational theist has a difficult time praising God for any events whatsoever, as it is never clear which events God has approved of and which he has not. Even events which may seem obviously pleasing to God (the birth of a healthy baby to a loving family, a positive career change, the healing of a disease) may, in fact, turn out to be instrumentally bad things which God might come to regret in the future. Certainly God is not to be praised for difficult circumstances, as they are always the result of the wicked choices of depraved wills, and are never ordained by Yahweh.⁴¹ The classical theist's worship of God for his providential wisdom might be mirrored by the relational theist's praise for God's omniscience—his ability to do such a good job generally working out his will despite the opaque vicissitudes of the free choices of human beings—but the lesser glory of such a being is difficult to conceal.

⁴¹ Ibid., 171.

Conclusion

Sanders and Ware both must own certain hermeneutical tensions that arise naturally between their positions and the biblical text: Ware must give an account for passages like the Golden Calf narrative of Exodus, and Sanders must abide the embarrassment of the abundance of pancausality texts in the Old and New Testaments. A close reading of their two books, however, reveals that their differences are as much methodological and presuppositional as they are exegetical. Sanders reads the relevant texts in light of libertarian human freedom and a presupposed philosophy of human relationships, whereas Ware reads them through the lens of compatibilism and meticulous sovereignty. In the end, Ware's analysis experiences less overall hermeneutical stress, his method is theologically more probable, and his conclusions are more existentially viable than Sanders' innovative proposal. Sanders' relational theism should be rejected as unlivable and unorthodox.