

“Should I still pray when God provides nonetheless?”

~ An examination on the ostensible paradox between divine providence and petitionary prayers through consideration of the Calvinist, Arminian and Open Theism Models

Karen Chum, Elaine Y. Ho, Chingmy Leung MCS1

Introduction

Christians have very mixed or even paradoxical theological views on looking at divine providence in the context of prayers. The same Christian person can believe in several sets of apparently contradictory theological views at the same time with regard to providence and prayers.

Sometimes he believes in predestined providence when he prays, “Oh God! I know you have the best plan for me. Please show me the new job which you have prepared for me.” While at other times he believes that his prayers could make a real difference on God’s decision on providence, “Lord! I know You listen to my prayers. Please grant us a son as my wife and I have been barren for years.”

It is not uncommon to see that amongst many Christians, there exists an ostensible paradox between divine providence and prayers: If God already provides for everything, why should one even bother petitioning in prayers? Or on the other hand, if one’s petitionary prayers do change God’s plans, then what is the nature of His providence in the first place? The ultimate question remains: to what extent does God provide for His creation in the context of prayers?

This paper attempts to examine this seeming paradox between divine providence and prayers through consideration of different theological models. It will first start with the definitions of divine providence and prayer. Secondly, it will examine the paradox between providence and prayers through the consideration of three models: Calvinist, Arminian and Open Theism. Thirdly, the paper will put forward a new model in an attempt to address some of the issues raised in the three models discussed. Finally, the paper will conclude with a response to some of the contradictory theological views as can be observed in many lay believers as set forth in the introduction.

Definitions

While different models assume slightly different definitions on each of the below

terms, we will still attempt to give a general definition for both terms below to confine the scope of our discussion.

We are using one of the most popular frameworks in defining providence (with regard to God's preservation, concurrence and governance in relation to His creation) in the analysis performed in this paper. We do acknowledge this framework was originally proposed by the Calvinists.

Divine Providence

God's divine providence is generally being referred to as God's activity of preserving, concurring with, and governing over His whole creation.¹

Prayers

In the context of this paper, when the term "prayers" is mentioned, it usually refers to "petitionary prayers," unless otherwise specified.

Calvinist Model

A Description of the Calvinist Model

This section of the paper attempts to outline the major thoughts of "Calvinists" on the issue of divine providence and prayer. It is worthy to keep in mind that John Calvin and his predecessors did not have a uniform school of thought on this issue. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, the term "Calvinist Model" bears a general meaning, containing a combination of some of the thoughts by John Calvin and some of the thoughts by a few others Reformed Theologians on the above-mentioned issue as set out below.

Proponents of the Calvinist model define God's divine providence as including the below elements:

Preservation

God maintains and sustains the reality He has created by willfully allowing it to continue to function and exist.²

Concurrence

God concurs or cooperates with natural and secondary causes coming from the

¹ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume One* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 270-1.

² Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, ed. L. Arnold Hustad (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 129.

actions of His creation.³

Government

God governs the whole of creation so that all things work towards His decreed plan, albeit sometimes involving the “overruling the regrettable consequences of [human] freedom”⁴. His government of reality and history is “the actual execution, within time, of [H]is plans devised in eternity”⁵.

Calvinists assert that all things are within the realm of God’s providence.⁶ As God freely designs everything in His master plan while remaining consistent with His own attributes, Calvinists thus propose a no-risk model of providence where all things are predetermined⁷. Further, God is all-knowing about His own entire determined plan. And given God is timeless⁸, it is thus irrelevant to debate about God’s foreknowledge of the future as God’s knowledge is simply a knowledge of how He has determined the future to be.⁹

A fundamental feature of the Calvinist model involves a definition of human freedom as being volitional or voluntary. Calvinists think that human freedom is not libertarian of nature. Rather, it is permitted by God as He grants room for men to have choices under His determined plan.¹⁰

Under this premise, the act of praying itself is therefore also within God’s divine providence, which He has warranted and permitted in His determined plan. While petitionary prayers are never a natural human right¹¹ and they do not change what God has planned to do¹², they are means to fulfill God’s own decrees. God has ordained human

³ Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume One*, 270.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁵ Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 131.

