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**Abstract** Review of *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (2001), by Clark H. Pinnock.

# A NEW EVANGELICAL VISION OF GOD: OPENNESS AND MORMON THOUGHT

David L. Paulsen and Matthew G. Fisher

*It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for  
a certainty the Character of God.*

Joseph Smith<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the Didsbury Lectures at the University of Manchester for the year 2000, Clark H. Pinnock, professor of theology at McMaster Divinity College in Canada, provided the most recent treatment of a new evangelical vision of God—one that is centered on the “openness of God.”<sup>2</sup> *Most Moved Mover* is the compilation of these lectures in

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1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 345.

2. Two other important books dealing with the openness of God include Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); they were recently reviewed by Paulsen and Fisher in *BYU Studies* 42/3–4 (2003): 110–23.

Review of Clark H. Pinnock. *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2001. 186 pp., with bibliography. \$19.99.

which Pinnock offers a compelling portrait of God that challenges the so-called classical<sup>3</sup> or traditional account of God formulated by early Christian theologians who were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Pinnock passionately denounces the idea that God is impassible, immutable, simple, and timeless. He vehemently rejects conventional ideas that God is primarily a “punitive authority,” a “metaphysical immobility,” or an “all-controlling power” (p. 1). Instead, he offers an “open” view of God that emphasizes his profound passibility and his genuine interpersonal relationships with other moral agents. The “open” God enters into authentic give-and-take relationships with human beings and leaves the future partly undetermined, allowing human beings to have an active role as agents within the unfolding of his purposes.

Notwithstanding the apparent attractiveness of the open view of God, the model has not enjoyed widespread acceptance within the evangelical community; in fact, it has been met by some with stopping of ears and gnashing of teeth. As an unabashed challenge to the more conventional Christian understanding of God, the openness model has encountered significant resistance, none of which has discouraged the architects of the view. Pinnock writes: “Whether the open view will succeed in becoming widely accepted as a model is far from certain. . . . The odds are probably against wide acceptance” (p. 24; see p. 185). A “model can prove fruitful even if it does not entirely succeed” (p. 186). But he also notes that “even those who complain about openness theism are revising their views along some of the same lines as the openness view” (p. 77).

Pinnock’s work should warrant the attention of a Latter-day Saint audience for at least three reasons. First, many aspects of openness theology resonate with Latter-day Saint understandings of God. Indeed, Pinnock has even been criticized for endorsing Latter-day

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3. Mainline Christian theology is usually referred to in the literature as *classical* theology. Pinnock chooses not to call it by this honorific title, opting instead for the term *conventional* theology. This is because he does not consider mainline thought to be the original biblical or primitive understanding of God. Cf. the first definition of “classical” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Of the first rank or authority; constituting a standard or model.”

Saint points of view.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in a review in *Christianity Today*, Pinnock's model is taken to task for suggesting that God may be an embodied person in time. According to one reviewer, "We are only a few steps away, it seems, from the assertion that God possesses a body of sorts, spiritual though it may be."<sup>5</sup> Latter-day Saints may find that careful contemplation of Pinnock's theological and philosophical reflections may reinforce some of their own convictions.

Second, Pinnock has opened the door for Latter-day Saints and openness thinkers to engage in cooperative work. In a cordial letter to David Paulsen, Pinnock recently wrote: "Your work has gotten me interested in knowing more about the 'Mormon/evangelical dialogue,' how to measure it and even how to bridge it. 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."<sup>6</sup>

Third, the openness movement is gaining significant attention throughout the contemporary religious landscape. For instance, the theme for the December 2003 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers was "The Open View of God and Its Critics." Informed Latter-day Saints, especially those involved in

4. Amazon.com reviewers of *Most Moved Mover* write: "Would that Mr. Pinnock would try again without the Book of Mormon this time"; and "With just a few statements, he shows how his position is most moved toward an almost Mormon position of a being who is not necessarily a pure spirit being, i.e., possibly embodied." See [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) (accessed 20 January 2004). Jeff Riddle, an evangelical pastor, writes on his Web site: "If the nascent ideas on divine corporeality in *Most Moved Mover* are any indication, it seems that the 'mature' vision of God in open theology will be more like that of Mormonism than orthodoxy." See [www.jpbc.org/writings/br-most\\_moved\\_mover.html](http://www.jpbc.org/writings/br-most_moved_mover.html) (accessed 19 January 2004).

5. Christopher A. Hall, "Openness Season," review of *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, by Clark Pinnock, *Christianity Today* 47/2 (2003): 92.

6. Clark Pinnock to David Paulsen, 9 August 1999.

interfaith discussions, will surely want to keep abreast of this exciting new development in evangelical scholarship.

Since the openness view of God is a reaction or challenge to the traditional or conventional conception of God, we will briefly lay out the essential features of the traditional view. We do this to better understand what this movement is reacting to. For most of Christian history, one notion of God has dominated the perspective of Christian theologians. It is a concept of Deity that emphasizes God's sovereignty, majesty, and glory. Richard Rice, an openness thinker, describes the conventional view as follows:

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.

In this perspective God is supreme in goodness as well as in power; he is caring and benevolent toward his creatures. Yet God is equally glorified and his purposes are equally well served by the obedience of the righteous, the rebellion of sinners, the redemption of the saints and the destruction of the wicked.

