

Divine Providence as Risk-Taking

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the precise way it may be said that God takes risks in creating and governing this world. In order to articulate this model of providence various texts of scripture are studied which have either been overlooked or interpreted differently in discussions of divine providence. These texts reveal a deity who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with creatures, a God who is genuinely responsive and who may be said to take risks in that God does not get everything he desires in these relationships. Furthermore, the traditional texts used to defend the no-risk view of providence are examined and shown that they do not, in fact, teach the idea that God is the cause of everything which happens in the world such that the divine will is never thwarted in the least detail. The biblical teaching of God in reciprocal relations with his creatures is then discussed in theological and philosophical terms. The nature of God is here understood as loving, wise, faithful yet free, almighty, competent and resourceful. These ideas are explicated in light of the more traditional theological/philosophical understanding of God. Finally, some of the implications of this relational model of God are examined to see the ways in which it may be said that God takes risks and whose will may be thwarted. The crucial watershed in this regard is whether or not there is any conditionality in the godhead. The no-risk view denies, while the risk model affirms, that some aspects of God's will, knowledge, and actions are contingent. In order to grasp the differences between the two models the doctrines and practices involved in salvation, the problem of evil, prayer and guidance are examined to see what each model says about them. It is claimed that the relational or risk model is superior to the no-risk model both in terms of theoretical coherence and the practice of the Christian life.

Key Words: Divine providence; divine sovereignty; evil; human freedom; omniscience; omnipotence; love; foreknowledge; risk; prayer; contingency; divine will; divine plan; divine-human relationship.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: The Nature of the Task	6
2.1 Metaphors and Models	6
2.2 Criteria	7
2.3 Anthropomorphism	12
2.4 A Shared Context	17
2.5 Two Objections	21
2.5.1 God as Wholly Other	21
2.5.2 The Appeal to Antinomies	28
2.6 Conclusion to Chapter Two	33
Chapter Three: Old Testament Materials for a Relational View of Providence Involving Risk	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.2 The Creation and its Divinely Established Conditions	37
3.3 Freedom Within Limits	44
3.4 The Implausible Happens	46
3.5 God Suffers on Account of His Sinful Creatures But Will Not Abandon Them	50
3.6 The Divine Purpose: Creating a Relationship of Trust	52
3.7 God May Be Prevailed Upon	57
3.8 Joseph, a Risk-Free Model?	58
3.9 God Works with what is Available	60
3.10 Divine-Human Relationality in the Covenant	68
3.11 Divine Goals with Open Routes	71
3.12 Excursus on Divine Repentance	75
3.13 Divine Wrath and Mercy Within the Context of 84 Covenantal Relationality	84
3.14 The Absence and Presence of God	88
3.15 The Potter and the Clay: an Examination of So-Called Pancausality Texts	91
3.16 Divine Love and Humiliation	101
3.17 Conclusion to Chapter Three	102
Chapter Four: New Testament Materials for a Relational View of Providence Involving Risk	104
4.1 Introduction	104
4.2 The Baptism	105
4.3 The Birth of Jesus and the Bethlehem Massacre	106
4.4 The Temptation of Jesus	109
4.5 Confession and Transfiguration	111
4.6 Compassion, Dialogue and Healing Grace	112
4.7 Gethsemane: The Pathos of Jesus	115
4.8 The Cross of Jesus	122
4.9 The Resurrection	127
4.10 Grace, Judgment and Humiliation: Divine Love in Jesus' Teaching	130
4.11 Various Texts on Providence	135
4.12 Conclusion to the Life of Jesus	139
4.13 The Jeopardy of God's Project in the Early Church	142
4.13.1 Acts 10-15	142
4.13.2 Romans 9-11	147
4.14 The Nature and Goal of the Divine Project	152
4.15 Eschatology and Providence	154
4.16 Excursus on Predictions and Foreknowledge	160
4.17 Conclusion to Chapter Four	169
Chapter Five: Risk and the Divine Character	173
5.1 Introduction	173
5.2 Summary of a Risk View of Providence	175