⁶ Terrance L. Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 234.

⁷ With regard to God’s providential relationship with men, Paul Helm asserts a no-risk model arguing that risk is not an issue in this area. He proposes that human freedom is not indeterministically free. Rather, given that no personal relationship is free from influence, our relationship with God also cannot be constraint-free. Therefore, the closeness of a true relationship enables the parties involved to predict better each other’s response and thus eliminating the risk element. See, Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993; *Contours of Christian Theology*), 147-53.

⁸ Or “time-free” according to Paul Helm. See, Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 248, quoting Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 3-4.

⁹ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer*, 233.

¹⁰ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, trans. L. B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 140.

¹¹ Helm, *The Providence of God*, 153-4.

¹² Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 135.

choices to be made exactly in the way He has planned things to be.¹³ Also, prayers enable men to “reach those riches which are laid up for [them] with the Heavenly Father”.¹⁴

Calvinists suggest that a faithful person who recognizes that everything is overruled by God’s divine providence will automatically commit himself and rely solely on Him.¹⁵ Thus when one prays, he must pray according to how the Holy Spirit inspires him.¹⁶

In summary, Calvinists believe that God’s providence is manifested through detailed plan for His creation which He has predestined in eternity. Petitionary prayers are not futile because they are God-ordained actions to fulfill His decree. Human freedom is not jeopardized as it is defined as being volitional in nature, and is a permission from God under His plan.

An Examination on the Calvinist Model

It is important to note that a fundamental presupposition on the Calvinist model is on the definition of human freedom. According to Berkouwer as mentioned above, Calvinists’ definition of human freedom, where it is permitted by God under His plan, is Biblical.¹⁷ This definition of human freedom appears to be consistent with God’s sovereignty and omnipotence. Under this premise, the question of whether prayers can change God’s plans is irrelevant. Given men’s freedom to pray is already God-ordained by definition, therefore their freedom, as well as the results of their prayers, are also part of God’s plan.

In Exodus, there was an example where the Israelites worshipped a golden bull idol in the desert. This infuriated God and He wanted to destroy them. But Moses petitioned for the people and “then the Lord relented and did not bring on disaster on His people He has threatened” (Exodus 32:14). Opponents to the Calvinist model would argue that Moses’ prayer did change God’s plan. But according to the Calvinists, the very act of Moses’ petition was also part of God’s plan. Therefore he did not really change God’s plan but rather realized His decree.

Opponents to the Calvinists’ would challenge: why did God say He wanted to destroy the Israelites in the first place if He knew that Moses was to petition and in the end He was to spare the Israelites? In a more general sense, if God knew what His ultimate plans are, and

¹³ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 237.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, Vols. XX-XXI, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.20.2.

¹⁵ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 263.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁷ Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 138.

He knew that men were going to petition in prayer, then what was the point for Him to put forward something contradictory at the beginning, such that “men’s prayers will serve as means to His ends”? Calvinists may respond by saying that the act of praying may serve as a means to foster a closer relationship between men and God¹⁸. We also bear in mind that, as mentioned in Footnote 7 above, Calvinists believe that the closer a relationship between two parties is, the easier it is for the parties involved to predict each other’s responses¹⁹. However, more elaboration is needed to bridge the logical gap between prayers and a closer relationship between men and God, as these two are not natural cause and effect.

The issue of God-ordained prayers as mentioned above can also be seen from the opposite perspective. Can one pray about something which deviates from God’s master plan? According to the Calvinists, this is not possible since God ordains all of men’s prayers and the faithful will pray according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. However there really do exist instances where prayers of the faithful remain “unanswered” (for the purpose of this paper, an unanswered prayer means one which outcome does not take place according to the petition) or even never answered. This raises the question of why God would inspire the faithful to pray about something which is not in His plan, and which He knew He would not “answer” in the end? Opponents to the Calvinists may argue that surely this has nothing to do with bringing men closer to God through prayers. On the contrary, it might even have the negative impact of distancing men from God. Accordingly, the proposition of prayers serving as means to bring men closer to God needs further modification and elaboration here.