According to this influential view, God dwells in perfect bliss outside the sphere of time and space. From his lofty vantage point, he apprehends the whole of created reality in one timeless perception: past, present and future alike appear before him. But though he fully knows and cares for the created world, he remains essentially unaffected by creaturely events and experiences. He is untouched by the disappointment, sorrow or suffering of his creatures. Just as his sovereign will brooks no opposition, his serene tranquility knows no interruption.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Pinnock et al., *Openness of God*, 11–12.

In his book *Most Moved Mover*, Pinnock both critiques the conventional model of God and sets out the openness alternative. After an introduction that offers a glimpse into the general shape of the openness model, he divides the book into four chapters, roughly corresponding to four bases of knowledge: scripture (“The Scriptural Foundations”), tradition (“Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance”), reason (“The Metaphysics of Love”), and experience (“The Existential Fit”). We will describe each of these and assess their relevance to Christian beliefs in general and to LDS theology in particular.

### The Scriptural Foundations

In this chapter Pinnock challenges the reader to consider the proper nature and character of God by appealing to scripture rather than notions derived from pagan philosophical theologizing. He also distinguishes the openness model from that of process theology, which arrives at somewhat similar conclusions by way of adopting a competing philosophy. “To be sound, theology (the open view of God or any view) must be true to the biblical witness as primary source” (p. 25). Pinnock acknowledges that tradition, philosophy, and experience are also important and have their place within the framework of a legitimate theology, but of greatest importance is holy scripture—and whether the proposed understanding of God is consonant with it (p. 24).<sup>8</sup> Pinnock finds support for the primacy of scripture in Karl Barth, who wrote, “Who God is and what it is to be divine is something we have to learn where God has revealed Godself” (p. 27). This

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8. Many have critically challenged the cogency of the biblical case that openness thinkers offer in behalf of their theology; e.g., Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000); Norman L. Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2001); John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul K. Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003)—but no one can plausibly deny their attempt to base their beliefs on the Bible. For example, Pinnock points out that John Sanders devotes over one hundred pages of careful biblical exegesis in behalf of openness theology in his book, *The God Who Risks* (p. 25).

approach resonates with that of Latter-day Saints, who also insist that acceptable understandings of God be grounded, first and foremost, in God's own self-disclosures, the Bible being one of the most important compilations of these disclosures. But biblical passages are notoriously susceptible to various, and often conflicting, interpretations. Thus Latter-day Saints also treasure the light shed upon God in the revelations of "Godself" contained in their other standard works.

Having set the Bible up as the primary authoritative standard for openness theology, Pinnock argues that it depicts a God who is loving, receptive, and active in the world and who desires and participates in a genuine give-and-take relationship with human agents. "Far from a totally unchanging and all-determining absolute Being," Pinnock writes, "the Bible presents God as a personal agent who creates and acts, wills and plans, loves and values in relation to covenant partners" (p. 25). Pinnock argues that the open view takes seriously the scriptural "idea of God taking risks, of God's will being thwarted, of God being flexible, of grace being resistible, of God having a temporal dimension, of God being impacted by the creature, and of God not knowing the entire future as certain" (p. 64). While admittedly many of these notions differ significantly from the traditional or conventional understanding of God, Pinnock makes no apologies since this is the portrait of God he finds depicted in both the Old and New Testaments.

Latter-day Saints often take issue with conventional Christianity on similar grounds. While the traditional view describes God as, among other things, absolutely unlimited in all respects, wholly other, absolutely simple, immaterial, nonspatial, nontemporal, immutable, and impassible, Latter-day Saints typically affirm that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is "the living God"<sup>9</sup> who created man in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), who spoke with Moses "face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:11). He is also the loving God who is profoundly "touched with the feeling of

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9. To mention just a few such references: Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26; Jeremiah 10:10; Hosea 1:10; Acts 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15), and salvifically involved in our individual and collective lives.<sup>10</sup>

The question of metaphor and anthropomorphism in the discussion about the biblical portrait of an open God is profoundly important. Pinnock says, “I give particular weight to narrative and to the language of personal relationships” (p. 20). We should “not set aside important biblical metaphors just because they do not fit the traditional system” (p. 19). “God’s revelation is anthropomorphic through and through. We could not grasp any other kind” (p. 20). But interpretation requires very careful exegesis (pp. 60–62). “All language is anthropomorphic and metaphorical, it is all we have to work with,” but “What does it mean for God to grieve, to interact, to weep, to cry out, to respond to prayer?” (p. 63).<sup>11</sup> Pinnock ventures a response, “Calvin was wrong to have said that biblical figures that convey such things are mere accommodations to finite understanding” (p. 27; see p. 67). The Latter-day Saint tradition similarly gives significant credence to anthropomorphic language in scripture. When God is described as angry, jealous, happy, sad, and so forth, the Saints do not believe that it is merely metaphorical due to our inability to fully comprehend deity. Pinnock writes:

The divine/human relationship is often spoken of in terms of marriage, child rearing and adoption. None of this would be true of an impersonal entity. God created humanity in his image, as an analogy of God, and the very basis of speaking of God in human terms. God wants to be thought of as a person who relates with other persons, who loves and suffers, responds and plans. (p. 80)

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10. See David L. Paulsen, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 13/2 (1999): 114–46.

11. See Daniel C. Peterson, “On the Motif of the Weeping God in Moses 7,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 285–317.