5.3	The Nature of the Divine Risk	177
5.4	The Divine Character and Providence	181
5.4.1	Introduction	181
5.4.2	Love	184
5.4.3	Wisdom	193
5.4.4	Faithful Freedom	195
5.4.5	Almightiness	204
5.5	Excursus on Omniscience	212
5.5.1	Introduction	212
5.5.2	The Main Alternatives	214
5.5.3	The Uselessness of Simple Foreknowledge for Providence	220
5.5.3.1	Introduction	220
5.5.3.2	Sin and Divine Risk	224
5.5.3.3	Damnation and Divine Risk	226
5.5.3.4	Divine Guidance and Protection	226
5.5.3.5	Mistakes and Divine Predictions	228
5.6	Conclusion to Chapter Five	229
 Chapter 6: Applications of the Risk Model of Providence		232
6.1	Divine Sovereignty	232
6.1.1	Introduction	232
6.1.2	Types of Relationships	233
6.1.3	Specific Versus General Sovereignty	237
6.1.3.1	Specific Sovereignty	237
6.1.3.2	General Sovereignty	239
6.1.4	Divine Permission	245
6.1.5	Human Freedom	250
6.1.6	The Concept of Divine Self-Limitation	257
6.1.7	Can God's Will be Thwarted?	262
6.2	Divine Purpose With Open Routes	266
6.3	Salvation and Grace	273
6.3.1	Introduction	273
6.3.2	The No-Risk Model of Salvation	274
6.3.3	The Relational Model of Salvation	280
6.3.3.1	Sin	280
6.3.3.2	Contingency in God	281
6.3.3.3	Grace for Fellowship	283
6.3.3.4	Some Objections	285
6.3.3.5	Conclusion to Salvation	292
6.4	Evil	292
6.4.1	Introduction	292
6.4.2	Evil and the No-Risk Model	295
6.4.3	Evil and the Risk Model	301
6.4.3.1	The Divine Project	301
6.4.3.2	Gratuitous Evil	305
6.4.3.3	Natural Evil	308
6.4.3.4	Jesus is God's Answer to Evil	310
6.4.3.5	Questioning God's Wisdom	312
6.4.4	Conclusion to Evil	315
6.5	Prayer	315
6.5.1	Introduction	315
6.5.2	The No-Risk and Prayer	316
6.5.3	The Risk Model and Prayer	319
6.6	Divine Guidance	325
6.6.1	The No-Risk View of Divine Guidance	325
6.6.2	The Risk View of Divine Guidance	327
6.7	Conclusion to Chapter Six	330
 Chapter Seven: Conclusion		331
 Bibliography		334

Chapter One: Introduction

The police car, lights flashing and siren roaring, sped past me as I was driving home. When I reached the stop sign at the corner I could see several police cars and an ambulance up ahead at the scene of an accident. Since I worked for the local newspaper as a photographer I decided to take some pictures of the accident. When I reached the scene I could see a semi-truck blocking the road, a motorcycle laying on its side, and a white sheet covering something near the truck. Everyone just stared at me which I thought was strange until someone came up to me and said, "You don't want to take any pictures here, that is your brother Dick under the wheels of that truck." The next few minutes are a blur in my memory but I do recall that when I got home I went to my room and put this question to God: "God, why did you kill my brother?" As I look back on this question I am fascinated that I asked it since I was a nominal Methodist at the time and I did not believe that God caused everything which happened. Perhaps I had picked up from the broader culture the belief that God was the cause behind everything, including all tragedies. In years to come many a Christian would attempt to provide me with "good" reasons why God ordained my brother's death. Such discussions have spurred my reflection on divine providence for over twenty years.

The belief that God is the ultimate cosmic explanation for each and every thing, including all bad things we experience, is quite widespread, at least in North America. At the funeral service for the death of a young child whose parents were close friends of mine, the pastor said, "God must have had a good reason for taking her home." Of course, "taking her home" is a euphemism for God killing her. In a little while the euphemism wore off and the parents inquired as to why God killed their daughter. Several weeks later when I was visiting these friends they put the question to me: "Why did God kill our baby girl?" They were angry with God but did not feel safe to cry out in lament at church for they were told that God's ways are best and it is sin to question God. In answer to their

question I sought to provide them with a different model of God--the one explained in this thesis. But the point I wish to make here is that there is a fair amount of anger and even hatred towards God both in and outside the church. Anger directed at a particular model of God.

After talks had broken off between Iraq and the United Nations over the invasion of Kuwait, then Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, said, "War is now in God's hands." When former president of the United States, Gerald Ford, heard this statement he remarked, "I wish it were, I'd feel a lot better about it." Is it the case that de Cuellar's remark manifests, while Ford's comment lacks, faith in divine providence? Not at all. But it might be the case that they reveal different understandings of providence. The two major models of divine providence are the no-risk and risk views. According to the no-risk understanding no event ever happens except that God specifically selected it to happen. Nothing is too insignificant for God's meticulous and exhaustive control. Each and every death, civil war, famine, wedding, peaceful settlement, or birth happens because God specifically intends it to happen so God never takes any risks that things will turn out differently than God desires. According to the risk model of providence God has established certain boundaries within which creatures operate but God sovereignly decides not to control each and every event. Some things go contrary to what God intends and things may not turn out completely as God desires. Hence, God takes risks in creating this sort of world. It is commonplace for some theologians to claim that only the no-risk model affirms divine sovereignty. That is, they believe that divine sovereignty, by definition, means exhaustive control of all things. However, this claim is questioned in this research. We should not dictate the sort of providence God must exercise. Instead, we should look to see what sort of sovereignty God has freely chosen to practice. Providence refers to the way God has chosen to relate to us and provide for our well being. Consequently, God may or may not have chosen to exercise no-risk sovereignty. We have to observe what God has chosen to do in history.