Moreover, the Calvinists’ notion of all things being outlined in God’s determined plan, or simply put, being predestined, raises another series of debates. It is hard to reconcile how a loving God would have predestined the occurrences of calamities and sufferings. And worse yet, how He would predestine some people to be saved and some not. If all things are predetermined, then what is the point for one to pray for peace in the world (when some wars are bound to take place as predestined), and to pray for the salvation of those predestined not to be saved? These issues demonstrate the deficiency of the presupposition of predestination of the Calvinist model. Consequently, the Calvinist model on prayer is also flawed in this aspect.

Arminian Model

A Description of the Arminian Model

¹⁸ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 259.

¹⁹ Helm, *The Providence of God*, 151-2.

This section of the paper attempts to outline the major thoughts of Arminians on the issue of divine providence and prayer. While also bearing in mind that there is no unified school of thought for the Arminians, for the purpose of this paper, the Arminian Model bears a general meaning, containing a combination of some of the thoughts by Jacob Arminius and some of the thoughts by some evangelical scholars in the modern world.

Divine providence as defined by the Arminians is set out below.

Preservation

God acts independent of all human beings by maintaining the contingent and dependent being of all creation. “The act of God is temporal – as continued through....the duration of things and not completed in a moment.”²⁰

Concurrence

God’s concurrence is in such a way that it removes immediacy of divine causality from the causal activity of the creatures.²¹ God has foreknowledge or “prescience” in that God has the divine ability to know with certainty things and events in the natural providential order that will occur in time as a result of contingent or secondary causes.

Government

God does not have specific and detailed plans or goals for each member of His creation²². Therefore, the free actions of humans are also part of God’s governmental working²³. In regard to God’s government of the world, a distinction should be drawn between the divine decree and the detailed providential order²⁴. God may sometimes intervene with His creation in uncommon ways of extraordinary events. This is referred to as His “special providence” and does not describe the way in which God usually governs the world²⁵.

²⁰ Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 246.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 243-55.

²² Jack Cottrell, “The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 107, quoted in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 338.

²³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 401.

²⁴ Muller, *God, Creation and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy*, 251.

²⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 339.

A fundamental assertion of the Arminians is that in order to preserve the real human freedom and real human choices that are necessary for genuine human personhood, God cannot cause or plan human voluntary choices, unless through His special providence as mentioned above²⁶. Accordingly, Arminians believe that God takes certain risks in His providential care.

Therefore, although human free will is preserved in the general sense, Arminians still allow for certain influences by God on men through prayers. Prayers exert “some kind of incomprehensible influence upon the wills of men”, which in a way impose limitations on human freedom²⁷.

It is interesting to note that Arminians have different camps of thoughts regarding God’s foreknowledge. Some Arminians assert that the omniscience of God does not mean exhaustive foreknowledge of all future events. Specifically, God does not know how human beings would make their choices in the future. On the other hand, other Arminians believe that God can see what will happen in the future, but it does not mean that God causes such events to take place. The third camp of Arminians proposes a “middle” knowledge where God knows all possibilities but does not determine the future choice people make.²⁸

An Examination on the Arminian Model

Arminians create logical problems on their views on *real human freedom* and *real human choices*. It is practically impossible if by “real human freedom” we mean voluntary, spontaneous and willing choices that are without any outside coercion or intrusion. Men are subjected to inevitable sets of constraints in making their choices. For example, the fact that God created this world and not another kind of world already imposes constraints to men’s choices. When men are faced with these constraints, they make them with their own “free will”, which can never be a real libertarian freedom that Arminians believe in.

Many Arminians believe that God’s providence does not include specific details in men’s lives as He allows men to have real human freedom. This proposition is implausible when Jesus specifically talks about God’s providence even for the sparrows in Matthew 10. The thought that God cannot cause or plan human voluntary choices unless through His "special providence" to human beings is also unconvincing. The term "special providence" as mentioned by Arminians is not address in details and sounds quite arbitrary. Such

²⁶ Ibid., 338.

²⁷I. Howard Marshall, “Predestination in the New Testament,” in *Grace Unlimited*, (place, publisher and date unspecified), 139-40, quoted in Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 341.

²⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 348.

statement is also inconsistent with the Scriptures when Jesus tells us "[a]nd even the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:30). It seems that Arminians treat their prayers as tools to force God to answer their petitions by adopting His "special providence" every time.