Latter-day Saint readers will find especially interesting Pinnock's proposal that openness theologians take seriously the idea that God is embodied. On this important matter, we quote Pinnock at length:

There is an issue that has not been raised yet in the discussion around the open view of God. If he is with us in the world, if we are to take biblical metaphors seriously, is God in some way embodied? Critics will be quick to say that, although there are expressions of this idea in the Bible, they are not to be taken literally. But I do not believe that the idea is as foreign to the Bible's view of God as we have assumed. In tradition, God is thought to function primarily as a disembodied spirit but this is scarcely a biblical idea. For example, Israel is called to hear God's word and gaze on his glory and beauty. Human beings are said to be embodied creatures created in the image of God. Is there perhaps something in God that corresponds with embodiment? Having a body is certainly not a negative thing because it makes it possible for us to be agents. Perhaps God's agency would be easier to envisage if he were in some way corporeal. Add to that the fact that in the theophanies of the Old Testament God encounters humans in the form of a man. They indicate that God shares our life in the world in a most intense and personal manner. For example, look at the following texts. In Exodus 24:10–11 Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abidu and seventy of the elders of Israel went up Mount Sinai and beheld God, as they ate and drank. Exodus 33:11 tells us that "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." Moses saw "God's back" but not his face (Exod. 33:23). When God chose to reveal his glory, Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up (Is. 6:1). Ezekiel saw "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezek. 1:28). John saw visions of one seated upon the throne (Rev. 4:2) and of the Son of Man in his glory (Rev. 1: 12–16). Add to that the fact that God took on a body in the incarnation and Christ has taken that body

with him into glory. It seems to me that the Bible does not think of God as formless. Rather, it thinks of him as possessing a form that these divine appearances reflect. (pp. 33–34)

Latter-day Saints will applaud Pinnock's bold conclusion: "I do not feel obliged to assume that God is a purely spiritual being when his self-revelation does not suggest it. It is true that from a Platonic standpoint, the idea is absurd, but this is not a biblical standpoint" (p. 34).

In addition to making a biblical case for divine embodiment, Pinnock proposes, without developing, three arguments for the same conclusion. First, Pinnock opines that God's agency would be easier to envisage if he were in some way corporeal (p. 34). Second, Pinnock suggests that embodiment may be a necessary condition of personhood. "The only persons we encounter are embodied persons and, if God is not embodied, it may prove difficult to understand how God is a person. What kind of actions could a disembodied God perform?" (p. 34; see pp. 80–81). Finally, Pinnock hypothesizes that corporeality may be a necessary condition of God's being passible (p. 81; see p. 81 n. 54). Each of these suggestions is provocative; indeed, each cries out for further development. Latter-day Saints should be eager to join in the task.

Another point on which Latter-day Saint understanding and openness thought converge is their view of the Christian Godhead. Both, on the authority of revelation, reject the conventional view that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost constitute one metaphysical substance, affirming rather that they are so lovingly interrelated as to constitute one perfectly united community. This understanding of the Godhead is known in contemporary Christian discourse as "social Trinitarianism" or as "the social analogy of the Trinity."

In line with this model, openness thinkers portray God as "a triune communion who seeks relationships of love with human beings" (p. 3). Pinnock describes the relational essence of the Trinity as "three persons in a caring, sensitive and responsive communion" (p. 84); this, he says, "is central to the open view of God" (p. 84). Further, "God is the one who lives in love and wills community with creatures; he is not a supreme monad that exists in eternal solitude.

To speak metaphysically, the gospel alludes to a relational ontology of persons in communion. The Trinity speaks to us of relationality and is not tied to substance philosophy” (p. 28). Later he writes, “God is more than a single loving person . . . he is a loving community of persons in which each gives and receives love” (p. 83).<sup>12</sup>

Our first article of faith affirms Latter-day Saint belief in the New Testament Godhead. It states simply: “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” Like openness theologians, Latter-day Saints do not understand the Godhead or trinity to be one metaphysical substance consisting of three persons. Joseph Smith clearly articulated this point, declaring in his last public sermon before his death:

I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years.

I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Actually many Christian thinkers are showing a renewed interest in Trinitarian thought. The following article and books are a few of the most important recent texts that outline and affirm social Trinitarianism and its resultant theological implications. They are Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21–47; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM, 1981); and Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988). Now, although these are just a few of the complete expositions on social Trinitarianism in modern times, it is important to note that invariably every modern scholar of Trinitarian thought has written anywhere from a brief to lengthy analysis of this theological idea.

13. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 370; see 372. See also Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. and comps., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980).

Yet, uniquely Latter-day Saint scripture repeatedly affirms that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are “one God.”<sup>14</sup> There is no contradiction here in that the honorific title “God” in Latter-day Saint discourse has more than one sense. It is used to designate the divine community (as in the later instances) as well as to designate each individual divine person (as in Joseph’s use). So it is true that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost constitute one God (i.e., one perfectly united divine community) and that they constitute three Gods (i.e., there are three divine persons each referred to as God). There is no inscrutable mystery here, just a simple difference in the use of the term *God*. Elder James E. Talmage clarifies this point in his exposition of the first article of faith. He writes:

Three personages composing the great presiding council of the universe have revealed themselves to man: (1) God the Eternal Father; (2) His Son, Jesus Christ; and (3) the Holy Ghost. That these three are separate individuals, physically distinct from each other, is demonstrated by the accepted records of divine dealings with man. On the occasion of the Savior’s baptism, John recognized the sign of the Holy Ghost; he saw before him in a tabernacle of flesh the Christ, unto whom he had administered the holy ordinance; and he heard the voice of the Father. The three personages of the Godhead were present, manifesting themselves each in a different way, and each distinct from the others. Later the Savior promised His disciples that the Comforter, who is the Holy Ghost, should be sent unto them by His Father; here again are the three members of the Godhead separately defined. Stephen, at the time of his martyrdom, was blessed with the power of