Yet, it is probably the case that most Western theists have thought that God does not take any risks in governing the world. After all, if God is a God of order then there is no room for a God who, in the words of Einstein's famous phrase, "plays dice with the world." Yet, views are changing in science, philosophy, and theology from a deity who is the "will-to-power" to a God who is the "will-to-community," a God who desires to be in relationship to all his creatures and who desires a personal relationship with humans. The task of this thesis is to give a coherent account of what is involved in the divine-human relationship and to explicate, from within this view, the ways in which divine providence is risk-taking. The sensibilities of many people will be shocked by the notion that God is a risk-taker for the metaphor goes against the grain of what we have become accustomed to think regarding divine providence. Theorists on metaphor, however, hold that a good metaphor is supposed to challenge conventional ways of looking at things and suggest an alternate perspective. Metaphors disclose a way of viewing life and relationships yet metaphors may also conceal things from us. When certain metaphors, such as God as king, reign for so long in theology we risk being conditioned to overlook aspects of our relationship with God. When this happens we need new "iconoclastic" metaphors which reveal to us something that was missing. It is my contention that the metaphor "God the risk-taker" does this in that it opens up new ways of understanding what is at stake--even for God--in divine providence. Things which may have been overlooked in the biblical record by exegetes as well as in our theology and liturgy.

It should be pointed out that thinking of God as risk-taker only makes sense within a particular theological model: a personal God who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures. Neither an impersonal deity nor a personal deity who meticulously controls every event takes risks. In order to articulate the heuristic value for the Christian life of God the risk-taker a model of God as a personal being who enters into personal relationships with us must be established. In order to explicate the model of a God involved in personal relationships who takes risks with his world several tasks must be

accomplished. These tasks are done in the various chapters of the thesis. Chapter two will discuss various methodological matters important for assessing the success of the proposal. The next two chapters will examine the Old and New Testament material supporting this model. These chapters look at biblical texts which are commonly ignored or radically reinterpreted in order to remove the element of risk from divine providence. Focus will be on the nature of God and the divine project this God has undertaken. Chapter five seeks to develop, in light of the biblical material, the nature of the God who undertakes the project of entering into reciprocal relations with the creatures. The attributes of God should not be arrived at dignum Deo (what it is dignified for God to be) but, rather, by looking at the particular sort of project God is seeking to accomplish. When this is done it becomes clear that the classical attributes of God need some revising. The final chapter spells out the practical implications of this model of God for the Christian life. Comparing and contrasting different views is one way of clarifying positions. To this end the risk and no-risk models of divine sovereignty are compared regarding several key areas of providence: salvation, suffering and evil, prayer, and guidance. It will be argued that it makes a significant difference for the devotional life which view of providence one affirms. Moreover, issues such as whether or not the divine will may be thwarted in any respect and whether God's plan for the world is a blueprint or only concerns general overall strategies will be explored.

At this juncture I would like to make a number of qualifications. To begin, this thesis is constructive. That is, it attempts to develop a particular theological model rather than critique a standard position. Although there will be times for critique that is not the primary goal. Second, I am not writing a general treatise on the doctrine of providence covering all the topics normally examined in such works. Rather, it is an examination of providence through the lens of divine risk-taking. Consequently, those aspects of providence which are studied are done so to see what should be said concerning a risk-taking God. Third, I have no delusions that this study will settle all the questions for I am all too

aware of the work which remains to be done. Fourth, though this work will touch repeatedly on the subject of theodicy, it is not a book about the problem of evil. Instead, it is about a personal God who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with us. From this particular model of God implications may be drawn out for the problem of evil.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help provided by Terence Fretheim, Mike Holmes, William Hasker and David Basinger who were kind enough to read various chapters and give me their responses. Also, thanks goes to Dean Fredrikson, my colleague and dialogue partner on this topic for over fifteen years. Last, but certainly not least, is Adrio König who has given me guidance and sometimes spirited debate in order to improve this thesis. I am truly thankful to God for the opportunity to work with these scholars and complete my doctorate.

Chapter Two: The Nature of the Task

2.1 Metaphors and Models

The working out of a theological project is done within a framework of beliefs regarding methodology, epistemology and language. This chapter discusses these sundry issues in order to inform the reader regarding some of the broader theological context in which the present study is done. The first topic of discussion is about language. In this thesis metaphors matter for it is through various metaphors that we understand and relate to God.¹ By use of metaphors we organize and give meaning to all of our experience, they are basic to all thought and language. They are "reality depicting" in that what we understand to be real is filtered through them.² They help us make sense of things with which we are initially unfamiliar by making comparisons. When we assert that Elvis is the king of rock and roll we make a comparison between kingship and this particular singer's relation to other rock and roll singers. When we assert that God is king of the earth we also make a comparison between kingship and God's relation to the world. Metaphors have the peculiar quality of saying that something both "is" and "is not," that is, in a certain respect what is asserted is correct but it is not the whole story.³ Saying God is a rock tells us something about God but not all that needs saying for we need a number of metaphors to describe God and God's relationship to us. Yet, metaphors--even those about God--are reality depicting in that they tell us of a real relationship between God and the world. If we claim that metaphors depict nothing about God or portray no genuine relationship then we have severed God from the world and we are locked into silence about God.

¹Helpful on the application of metaphors to God is Terence E. Fretheim, The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1-12.