Some Arminians believe that God cannot see the future, while some other Arminians think that God merely has "middle" knowledge. Both camps contradict with the teachings of the Bible. In Romans 11:2, the Bible affirms that there are possibilities that God has foreknowledge. Moreover, God's providence is confined due to His lessened power and His ignorance of future, for it is doubtful how God guides men but does not predict the consequences of their future. Therefore, those Arminians' views are self-contradictory.

Arminians are also faced with a serious dilemma when approaching Isaiah 45:9-13, Jeremiah 18:1-6 and Romans 9. In those chapters, the subservience of humans to the sovereignty of God is clearly taught. With this divine capability, God need not wait until we pray to activate the answer.

Furthermore, Arminians believe that prayers can make a difference or can change God's will which implies that God's exhaustive control over the world is denied, as some things can occur that He does not will or want to occur or vice versa. This effectively undermines His sovereignty. Moreover, certain things that God wishes to do for us may not be possible because we do not ask. It might be objected that God, being omnibevolent, must always bring the most valuable thing to us, whether He is asked to do so or not.

Another problem may arise if a man prays for something that would involve third parties, whose freedom may be affected by God answering the prayers of the petitioner. There is a contradiction between God affirming a person's freedom by answering to his request (or his choice), and at the same time the very act of granting this freedom intrudes into the freedom of another person.

Finally, there are examples in the Bible where prayers do not change God's wills (Numbers 23:19), nor do they change His essence (Malachi 3:6). In reality, men do not always receive what they ask for in prayers. Even God's son, Jesus asked for the removal of the cup before His crucifixion (Matthew 26:39,42), Paul prayed thrice for the removal of his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7). In both cases the petitions were not answered. Arminians fail to account for the discrepancy of such occurrences with a future where details are not determined but only provided through men's free choices.

Open Theism

A Description of the Open Theism Model

This section will discuss the general theological framework of the Open Theist model on the issue of divine providence and prayer.

Open Theists focus their discussion regarding divine providence on God's governance of His creation, and God's concurrence with human beings. However, we shall attempt to deduce their definition of providence from their arguments using the general framework of providence proposed in the introductory section of this paper.

Preservation

Though not explicitly mention, it could be deduced that Open Theists believe in God's preservation of His creation by purposefully allowing it to continue to function. As Open Theists believe in God's concurrence and governance, and such attributes of divine providence will be meaningless in the absence of God's preservation.

Concurrence

God concurs with human beings as they make free, genuine choices that craft the reality of the world. Thus, this reality is a collaboration between God and men.²⁹

Government

God governs over His creation by granting them libertarian freedom to make genuine choices. The future for the most part is open to allow human free choices, while God does have certain "goals" and "purposes" which are destined to be achieved.³⁰

Providence in Open Theism is a manifestation of God's love for men.³¹ Such love requires freedom.³² Therefore, though God is omnipotent, He has freely limited Himself from total control over human activities by granting libertarian freedom to men.³³ Consequently, history and the real world are the results of the collaborations between the two

²⁹ Richard Rice, "Preface," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.

³⁰ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 72.

³¹ Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 21.

³² Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, 71.

parties.³⁴ “In Open Theism, Providence is a big risk, and God is the ultimate chess player, who is constantly thinking out strategies, depending on the moves men make.”³⁵

As a result, the future is open for the most part despite God does have some good plans and purposes for all human beings in general, or “ultimate goals”³⁶ as they are called, that are predestined to be achieved.³⁷ However, men abuse the use of their freedom or turn away from God’s love from time to time. This is the cause of “un-wanted events” happening in the world. Therefore, to accomplish God’s ultimate goals, He “has reserved Himself the right to intervene forcefully when it is absolutely necessary”.³⁸ This preserves His sovereignty as no creature’s petition can change God’s ultimate purposes.