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14. See the Testimony of Three Witnesses at the introduction of the Book of Mormon. After bearing testimony to the truthfulness of Joseph Smith’s account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, they close by giving honor “to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.” Various scriptures within the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants also affirm the unity and oneness of the Godhead. See 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:36; Doctrine and Covenants 20:28; 35:2; 50:43.

heavenly vision, and he saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Joseph Smith, while calling upon the Lord in fervent prayer, saw the Father and the Son, standing in the midst of light that shamed the brightness of the sun; and one of these declared of the other, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” Each of the members of the Trinity is called God, together they constitute the Godhead.<sup>15</sup>

As to the unity of the Godhead, Talmage explains:

This unity is a type of completeness; the mind of any one member of the Trinity is the mind of the others; seeing as each of them does with the eye of perfection, they see and understand alike. Under any given conditions each would act in the same way, guided by the same principles of unerring justice and equity. The one-ness of the Godhead, to which the scriptures so abundantly testify, implies no mystical union of substance, nor any unnatural and therefore impossible blending of personality. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are as distinct in their persons and individualities as are any three personages in mortality. Yet their unity of purpose and operation is such as to make their edicts one, and their will the will of God.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly Latter-day Saint and openness views of the Godhead are very much on the same page. Our reflections on what each take to be scripture can mutually inform and inspire.

As a conclusion to this chapter, Pinnock reminds us of his commitment to the primacy of scripture in shaping our understanding of God. He writes: “Our thinking needs to be reformed in the light of the self-revelation of God in the gospel and we must stop attributing to God qualities that undermine God’s own self-disclosure” (p. 27). No other influence, it might be said, has done more to undermine

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15. James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 35–36.

16. *Ibid.*, 37.

the correct concept of God than the confluence of Greek thought and Christian doctrine, which Pinnock treats in his next chapter.

### Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance

Pinnock argues in this chapter that traditional conceptions of God's attributes such as absolute immutability, timelessness, and impassibility—now firmly rooted in Christian tradition—are, in fact, pagan by-products of the Hellenistic intellectual milieu in which the conventional Christian view of God was shaped. Pinnock admits that every theology interacts with its environment; it “seeks to conceptualize and it creates a kind of synthesis” (p. 65). But, he says, it is our responsibility to consider the environment wherein the conventional model of God was formulated and discern whether it led to the corruption of the biblical portrait. The Greek thinkers (e.g., Origen, Augustine) offered the early Christian theologians a concept of God that could be understood using the best ideas of their time. According to Pinnock, regardless of their intentions, the Greek thinkers' influence exacted a considerable price. This “set up a tension between Greek and biblical ideals of perfection, requiring theologians to reconcile the incomparable God of the Bible, ever responding to changing circumstances and passionately involved in history, with something like the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, a God completely sufficient unto himself” (pp. 65–66).

Pinnock also challenges the traditional understanding of omniscience by contending that although God knows “everything that could exist in [the] future” (p. 100), he does not possess exhaustive specific foreknowledge. For Pinnock, “exhaustive foreknowledge would not be possible in a world with real freedom” (p. 100). Critics of the openness model are quick to contend that any qualification of the notion of God's complete knowledge of the future diminishes his power and worshipability. To the contrary, openness theologians argue, this only makes God *more* praiseworthy for his wisdom and resourcefulness in responding to emerging contingencies.

Latter-day Saints differ among themselves in their understandings of the extent of God's foreknowledge. Some, including Presidents Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff, have thought that God increases endlessly in knowledge and, hence, presumably, at every time lacks exhaustive foreknowledge. Brigham Young stated that "the God I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children; they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful."<sup>17</sup> And, in agreement with Young, Wilford Woodruff explained: "If there was a point where man in his progression could not proceed any further, the very idea would throw a gloom over every intelligent and reflecting mind. God himself is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end. It is just so with us. We are in a probation, which is a school of experience."<sup>18</sup>

Others hold to a more traditional view that God's knowledge, including the foreknowledge of future free contingencies, is exhaustively complete.<sup>19</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith asserted: "Do we believe that God has all 'wisdom'? If so, in that, he is absolute. If there is something he does not know, then he is not absolute in 'wisdom,' and to think such a thing is absurd. . . . It is not through ignorance and learning hidden truth that [God] progresses, for *if there are truths which he does not know, then these things are greater than he, and this cannot be.*"<sup>20</sup> Bruce R. McConkie expressed a similar sentiment: "There are those who say that God is progressing in knowledge and is learning new truths. This is false—utterly, totally, and completely. There is not one sliver of truth in it. . . . God progresses in the sense that his kingdoms increase and his dominions multiply—not in the sense that he learns new truths and discovers new laws. God is not a student. He is not a laboratory technician. He is not postulating new

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17. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:286.

18. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:120.

19. 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)." "Care for the Life of the Soul," *Ensign*, May 2003, 70.

20. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:5, 7, emphasis in original.

theories on the basis of past experiences. He has indeed graduated to that state of exaltation that consists of knowing all things.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite these differing views within the Latter-day Saint tradition,<sup>22</sup> there is accord on three fundamental points: (1) Man is an

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

22. The following Latter-day Saints have similarly indicated where they stand on the respective sides of this divide. Hyrum Smith in April 1844, perhaps indicating that God is not eternally self-surpassing in terms of intelligence, said: “I want to put down all false influence. If I thought I should be saved and any in the congregation be lost, I should not be happy. For this purpose Jesus effected a resurrection. Our Savior is competent to save all from death and hell. I can prove it out of the revelation. I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and all power.” Hyrum Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:300 (6 April 1844). Both B. H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe affirmed Brigham Young’s and Wilford Woodruff’s teachings. “To determine this relationship between God and man,” Widtsoe explained, “it is necessary to know, as far as the limited human mind may know, why the Lord is the supreme intelligent Being in the universe, with the greatest knowledge and the most perfected will, and who, therefore, possesses infinite power over the forces of the universe. . . . One thing seems clear, however, that the Lord who is a part of the universe, in common with all other parts of the universe is subject to eternal universal laws. . . . Therefore, if the law of progression be accepted, God must have been engaged from the beginning, and must now be engaged in progressive development, and infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today. Nothing in the universe is static or quiescent.” John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 24. According to B. H. Roberts, “God’s immutability should not be so understood as to exclude the idea of advancement or progress of God. Thus, for example: God’s kingdom and glory may be enlarged, as more and more redeemed souls are added to his kingdom: as worlds and world-systems are multiplied and redeemed and enrolled with celestial spheres, so God’s kingdom is enlarged and his glory increased. So that in this sense there may come change and progress even for God. Hence we could not say of God’s immutability as we do of his eternity that it is absolute, since there may come change through progress even for God: but an absolute immutability would require eternal immobility—which would reduce God to a condition eternally static, which, from the nature of things, would bar him from participation in that enlargement of kingdom and increasing glory that comes from redemption and the progress of men. And is it too bold a thought, that with this progress, even for the Mightiest, new thoughts, and new vistas may appear, inviting to new adventures and enterprises that will yield new experiences, advancement, and enlargement even for the Most High? It ought to be constantly remembered that terms absolute to man may be relative terms to God, so far above our thinking is his thinking; and his ways above our ways.” B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy’s Course in Theology* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994), Fourth Year, 69–70. On the other hand, Robert Millet and Joseph F. McConkie argue for the same understanding of this attribute as do Bruce R. McConkie and Joseph Fielding Smith. “Our Father’s development and progression over

agent with power to choose other than what he, in fact, chooses; (2) Whatever the extent and nature of God's foreknowledge, it is not inconsistent with man's freedom—God's knowledge does not causally determine human choices; and (3) God's knowledge, like God's power, is maximally efficacious. No event occurs that he has not anticipated or has not taken into account in his planning.<sup>23</sup>

Pinnock writes, "We need to identify the type of divine perfection envisaged by the biblical witnesses and consider how better to conceptualize certain of the attributes of God based upon that witness" (p. 65). While there is little confusion concerning God's interactivity in our daily devotional lives, mainline Christian theology, according to Pinnock, has lost somewhat its biblical focus (p. 65). "A package of divine attributes has been constructed which leans in the direction of immobility and hyper-transcendence, particularly because of the influence of the Hellenistic category of unchangeableness" (p. 65). There can be no doubt that a significant part of a person's theology is shaped by his or her environment, by the best ideas and thought of the time. The very act of theologizing is an attempt to understand and describe the doctrines revealed by God, and man has always sought the best tools available to do it. According to Pinnock, the concept of perfection is one area that men have struggled with and employed many tools to further understanding. "It is tempting to think of God abstractly as a perfect being and then smuggle in assumptions of what 'perfect' entails" (p. 67). How do we know if a perfect being suffers or not? Is a perfect being timeless or changeable? Pinnock suggests that what we

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an infinitely long period of time has brought him to the point at which he now presides as God Almighty, He who is omnipotent, omniscient, and, by means of his Holy Spirit, omnipresent: he has all power, all knowledge, and is, through the Light of Christ, in and through all things." Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Life Beyond* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 148–49. An attempt to reconcile these differing points of view is provided by Eugene England in "Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God," *BYU Studies* 29/3 (1989): 31–47.

23. See David L. Paulsen, "Omnipotent God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1030.

are doing when we engage in this type of theologizing is “seeking to correct the Bible; to derive truth about God not from biblical metaphors but from our own intuitions of what is ‘fitting’ for God to be” (p. 67). It is a type of negative theology—one begins with a concept of perfection and then works backward, ascribing only those attributes to God that cohere with one’s original concept rather than appealing to God’s own self-disclosure to better understand his true character and attributes. “In this way,” according to Pinnock, “God’s nature is made to conform to our notions of what deity should be like and, if the Bible does not measure up to this standard in its speech about God, we invoke our own subjective criteria to correct it” (p. 67).

In his letter to Paulsen, Pinnock asks: “Are we (in your opinion) co-belligerents as it were in the struggle against pagan influences in classical theism?” The answer resounds: we certainly ought to be! Latter-day Saints believe that the fledgling church that Christ had established during his ministry faced serious challenges after the death of the apostles. With the passing of the apostles, no one could authoritatively say, “Thus saith the Lord.” At this point the church, for the first time, was forced to take up fully the burden of constructing theology—to seek a proper understanding of God’s reality, to describe divine things intelligibly and rationally, and to articulate the present meaning of past manifestations and self-disclosures of God.<sup>24</sup> This was not a light responsibility, and many of the early Christian apologists appealed to secular learning for help. The learning was predominately Greek, and it was Greek learning that would subsequently have a profound effect on the shape of conventional Christianity. Today the Hellenistic influence on traditional theism is recognized as too blatant to deny. It is refreshing to see writers like Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and other openness thinkers sounding the call to purge the traditional understanding of God of the doctrinal corruptions left as a pagan inheritance. In this effort, we are indeed co-belligerents.