²See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Janet M. Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). On the primacy of metaphor for developing a post-critical philosophy see Jerry H. Gill, On Knowing God: New Directions for the Future of Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

³See Sallie McFague's two works: Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) and Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

Theological models, whether in science or religion, embody a key metaphor or cluster of metaphors which guide our reflection and application to life. Certain metaphors function in a comprehensive way in that they come to "control" or "orient" our thought and life about particular subjects and so may be called key models.⁴ Key models or "root metaphors" offer sustained and systematic reflection upon a topic in order to give coherence and meaning to our experience. They also shape the way we live since key models seek to provide comprehensive life applications. Different key models give rise to different theologies.⁵ Many of our theological disputes arise because we look at the "evidence" through different models. For instance, the model of God as the immutable king is employed by classical theism to view the biblical texts on divine repentance as anthropomorphisms so that God never actually changes his mind.⁶ The metaphor of divine immutability also shapes the way one practices the Christian life (e. g., prayer). The model of a personal God who takes risks understands divine repentance and prayer differently. Models make a difference in how the biblical text is read as well as in how we live out our faith.

2.2 Criteria

Any theological model must meet three criteria in order to qualify for having "public intelligibility."⁷ Intelligibility or rationality is a communal rather

⁴The term is borrowed from Vincent Brümmer's The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 20. The following discussion is indebted to him. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), calls these "control beliefs."

⁵See my "God as Personal," ed. Clark Pinnock, The Grace of God, The Will of Man (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 165-180. Also helpful on models in theology are: Hans Küng, Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View, tr. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988) and John Goldingay, Models For Scripture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁶For more on this see 3.12.

⁷Excellent discussions of these and additional criteria may be found in Christoph Schwöbel, God: Action and Revelation (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 132-152, Brümmer, Model of Love, 22-9, and David L. Wolfe, Epistemology: The Justification of Belief, Contours of Christian Philosophy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 43-69. Schwöbel and Wolfe are particularly helpful in situating the criteria into the larger "practical"

than merely a private affair, so I include the word public. In order to be "rational" a model must meet the rules of intelligibility established by the community in which one advances the proposal. There are three criteria for evaluating a theological key model. The first criterion is consonance with tradition. Since it is theologians who develop theological models and theologians are socially located in particular traditions, any proposed model must reach a significant degree of harmony with the authoritative sources of that tradition. In the case of Christian theology the primary standard, or the norming norm, is the Bible and especially the gospel of Jesus. If the model does not resonate with scripture overall along with the person and work of Jesus in particular it cannot, with integrity, be called Christian. Moreover, all theologians belong to particular traditions of interpretation of scripture. We are Roman Catholic or Orthodox or Protestant, not to mention the various subtraditions in each of these communities. Any theological model not only has to resonate with scripture, it must also find a place within the religious tradition of the audience to whom the proposal is being made.⁸ The problems we select to address, the evidence we cite, the interpretation we give to the evidence, and the rhetoric we use to communicate our proposals owe a great debt to the communities to which we belong. This does not rule out reforms, even significant ones, within our traditions, however, for they are not static. From time to time barnacles and other accrustations need to be and are removed if the tradition is to make better headway in the world. Yet, any new proposal must have a fair degree of continuity with the intentions, functions and material content of the doctrinal positions of the tradition if it is to find a hearing.

project of making sense of life. Overall, my general epistemological approach is known as "critical realism." Critical realism seeks to overcome the dual myths of pure objectivity and pure subjectivity by noting that all understanding involves both elements. On this see Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 185-226, and Arthur F. Holmes, Contours of a World View (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 145-152.

⁸See the stimulating work by David S. Cunningham, Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

The second criterion is conceptual intelligibility. In order for the model to make sense the set of concepts entailed must be unpacked to see whether they are internally consistent, coherent with other beliefs we affirm, comprehensive in covering the range of relevant considerations, and communicable to others. If a concept is contradictory it fails a key test for public intelligibility for what is contradictory is not meaningful. Furthermore, if concepts integral to the model are mutually inconsistent it calls the coherence of the model into question.⁹ A model with too many internal tensions lacks cohesiveness. Regarding comprehensiveness, theological models highlight certain aspects of the faith while overlooking others. The more comprehensive a model is in covering the range of relevant considerations the more satisfactory it will be. Brümmer puts it well when he says, "a systematic theologian is required to develop a suggested theological key model derived from the cumulative tradition, coherently and comprehensively, in order to see what it entails for the whole conceptual scheme of the faith: which elements of the tradition will be highlighted and which will be filtered out or overlooked?"¹⁰ I would add that a proposed model may afford fresh insights into cherished aspects of the faith as well as relieve certain tensions regarding the faith inherent in a different model. All models have costs in that they have strengths and weaknesses. The determination of what is "too costly" is influenced by the particular lenses through which the evaluator is looking. Thus, what may be considered a strength by one person may be viewed as a weakness by another. Concerning communicability, it may be said that all rationality presupposes communities of language users and people committed to the project of sense-making. Rationality is never a merely private affair for the standards of rationality are dependent upon the traditions of specific communities. In Christendom, if you wish to communicate rationally to others then you must do so with logical consistency and coherence or you forfeit the right

⁹For a detailed examination of the "coherence" condition see Richard Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11-50.

¹⁰Brümmer, Model of Love, 25.

to claim public intelligibility for your model.

The third criterion is adequacy for the demands of life. The proposed model must be relevant to the real life situations faced by the community. The theological model needs to help us in our relationships to God, others, the creation, and ourselves. It must be found useful in enhancing such activities as prayer, comforting the suffering, and acting responsibly in the world. Not only must the model be judged as to whether it is adequate on the corporate level, it must also be evaluated on the individual level. Though all of us are situated within specific communities we, nevertheless, have our own personal experiences and identities which shape our evaluation of any particular model concerning its adequacy for helping us cope with life. Hence, everyone will not necessarily evaluate the model in the same way. Yet, the fact remains that theological models have to demonstrate their value in the lives of the people of faith.