Since future events are not predetermined, petitionary prayers are of paramount importance in determining the actual outcome of events.³⁹ However, God has no obligation to do whatever men ask Him to. He decides on His actions depending upon whether the requests fall outside of the boundary of a “suitable system”, or whether they are good or harmful to men.⁴⁰

Open Theists believe that prayers may perhaps expand the providence from God. There are specific goods that people will only have if they ask God for them, and specific evils that may occur if God’s people do not pray for their prevention.⁴¹ Nevertheless, men’s petitions are not the cause of God’s response but because of God’s love, He takes the initiative in respond to our prayers.⁴²

Furthermore, petitionary prayers can even be viewed as opportunities for morally mature individuals to grant God the permission to influence their minds and enlighten their thoughts, in order to help them to lead better Christians’ lives.⁴³

It is worthy to note that an inevitable question that arises from an open future is its relation to God’s omniscience. Open Theists affirm that God is omniscient. Their fundamental argument is over the definition of the reality that God is omniscient about⁴⁴. They assert that it is “logically impossible for God to have foreknowledge of creaturely

³⁴ Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 16.

³⁵ Iain D. Campbell, “Open Theism,” 2001; available from http://www.backfreechurch.co.uk/Studies/open_theism.htm (cited 12 Nov 2004).

³⁶ Rice, “Preface,” 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer*, 72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁰ David Basinger, “Practical Implications,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 158-9.

⁴¹ Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* 72.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102

⁴³ Basinger, “Practical Implications,” 162.

⁴⁴ Gregory A. Boyd, “The ‘Open’ View of the Future;” available from http://www.opentheism.info/open_view_of_future,_boyd.htm (12 Nov 2004).

actions that are truly free.”⁴⁵ Therefore, by saying that God does not have knowledge of the outcome of truly free actions, which logically cannot be known, does not compromise with God’s omniscience⁴⁶.

Instead, Open Theism holds that the future where God is omniscient about “is partly composed of indefinite possibilities as opposed to...exclusively composed of definite realities”⁴⁷. In addition, God’s foreknowledge contains knowledge of what God has decided to bring about unilaterally, and those events that are determined to occur.⁴⁸ Hence, it is not the case that anything can happen; the future is partly open and partly settled.⁴⁹ For example, God predestined the death of Jesus and without predestining which individuals would disapprove him.⁵⁰ Likewise, we cannot choose our parents, but most of us can choose our spouses.

An Examination on the Open Theism Model

Open Theists’ attempt to offer a resolution on the problem of evil and suffering seem to have missed out the real existence and the significant role of evil power. They believe that “the potential for evil lies in the nature of free will. Once God gave people this freedom, the purpose for their actions lies in them, not God.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, they cannot account for sufferings that are neither accountable to human beings nor to God - an example of which is Job’s experience in the Bible.

Open Theism downplays the total sovereignty of God and thus demeaning the perfection of an omniscient God. It challenges God’s immutability and impassibility. Rather than providing guidance and providence to us, God seems to be helpless and unreliable. He has no plan for the future and takes risks in it. These all implies that He is not a perfect God, who does not know what is the best of the future. If this is the case, petitionary prayers become extremely important because Open Theism implies that God’s providence may possibly be absent if we do not pray. If this is the case, is it possible that men are

⁴⁵ William Hasker, “The Openness of God,” p. 10, 1998; available from http://www.opentheism.info/hasker,_csr.htm (12 Nov 2004).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷ Boyd, “The ‘Open’ View of the Future.”

⁴⁸ John Sanders, “Does God Know Your Next Move?” *Christianity Today*; Vol. 45, No. 7 (21 May 2001): p. 38; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/007/39.38.html> (cited 12 Nov 2004)

⁴⁹ Gregory A. Boyd, “The Classical View of Divine Foreknowledge,” in *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 32-3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁵¹ Boyd, “Questions and Objections,” in *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 99.

overvaluing petitionary prayer as a tool to secure their lives? In other words, are men primarily responsible in determining their own lives?

Also, by placing primary emphasis on God's love for human beings, Open Theism fails to encompass God's other significant attributes such as righteousness.

Further, Open Theists often use the terms "ultimate goal" and "final purpose." According to Boyd, some of these ultimate goals are "God's ultimate victory over Satan and all forces of evil who have aligned themselves with Him," and others that are shown in the Scripture. However, he also claims "God providentially determines particular future events to the extent required for his ultimate goals to be attained."⁵² This raises ambiguity as to what these "particular events determined" by God are. Also, the use of "ultimate goals" seems arbitrary. When something happens after men petition in prayers, they would still never know if that event is what God originally has determined (if it is one of His "ultimate goals") or if God has taken their requests in prayers as a guideline to exercise His providence. It is difficult to understand that if God already has "good purposes" for men in general, then what is the necessity of the prayers to initiate men-God collaboration to determine the future? Does it imply that the God's "good purpose" is not the best plan for men?