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24. See David L. Paulsen, review of *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*, by Roger E. Olson, *BYU Studies* 39/4 (2000): 185–94.

### The Metaphysics of Love

In chapter 3, Pinnock champions a theology that is not only traditional and biblical, as he attempts to illustrate in the previous two chapters, but also coherent and timely for a contemporary audience. The metaphysics of love, as far as we interpret it, is an attempt to enter Pinnock's "theology of love" into dialogue with modern thought/philosophy. "Did not the Israelites leaving Egypt take the jewels of Egyptian culture and reshape them into furniture for the sanctuary? Have not all the great theologians made use of philosophical reflection to give force to their own convictions?" (p. 113). When it comes to philosophical reflection, Latter-day Saints often fall victim to mental laziness, which B. H. Roberts sees as one of the unfortunate vices of men. Roberts stresses the importance of a spiritually and philosophically sound religion. "It requires striving—intellectual and spiritual—to comprehend the things of God—even the revealed things of God. . . . Men seem to think that because inspiration and revelation are factors in connection with the things of God, therefore the pain and stress of mental effort are not required."<sup>25</sup> "Religion must appeal to the understanding as well as to the emotional nature of man. It must measurably satisfy his rational mind as well as fill his spiritual and ethical longings—his thirst for righteousness."<sup>26</sup>

Resonating with Roberts's sentiments, Pinnock comments, "It is not a bad thing to be philosophically engaged. Surely a failure to grapple with intellectual issues is a weakness from a theological standpoint" (p. 113). One might wonder why, immediately after denouncing classical theism as rooted in Hellenistic philosophy, Pinnock actually encourages Christians to make use of philosophical conceptions relevant in our modern age. In response to this query, Pinnock points out that "in the ancient context, permanence was preferred to change, while moderns opt for change over permanence" (p. 116). This is his way of justifying the open view for today. Hence Pinnock suggests, "What

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25. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, Fifth Year, iv–v.

26. *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:381.

Augustine did in his day, we have to do in ours. A synthesis does not have to be a bad thing so long as it does not hinder the proclamation of the gospel” (p. 113). While Pinnock does not want to focus attention on a particular philosophy as being ideal for Christian theology, he suggests certain parameters within which a relevant philosophical system must fit if it is going to help us better understand God and his attributes. “A tragedy of theology has been that, owing to philosophies which privilege changelessness, it has been difficult to express the central Christian truth claim that the Word was made flesh. Theology needs philosophy that can handle themes like perfection-in-change, incarnation, and pathos. It needs philosophical thinking which has room for a God who can be affected and not unaffected by relations to the world” (p. 116).

As Latter-day Saints, we do not rely on philosophical world-views or systems for articulating or defending our understanding of God. But we do reflect on revelation to deepen our understanding of God. Pinnock refers to his own approach as “biblical philosophy.” For Latter-day Saints, what is revealed must be understood to embrace the standard works and divine self-disclosures coming to and through our living prophet. Pinnock seems convinced that close biblical analysis and rational engagement will result in “openness thinking.” We believe that modern revelation points in the same direction.

One area in which Pinnock feels revelation as recorded in the scriptures is joined, and even stimulated, by philosophy arises when the classical “problem of evil” is broached. He confronts the problem, which has otherwise proven itself a profound crux within the course of almost every theological roadmap, with a “logic of love” theodicy. Pinnock sketches this idea out along these lines:

- (a) God created for the sake of loving relationships.
- (b) This required giving real freedom to the creature that it not be a robot.
- (c) Freedom, however, entails risk in the event that love is not reciprocated.

(d) Herein lies the possibility of moral and certain natural evils—those which appear irredeemably malicious and demonic.

(e) God does not abandon the world but pledges a victory over the powers of darkness. In such a theodicy, God does not will evil but wills love and, therefore, freedom that opens the door to things going right or wrong.

(f) Though God does not protect us from ourselves, God is there redeeming every situation, though exactly how, we may not yet always know. (pp. 131–32)

Pinnock acknowledges that God chose to create this world, that he could have chosen another possible world but he didn't, that he chose instead to create a world where humans possessed real freedom, and that real freedom entails risk.<sup>27</sup> "Risk was involved in creating this kind of non-divine order because rebellion and defection are possibilities. Evil was not what God willed, though he did make it possible by giving freedom for the sake of love" (p. 132). Theists in the past have gone to great lengths to avoid including the category of risk in God's experience, but for Pinnock it is an integral part of a loving relationship. Acceptance of divine risk makes the job of confronting the problem of evil easier. Pinnock has the philosophical luxury of saying "things do not always go the way God wants them to" (p. 132). However, for many this luxury is counterintuitive or countertraditional. For Pinnock, the failure to achieve a coherent theodicy is because of the obsession of conventional theists for divine control and because "the blueprint model of divine providence, in which each evil serves a higher purpose and every gruesome detail contributes to the beauty of God's work, makes the problem of evil insoluble" (p. 133). He goes on to claim that "belief in a God who ordains and/or allows every evil to exist (including the burning of children) cannot be sustained" (p. 133).