This thesis attempts to address the model of divine providence as risk-taking in light of these three criteria. To this end use is made of biblical, systematic and philosophical theology. Chapters three and four seek to demonstrate consonance between the risk model of providence and the Bible. It is important for theologians not merely to reflect on the Bible but to actually examine in detail particular biblical texts. Historical theology--tracing what the tradition has said on the subject--is also important but, having already done that work elsewhere, I shall not repeat it here.¹¹ Yet, it should be noted that the no-risk model has a head start of some several hundred years. Hence, theologians employing it have had ample time to respond to questions of interpretations of various biblical texts and questions pertaining to the nature of God and the Christian life. It cannot be expected that the risk view of providence will be able to immediately handle all the questions thrown at it. Nevertheless, this thesis represents a sustained attempt to develop and substantiate the risk model

¹¹See my, "Historical Considerations," Clark Pinnock, et. al. The Openness of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

of providence. For some time now there has been a new wave of critical reappraisal and responsible reconstruction regarding the doctrine of God. Old views of God are either dying or are seriously ill, in need of healing. This study is an attempt to bring healing to certain aspects of the God of classical theism.¹² Chapter five and parts of the other chapters utilize philosophical theology in order to show the conceptual intelligibility of this model by looking at its internal coherence and answering questions regarding certain "problems" this view might be thought to engender. Finally, chapter six draws upon systematic theology to probe how this model affects other important doctrines and to see whether the model of a risk-taking God is adequate to the demands of the life of faith. It is important that all three disciplines function together since biblical scholars may be unaware of theological or philosophical paradigms through which they view the text and theologians and philosophers may be unaware of what the biblical texts actually say about the matter upon which they are reflecting.

It will be argued that the no-risk model of God has, in some respects, strayed from its scriptural moorings, fallen into incoherence, and failed to meet the demands of the practice of faith. The project here undertaken will develop the model of God as risk-taker and explore the implications of such a model for the life of faith.¹³ Yet, because the arguments put forth are all situated within

¹²I am not alone in this undertaking. Something that surprised me as the study unfolded was the number of Reformed (Dutch Reformed in particular) thinkers who support the risk model. Things are certainly changing in Reformed theology!

¹³Any new proposal will be viewed with skepticism by some: Could so many theologians and philosophers have been wrong? Whether they were wrong on this issue remains to be seen. That they have been wrong on many other issues is historically clear. After all, certain "clear" passages of scripture were used in the past to justify a geocentric solar system, deny women any relief from the pain of childbirth, justify persecution of the Jews, and legitimize slavery of blacks. It is fascinating that until the late 1800's most Christian theologians used the Bible to sanction slavery and that, in America, many southern clergy took up arms against the "infidel" northern clergy because they believed the Yankee Christians were rejecting the clear truth of the Bible! In this case the southern Christians were the biblical conservatives while their northern counterparts were the liberals. See Kevin Giles, "The Biblical Argument for Slavery: Can the Bible Mislead? A Case Study in Hermeneutics," Evangelical Quarterly 66, no. 1 (Jan. 1994): 3-17.

a contextual web of belief, those who do not share my larger web of belief are not likely to agree with my conclusions. Moreover, I make no pretensions of "proving" my case. Rather, this thesis is an attempt to offer, what may be called, a cumulative case in support of divine risk-taking. It is not the only model a Christian may be rationally justified in holding. But I do believe it is superior to the no-risk model of providence in having greater fidelity to the biblical story, a more coherent view of the nature of God, and better understandings of the life-application issues such as evil, prayer, guidance and a personal relationship with God.

2.3 Anthropomorphism

The metaphors and models we use to speak about God and God's relationship to the world are all anthropomorphic. There is simply no getting around this. Some have found this situation quite troubling. It is quite commonplace for people to assert that God is so transcendent that we cannot know what God is truly like. When human traits such as having eyes, feelings or changes of mind are attributed to God the charge of impropriety is raised. We cannot, it is claimed, bring God down to our level and impose human logic and language upon God for God is utterly transcendent. Did not the prophet Isaiah chide his contemporaries for making idols of the incomparable God. He says of God, "to whom would you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike?" (45:5, cf. 40:18, 25). Later he says, "for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9). This text has become the classic text among theologians and philosophers to affirm the absolute transcendence of God. The Isaiah passages along with other biblical texts declaring that God is "not a human being" (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Hosea 11:9) are often understood as biblical warrant for the disparagement of anthropomorphism.

Philosophers have long criticized the ascription of human characteristics to

deity. Not long after Isaiah the Greek thinker, Xenophanes, railed against anthropomorphic deities saying that "if oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen."¹⁴ In the Eighteenth century David Hume, arguing against "natural religion," has one of his characters say that he is scandalized by the anthropomorphic character of natural theology's arguments for God. It is degrading to the deity to assume that the divine mind is just like a human mind. "[S]o near an approach we never surely can make to the Deity. His ways are not our ways. . . . [W]e are guilty of the grossest and most narrow partiality, and make ourselves the model of the whole universe."¹⁵ In the Nineteenth century Ludwig Feuerbach launched a trenchant critique against all anthropomorphism by claiming that Christendom had created a God in its own image. He says that humans create God by making God into our antithesis: "God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful."¹⁶ According to Feuerbach, this God is a purely human creation, a genuine anthropomorphism so that the attributes of the divine nature are really attributes of human nature. Hence, theology is merely anthropology.