Moreover, Open Theists have difficulty in accounting for Biblical prophecies because their basic claim is an entirely open future in general. Interestingly, they defend that both Jesus' foretelling of Peter's denial and Judas's betrayal are accounted for by Jesus' perfect prediction,⁵³ which they argue fall into the category of God's actions in fulfilling His plan. This defense seems to be arbitrary if not self-contradictory.

Open Theists emphasize that prayers serve as tools for men to suggest to God how the future should be, such that men and God can construct the future together. Prayers thus become extremely meaningful in this model. However, the nature of God's providence becomes debatable as a result. First, men do not know whether these uncertain outcomes they pray for are the "final purpose" of God, and thus suggesting their prayers are meaningless as these outcomes are already determined by God in eternity. Secondly, if these uncertainties are not God's "final purposes", His providence is largely limited due to His diminished sovereignty and His ignorance to the future where His actions can only come afterwards. Indeed, God's providence becomes insignificant according to Open Theists' arguments.

⁵² Ibid., 145.

⁵³ Boyd, "The Classical View of Divine Foreknowledge," in *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, 35.

Summary of Examinations

After examining three different models (Calvinist, Arminian and Open Theism) on divine providence and prayers, we hereby summarize our observations. We challenge the Open Theism model in that it diminishes the sovereignty of God. We agree with the assertion by certain Arminians that although God foreknows all of our choices, we still make these choices out of our freewill nonetheless. However, we appall the assertion by certain Arminians, like the Open Theists, that God leaves the details of men's future open and He allows men to decide on these details, and thus demeaning God's sovereignty. While bearing in mind the shortfalls in certain aspects of the Calvinist model as discussed earlier (e.g. regarding God's predestination), we still prefer this model amongst the three discussed. Not only is the Calvinist model the most developed and refined, but it also upholds God's sovereignty. Generally, it can reconcile the controversial issues of human free-will, foreknowledge, prayers and providence.

Therefore, in an attempt to resolve the ostensible paradox between divine providence and petitionary prayers, we put forward our model below. Our model is based on the Calvinist model and on which we have made certain modifications in response to its shortcomings.

Our Proposed Model – Modified Calvinist

Given our model is Calvinist based, our basic definition of divine providence (on God's preservation, concurrence and government) is the same as that described under the section titled "Calvinist model". Below is a development of our model which one will find to be Calvinist-based with modifications.

God provides for every detail in our lives (Matthew 10: 29-31). Given God is omniscient, He of course foreknows all that will take place in eternity. However, this does not mean that God predestines by forcing us to make our choices in ways to fulfill His decree⁵⁴. Rather, human beings still make their own free choices.

Here, we need to clearly define the term "human freedom". We acknowledge that human beings have freedom to make their choices and should be responsible for the

⁵⁴ God's foreknowledge of the future does not imply the necessity or predetermination of how an event will take place. His foreknowledge implies that something "will not happen otherwise" but not that it "cannot happen otherwise," the latter of which means God has predestined the outcome. See Carver T. Yu, "God's Foreknowledge and Human Freedom – An Attempt for a Resolution" (lecture notes distributed at the course of Doctrinal Theology (1): God and Revelation, China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, 16 Nov 2004).

consequences of their choices. However, this freedom is not libertarian in nature. But rather, it is “constrained”. First, the fact that God chose to create this world as opposed to other worlds imposes restrictions to human beings⁵⁵. That is, human beings live in this particular world and thus are subject to rules and restrictions which are real attributes of this world. Secondly, we often make choices based on experience and by taking into account of other factors (e.g. how our decisions will affect ourselves or others). Thirdly, as we are all corrupted by sin we can never choose good out of our own free will (unless through God’s grace)⁵⁶. Therefore, it is logically impossible for human beings to have true libertarian freedom. Nonetheless, though we are subject to certain sets of constraints in making our choices, we still make these choices out of our own free will.