Pinnock's theodicy may not be palatable to a mainstream Christian audience, and it is by no means the only approach to the age-old

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27. For a more exhaustive treatment of divine risk, see Sanders, *The God Who Risks*.

problem of evil. Through the insights of Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints have a tenable way out of the conceptual incoherency generated by the traditional efforts to explain of the problem of evil. Revelations to Joseph Smith circumvent the theoretical problem of evil by denying the troublemaking postulate of absolute creation (creation *ex nihilo*) and, consequently, the classical definition of divine omnipotence. Contrary to conventional Christian thought, Joseph Smith explicitly affirmed that there are entities and structures which are coeternal with God himself (D&C 93:23, 29). These eternal entities seem to include chaotic matter, intelligences, and lawlike structures or principles. What are possible instances of such laws or principles? Lehi makes reference to some such principles in the enlightening and comforting explanation of evil he provides to his son Jacob as recorded in 2 Nephi 2. “Adam fell that men might be,” Lehi tells Jacob, “and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). But to attain this joy, Lehi explains that

it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, [nor] holiness . . . , neither good nor bad, . . . [neither] happiness nor misery. . . . And [so] to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, . . . it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter. Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other. (2 Nephi 2:11, 15–16)

According to Lehi, there are apparently states of affairs that even God, though in some sense omnipotent, cannot bring about. Man is that he *might* have joy, but even God cannot bring joy without moral righteousness, moral righteousness without moral freedom, moral freedom without an opposition in all things (see 2 Nephi 2:25–26). With moral freedom as an essential variable in the divine equation for man, two consequences stand out saliently: (1) the inevitability of moral evil and (2) our need for a redeemer.

If this interpretation of 2 Nephi 2 is correct, then we ought to reject the conventional definition of omnipotence in favor of an understanding that fits better with the inspired text. Given that text, how ought we understand divine omnipotence? B. H. Roberts proposed that God's omnipotence be understood as the power to bring about any state of affairs consistent with the natures of eternal existences.<sup>28</sup> So understood, we can adopt an "instrumentalist" view of evil wherein pain, suffering, and opposition become means of moral and spiritual development. God is omnipotent, but he cannot prevent evil without preventing greater goods or ends—soul-making,<sup>29</sup> joy eternal (or godlike), life—the value of which more than offsets the disvalue of whatever evils may flow from the exercise of moral agency. So it seems that, in openness theology and Latter-day Saint revelation, we find an element of risk anywhere God relinquishes some of his power in order to insure real moral freedom.

Pinnock also believes that his "logic of love" theodicy helps us cope with natural evils, such as a disease or a flood, by rationalizing evils that emerge independent of human action. Some of these evils, according to his model, "may arise from the randomness that underlies creativity and be the by-product of the orderly natural process that sustains life" (p. 134). Still other natural evils are attributed to "the free will of spiritual beings who, unlike ourselves, also possess a degree of control over nature. After all, Scripture speaks of the demonic and spiritual warfare" (p. 134).<sup>30</sup> "The open view of God lets one affirm the reality of genuine evil because it does not see God as the only source of power and does not have to figure out why, in God's mysterious providence, horrors come upon us" (p. 133). Given the commitment of the openness view to what is often called liber-

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28. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, Fourth Year, 70.

29. See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

30. Pinnock feels that the idea that some evils originate in the kingdom of Satan is supported biblically. While he does not offer specific proof texts, he points out that Jesus did not attribute things like deformity, blindness, leprosy and fever to the providence of God. Pinnock writes, "We say with Jesus, 'An enemy has done this!' and refuse to blame God for it (Mt. 13:28)" (p. 134).

tarian freedom, it allows for the possibility of surd evil—that is, evil that ought not to be.<sup>31</sup>

After delving into several other areas in which he feels philosophy might lend a helpful hand, Pinnock closes the chapter by pointing out that Christian theologians have labored under a heavy burden. “The available philosophical resources for the early church were not altogether suitable for rendering Christian ideas. Theology has needed new points of departure and fresh thinking that could better express the personal reality of God” (p. 150). Additionally, “If . . . God is understood more biblically and, to moderns, more intelligibly [through sound philosophy] as a power that is internally related to the world and the ground of our own worth as persons, Christian theism can become intellectually compelling again” (pp. 150–51).

### **The Existential Fit**

In the last chapter, Pinnock examines what he calls the “existential fit” of openness theology. Does it “work” in the experience of those who embrace it? Pinnock argues that the open view presents for the Christian disciple a more appealing view of God than does the conventional view. He argues that even those who do not embrace this view live as though it were true. “One of the strengths of the open view is that people see the way it makes sense of their lives and are drawn to it. It is hard to refute on the existential level” (p. 154). We live as though what we decide makes a difference (p. 178). According to Pinnock, the open view affirms human freedom, makes prayer relevant, and encourages steps on the way to sanctification. If the future is determined or foreknown, why should we even bother to do the right thing? “If we believe God is a stern, cold lawgiver who has no real interest in us, who is merely a ruler, lord, a judge and not a

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31. For a Latter-day Saint treatment that proposes the existence of pointless evil, see R. Dennis Potter, “Finitism and the Problem of Evil,” *Dialogue* 33/4 (2000): 83–95; and David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” *BYU Studies* 39/1 (2000): 53–65.

father, we will have great difficulty living the Christian life” (p. 154, quoting Thomas Merton).

One of the great virtues of the open view, according to Pinnock, is that it enjoys an “as if” asset—“It is safe to live as if the model were true” (p. 155). Conventional theism, on the other hand, has an “as if not” problem. Pinnock suggests that one “would be wise to live as if [conventional theism] were not true, otherwise [one] could have a crisis of motivation” (p. 155). Pinnock offers some examples.