Since this thesis makes much use of anthropomorphism it is important to respond to these objections. First, as Karl Barth points out, the Bible does teach the hiddenness and incomprehensibility of God. God is not knowable unless God makes himself known and even then we do not possess a complete understanding of God. But Barth goes on to say that this hiddenness is not due to the inadequacy of human language and thought for talk of God, nor because of any metaphysical distinction between the abstract and the sensual. Instead, the

¹⁴Cited in W. T. Jones, A History of Western Philosophy: The Classical Mind, second ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 19.

¹⁵David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 156.

¹⁶Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, trans. George Eliot, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 33.

incomprehensibility of God is based on the creator/creature distinction which comes to us from divine revelation.¹⁷ Moreover, an additional reason for divine incomprehensibility is due to the personal nature of God for persons are not capable of being fully circumscribed by definition and language.¹⁸

Second, Fretheim notes that there are two ironies involved with the depreciation of anthropomorphism by theologians.¹⁹ First, it is a distinctive of Israelite religion, in contrast to the other ancient Near Eastern religions, that anthropomorphic metaphors predominate.²⁰ If we dismiss them we lose much of the Hebrew Bible. Also, it is ironic that Christians would disparage anthropomorphism since Jesus is the consummate anthropomorphism! Moreover, the charge may be reversed: God's concern for justice and love is not anthropomorphism, rather our concern for justice and love is a theomorphism!²¹ Humans are created in the image of God so the human must be seen as a theomorphism. This is the stance of the Christian faith.

Third, yet humans as sinners are not theomorphic for we fail to love, seek justice and forgive. This is precisely what Isaiah meant by "my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways." Unfortunately, this text has for so long been understood as a philosophical timeless truth--God is ontologically and epistemologically wholly beyond us--that it is commonplace for contemporary theologians, as diverse as Gordon Kaufman, John Macquarrie, J. I. Packer and Geoffrey Bromiley, to use this verse as a general principle espousing human

¹⁷Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 2.1, 179-254.

¹⁸See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 302.

¹⁹Fretheim, Suffering of God, 6.

²⁰See the studies by Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets, in 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 2. 48-58, and Adrio König, Here Am I: A Believer's Reflection on God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 59-109.

²¹See Heschel, The Prophets, 2.51-2, and Fretheim, Suffering of God, 11.

inability to understand the divine nature and activities.²² But Isaiah is not establishing axioms about transcendence. Rather, he is informing his people that they may feel safe in returning to Yahweh, despite their previous idolatry, because Yahweh is a God who pardons and shows mercy on sinners. He implores the Israelites to return to Yahweh because Yahweh is not like us humans--he forgives! (see Hosea 11:8-9). It is because God's character is different from human sinfulness that God seeks genuine reconciliation and healing for their wounded relationship. This and similar texts refer to character differences between God and humans not ontological and epistemological differences. For Isaiah, God is incomparable to humans in that he loves those we would not. Hence, the real paradox is not between God as the absolute and God as anthropomorphic but between God's grace and human sin.²³

Neither can other biblical texts be used to support the teaching of an abstract transcendence and immutability. Numbers 23:19 refers to God's steadfast loyalty to the people he brought out of Egypt--he will not change his mind and curse his people no matter what religious rites the prophet Balaam performs. In 1 Samuel 15:29 Samuel declares that God will not take back his decision to remove Saul's kingship. God will not change his mind about this matter. These texts pertain to specific divine decisions based on particular human situations. They do not describe an abstract transcendence.

The fourth point is that the term anthropomorphism may have a narrow or broader meaning. The narrow sense refers to speaking of God having human characteristics such as emotions or eyes. Anthropomorphism may be used more broadly in the sense

²²See Gordon Kaufman, Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 120 n. 4, 302; John Macquarrie, God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 213; J. I. Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 24; and Geoffrey Bromiley, "Providence" in G. Bromiley ed. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.1021.

²³See Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1 286-7, and G. C. Berkouwer, The Providence of God, tr. Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 209.

that all our language about God is human language. Whether we use abstract or concrete terms for God, we are being anthropomorphic since we are drawing our ideas from human experience.²⁴ When humans use language it is human language we use to speak about anything--from God to black holes. Even terms such as infinite, actus purus, omnipotence and Being Itself are anthropomorphic in that they are human words, metaphors applied to God. Consequently, if we are to talk of God then our choice is between using anthropomorphisms or being locked in the frozen silence of absolute ineffability.

The biblical writers repeatedly use a wide array of anthropomorphisms for God. God is said to hear, speak, see, and smell. God is faithful, wise, longsuffering and loving. God plans, chooses and acts. God suffers grief and joy, sorrow and delight. God is depicted in the familiar human roles of father, mother, husband, shepherd and king. God is also theriomorphized as lion, lamb and vulture and physiomorphized as fire, wind and fountain of water.²⁵ Nonetheless, all of these descriptions are by human authors and so they are anthropomorphic in the sense of using human language to refer to God. Finally, these anthropomorphisms are vitally important for they depict God in relation to us and cannot be rejected unless one desires to deny God's covenantal relationship with us.