God is omniscient as mentioned and so He knows how we are going to make our choices, especially with the constraints we have. He knows whether we will choose “right” (things that please Him) or “wrong” (things that do not please Him). But it is still our free choice.

God knows when we will pray too. Though prayers are foreknown by God, we do not pray as though we are puppets. Rather, we pray out of our own free will as circumstances arise.

When we pray, we make requests to God. As an almighty God, He knows what we are going to ask for even before we pray. As mentioned above, although God knows the content of our prayers He did not force us to make such requests. Rather, we engage in petitionary prayers at our own free choice as circumstances arise. Thus while nothing comes as a surprise to God, the content of prayers is still out of human free will.

Prayers are means to allow us to get to know God’s will better regardless of what the outcome of the prayers are, that is, whether they are “answered” (the definition of which is set out under the section titled “Calvinist Model”) or not.

God knows how things will take place (that is, the outcomes of prayers) since He is omniscient. If our prayer is answered, it is very easy to conclude that the outcome is part of God’s plan and it pleases Him. However, even if our prayer is unanswered, the outcome is also part of His plan. The process of praying and then the prayer not being answered is actually part of God’s providential care in which we can know Him better and to be brought closer to Him. This is because even if the requests are not granted, a stream of comfort will

⁵⁵ This concept is inspired from Carver T. Yu, “Sin” (lecture discussed at the course of Doctrinal Theology (1): God and Revelation, China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, 9 Nov 2004).

⁵⁶ Carver T. Yu, “Human Freedom” (lecture discussed at the course of Doctrinal Theology (1): God and Revelation, China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, 9 Nov 2004).

come into our heart as the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. The Holy Spirit will lead us closer to the truth and thus closer to God.

With the above in mind, how do we understand what Jesus said in Matthew 7:7, “Ask, and it will be given to you”? When we ask for something that is compatible with God’s will, it will be given to us. If we ask for something that is not compatible with His will, our providential God still provides the best for us even though it may not necessarily be what we have in mind originally. And equally important, He provides the experience such that we can better comprehend His will and understand His love and grace. .

The acts of making choices, praying, God answering (or not answering), and then making choices again constitute a recurring process. Whether a person chooses to seek God’s will through prayers in his next decision is entirely his free choice. If one chooses not to seek God’s will again, this does not mean that God’s providence will cease. God still provides for the person in the sense that He opens up possibilities and creates circumstances for the man to be able to make free choices, though the results of such choices may not be pleasing to Him.

There is more to whether God answers a person’s prayer or not. Prayers allow men to foster a closer relationship with God, and to seek for the accomplishment of His will (Matthew 6:10). Therefore, the whole recurring process of choices, prayers and outcomes, as mentioned above, is also part of God’s providential care for men.

Conclusion

We humbly admit that the relationship between God’s providential care and prayers remain a mystery. However, we give our best efforts to try to articulate this concept as much as possible with men’s limited wisdom and logics, in order to help lay Christians to understand more about this mystery in the context of their faith.

We recognize that the framework of providence that we used in this paper (on preservation, concurrence and governance), whilst popular amongst academics, is nevertheless somewhat Calvinist in nature. Therefore, if we were to use a different framework in defining providence, a different conclusion may occur.

Our model is an attempt to clarify some of the ostensible paradox between divine providence and prayers faced by many Christians. As a conclusion, we firmly believe we can confidently proclaim God’s divine providence to all Christians, and also to all of mankind. God is faithful, caring and loving. As stated in James 1:6-8, God will listen to our prayers when we pray with faith. As mentioned above, whether our prayers are

answered or not may not be the most important part. Rather, prayers foster a closer relationship between men and God. When we pray humbly, persistently and with an obedient heart, an unanswered prayer will not affect our trust in God. On the contrary, the whole recurring process of “free-choices”, prayers and outcomes, as mentioned above, will allow us to continue to seek His will and quest to be closer to Him.

Our sovereign God’s divine providence never ceases, even though we sometimes make choices that are against His will. As Christians who have experienced God’s mercy, our response to His unfailing providential care can only be with awe and thanksgiving.