Suppose that God, as Thomas Aquinas taught, is unchangeable as a stone pillar and cannot entertain real relationships in his essential nature. Suppose that in God there are no real relations to creatures—that they may move in relation to God but God cannot move in relation to them. Since the Christian life is at the heart a personal relationship with God, it would be best to live as if this view of immutability were not the case, as I am sure Aquinas himself must have done in his life. (p. 156)

Pinnock asks the reader to suppose that God were impassible and could not be affected by what transpires in the world, as conventional theism has always claimed. Clearly the implications of this view run deep. “Does this mean that God is not wounded by injustices, as Calvin said, and cannot feel our pain, as Anselm said?” (p. 156). To view God as impassible is to say that God does not grieve with us or rejoice with us, and Pinnock insists that this is “existentially intolerable” (p. 156). Whatever your doctrine is concerning God’s ability to be affected by his creations, existentially, it seems necessary to live “as if” the conventional view of divine impassibility were *not* true. “Only a suffering God can help” (p. 156), asserts Pinnock.

The Latter-day Saint tradition has a general harmony between our understanding of God and our devotional lives, and yet our understanding of God has been formed through divine self-disclosure and has been recorded as revelation, both ancient and modern. A faith whose doctrine squares neatly with the intuitive devotional attitudes of its members deserves consideration. Moreover, a faith whose formal doctrines concerning deity are at odds with the way in which

the faithful approach God and providence deserves possible reconsideration of its fundamental doctrines. “If our lives make no impact on God and if what you decide makes no difference to the blueprint of history, why go on?” (p. 154).

Latter-day Saints are certainly not the only Christians who have recognized the profound need for a harmony between doctrine and devotion. William James—turn-of-the-century American philosopher—articulates the importance of avoiding the kind of existential self-contradiction that conventional Christianity leads to.

Take God’s aseity, for example; or his necessariness; his immateriality; his “simplicity” or superiority to the kind of inner variety and succession which we find in finite beings, his indivisibility, and lack of the inner distinctions of being and activity, substance and accident, potentiality and actuality, and the rest; his repudiation of inclusion in a genus; his actualized infinity; . . . his self-sufficiency, self-love, and absolute felicity in himself:—candidly speaking, how do such qualities as these make any definite connection with our life? And if they severally call for no distinctive adaptations of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man’s religion whether they be true or false?<sup>32</sup>

Pinnock sorts out some of the practical aspects of the open view, including petitionary prayer: “In prayer the practicality of the open view of God shines. In prayer God treats us as subjects not objects and real dialogue takes place. God could act alone in ruling the world but wants to work in consultation. It is not his way unilaterally to decide everything” (p. 171). Again, the root metaphor that the openness thinkers use to help express their vision of God is that of a loving father. “He treats us as partners in a two-way conversation and wants our input—our gratitude, our concurrence, our questioning, even our

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32. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences: A Study in Human Nature* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2002), 445. Also see Paulsen, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James.”

protests and our petitions” (pp. 171–72). For Pinnock, God enlists our input because he wants it, not because he needs it—he invites us as partners to help steer the course of his divine plan. “God does not stand at a distance but gets involved, becomes conditioned, responds, relents, intervenes and acts in time” (p. 172). God allows us to influence him so that we might be contributors to the flow of events. Pinnock supports this view by drawing from the New Testament: “You have not because you ask not” (James 4:2 NRSV). He assures us that the scriptures are full of examples of the efficacy of petitionary prayer. He cites the example in which God tells Moses that he is going to destroy Israel, but Moses counters with reasons why he should not do so (Exodus 32). In that case, God listens to Moses, relents, and does not follow through on his plan. On the other hand, Manasseh ignores God and is taken by the Assyrians: “While Manasseh was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. He prayed to him and God received his entreaty, heard his plea, and restored him again to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord indeed was God. (2 Chr. 33:12–13)” (p. 173).

Latter-day Saints should have little problem with the idea that God is open to our petitions and willing to receive our entreaties.<sup>33</sup> The Latter-day Saint understanding of God is one of profound passibility. And while we, with openness thinkers, depart from the dominant theological Christian tradition by affirming a passible God who is affected, and often persuaded, by our pleas, we make no apologies since such a God is consistent with both the scriptural account and the way in which we experience God in our devotional lives.

## Conclusion

God is not a metaphysical iceberg but a dynamic, passible, and personal interactive agent who enters into genuine give-and-take relationships with human agents. This, essentially, is the battle cry of

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33. See “Thine alms have come up as a memorial before me” (D&C 112:1; cf. Acts 10:4; Jacob 7:22; Mosiah 3:4; 27:14).

the openness movement. From divine embodiment to profound passibility, it is not hard to see how Pinnock's open model of deity resonates with common Latter-day Saint understandings of God. It is not, of course, a perfect mesh, yet clearly we do have much in common.

Once in a great while a theological treatise surfaces that is devoid of extraneous apologetics and polemics, a body of work that raises fundamental questions, proposes compelling responses, and engenders profound thought. We believe Pinnock's *Most Moved Mover* is one such book; it is a book that deserves, even demands, our attention. It is forcing many to deal with topics like divine embodiment, temporal eternity, a partially unsettled future, and a God that is far from the immobility Aristotle described as the Unmoved Mover. As Latter-day Saints, we encounter God through sacred divine self-disclosure recorded in the scriptures and also through our personal encounters with him. And many of us discover a loving Father in Heaven who is, indeed, the Most Moved Mover.