²⁴See Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1 pp. 222 and 265, Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, tr. Darrell Gruder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 258-260 and Berkouwer, Providence, 73.

²⁵For more on these see Gary Alan Long, "Dead or Alive?: Literality and God-Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 62, no. 2, (Summer, 1994): 521-3 and G. W. Bromiley, "Anthropomorphism," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1.136-7. Nelly Stienstra, YHWH is the Husband of His People: Analysis of a Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993), pp. 55-9, distinguishes between literal and metaphorical anthropomorphisms. Metaphorical anthropomorphisms depict God in roles which he obviously cannot perform literally such as being the husband or father of Israel. The biblical writers understood that they were speaking metaphorically in such cases about the kind of relationship between God and Israel. Literal anthropomorphisms occur primarily in Genesis and Exodus where God is depicted as walking and calling out to Adam (Gen. 3), visiting Abraham as one of three men and declaring that he has come down to investigate the outcry from Sodom to see just what is the case (Gen. 18), wrestling with Jacob (Gen. 32), and standing in front of Moses, Aaron and the elders who actually "see God" (Ex. 24:9-11).

The main point I wish to make thus far is that we cannot escape anthropomorphism when speaking of God any more than we can escape it when speaking of our dogs or computers. Human words are all we have to speak about anything and we shall have to content ourselves with this situation. The choice before us, argued the ancient skeptic, Carneades, is that any notion of God will either be anthropomorphic or meaningless.²⁶ If, he says, we claim that God is infinite, unlimited and immovable then we do not have a being which we can know and so it is a meaningless concept. If we think of God as personal, living and interacting with us then we are speaking anthropomorphically.

2.4 A Shared Context

Speaking of God anthropomorphically will be seen as legitimate if we have a proper understanding of where we stand in order to talk about God. Adrio König points us in the right direction when he says, "we have no knowledge of God other than in and through his participation in our history."²⁷ Aquinas said that "we come to know and name God from creatures" meaning that all of our knowledge of God arises from within the created order.²⁸ Many centuries earlier Hillary of Poitiers said, "we must believe God's word concerning Himself, and humbly accept such insight as He vouchsafes to give. [We must believe] in Him as He is, and this in the only possible way, by thinking of Him in the aspect in which He presents Himself to us."²⁹ In a quite straightforward manner Hillary says that the Bible, with all its anthropomorphism, nevertheless presents God as he truly

²⁶See Charles Hartshorne and William Reese eds., Philosophers Speak of God (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 416.

²⁷König, Here Am I, 111.

²⁸Aquinas, Summa Theologica, ed. Anton C. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945), 1, q. 13, a. 1.

²⁹Hillary of Poitiers, On the Trinity (4.14), in Philip Schaff ed. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 9.75.

is.³⁰ If the Bible gives a correct view of God then this implies that God knows how to use human language and concepts such that they are adequate for understanding that which God desires us to understand. In order for this to be the case we must presuppose a shared context between God and the creation.³¹ By context I mean our language, history and spatio-temporal world. This is our context and the biblical revelation asserts that God shares that context with us by being in relation to us. In relating to us God communicates and acts in the created order--our context.

The creation is different from God, but no more different than God intended it to be.³² If that is the case then the only way of knowing just how different we are from God is by God revealing that to us. According to the Bible God is a distinct ontological other from us: God is not the world. Yet, we come to know this from God's relationship to us in the world. Fretheim remarks that "at least since the creation of the heavens and the earth, God has been related to the world from within its structures of time as well as those of space."³³ What we know of God is through his relationship to the creation; his involvement with us in our context. We can know that God existed apart from the world even though we only come to know that from within the world. We know nothing of God apart from God's relationship to the world. Does this mean that God has no being apart from the creation? No! It only means that we have no knowledge of God apart from the way he has created us and revealed himself to us. Brian Hebblethwaite says, "If God creates a temporally structured universe, then, whatever his own eternal

³⁰Language serves as an intermediary for God and if it represents God then we must think (de dicto) of God sharing some of the same characteristics of reference as we experience. When I say the words of the Bible depict what God is really like I do not mean that my knowledge of God is direct or complete. But I do want to say that we have no basis for claiming that the true being of God (theologia) is any different from the revealed God (oikonomia).

³¹The notion of a shared context is insightfully discussed by Frank G. Kirkpatrick, Together Bound: God, History and the Religious Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³²I owe this insight to my colleague Dean Fredrikson.

³³Fretheim, Suffering of God, 40.

being may be he must relate himself to his creation in a manner appropriate to its given nature, i. e. temporally."³⁴ Although the possibility exists that God's eternal being may be different from the way God relates to us, we have no way of knowing it is different and no reason to say it is different unless we wish to deny God's revelation to us in history. We know nothing of a God unrelated to us.

Does this imply that God is literally like us? John Macquarrie observes that all talk of God, whether in terms of symbols, metaphors or models, ultimately returns to some core likeness between God and the creatures or it lapses into agnosticism.³⁵ Does this mean that God shares some of the same (univocal) predicates with creatures or only similar (analogous) ones?³⁶ It would seem that even those who defend the doctrine of analogy presuppose that in some respects similarities between God and us are univocal.³⁷ Even Aquinas held that the "universal" terms, such as being, good and living, are not used metaphorically for God but "absolutely," "properly" and "literally."³⁸ Even those who practice negative theology apply such predicates as incorporeality and immutability in a literal way to God. Thinkers as diverse as John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, George Berkeley, William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Thomas Tracy and Paul Helm

³⁴Brian Hebblethwaite, "Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge," Religious Studies 15 (1979): 436 (italics mine).

³⁵Macquarrie, God-Talk, 220-1.

³⁶Eric Mascall, a proponent of analogy, seems to suggest that there is an infinite difference between the analogates when speaking of God and humanity. If so, then the doctrine of analogy fails to give us any knowledge of God. See Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 40-1. Jüngel, God as the Mystery, 260-1 claims that the doctrine of analogy was developed to abrogate the scandal of anthropomorphism. Vincent Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 43-51, provides some further substantive criticisms of the doctrine of analogy.

³⁷Douglas Kelly chides me for taking some of the biblical descriptions of God univocally. What an irony that a conservative evangelical theologian criticizes me for taking the Bible seriously! Kelly, however, seems to believe that terms such as "infinite" and "uncreated being" are used univocally of God. See his "Afraid of Infinitude," Christianity Today 39, no. 1 (Jan. 1995): 32-3.

³⁸Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 1, q. 13, a. 3.

all agree that there must be a "hard literal core" or "univocal core" to our talk about God.³⁹ There must be some properties which, when used of God, are used in the same sense as when we use them of things in the created order or we will be back in the cave of agnosticism. If God shares the same context with us, as the biblical revelation presupposes, then we have a basis for our hard literal core.

What sort of terms qualify as part of this hard literal core? The most basic one, according to the biblical portrait, is God as personal. God is portrayed as a being who relates with other beings; who loves, suffers, intends, enacts intentions, responds to others, etc. Minimally, we see God as a personal agent. When God is said to be a husband, father and friend, these metaphors are dependent upon the literalness of God being a personal agent.⁴⁰ Apart from personhood they make no sense. Saying God is personal is to affirm anthropomorphism. If God is a personal agent, then there is a shared context and anthropomorphism is inescapable. The fear of some, at this point, is that if we cannot escape anthropomorphic language for God then we will create God in our own image. But this need not be the case. Frederick Ferré points out that anthropomorphism should not be equated with anthropocentrism (the former is inescapable while the latter is not).⁴¹ Moreover, there are numerous safeguards in the biblical literature to help keep us from such idolatry.

³⁹Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, 51-87. Swinburne cites Scotus and Ockham on pp. 74-6. George Berkeley, Alciphron, 4.21 in Ed. Mary Calkins, Berkeley: Essay, Principles, Dialogues (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929); William Alston, "Can We Speak Literally of God?" Divine Nature and Human Language (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 39-63; Thomas Tracy, God, Action and Embodiment (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 152; Paul Helm, "The Role of Logic in Biblical Interpretation," in Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus eds., Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 853.

⁴⁰Moreover, there is something that is literally true of God's relationship with us communicated by the richness of the metaphors. Metaphors embrace and do not rule out literalness in the sense that they do tell us something about that which we are speaking. However, affirming univocity does not commit us to the "picture theory" of meaning where one word refers to one empirical referent.

⁴¹Frederick Ferré, "In Praise of Anthropomorphism," in Robert Scharlemann and Gilbert Ogutu eds. God in Language (New York: Paragon House, 1987), 182-193.

Finally, it must be noted, Jesus is the consummate anthropomorphism: "the Logos became flesh and blood and tabernacled among us" (John 1:14); the person who has witnessed Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9); Jesus is the "exact representation of the divine nature" (Heb. 1:3) in whom "deity dwelled in bodily form" (Col. 1:15-20, 2:9). If the incarnation is true and Jesus experienced full human life, then God relates to the world in precisely the same way we do. We do not have to rely on the doctrine of analogy since Jesus is the consummate revelation of God in human form. The divine self-disclosure in Jesus puts an end to the claim that being in the form of a human is contrary to the divine nature. To overturn this we would need a priori knowledge that the divine nature is completely unlike human nature which would render an incarnation impossible.

2.5 Two Objections

2.5.1 God as Wholly Other

The history of Western thought is replete with people who have heaped scorn on the notion of God sharing the same context with us and the "scandal of anthropomorphism" this entails. Instead, these thinkers argue God is infinite and wholly other than we are. The Pre-Socratic philosopher, Anaximander, said that the ultimate metaphysical principle necessary to make sense of our lives cannot be found within the realm of existence. Instead, we must posit what he called the "unlimited" which is totally beyond anything we know. It is utterly ineffable for the unlimited has no predicates. Plato believed we have to ground our rationality in something other than our existence. He dismisses the stories which the Greek poets wrote of the gods as being anthropomorphic and searches instead for that which is perfect, timeless and immutable. This he finds in the realm of the Forms which exist outside our spatio-temporal world.⁴² Aristotle posited a God: a consciousness thinking on itself which exists beyond the conditions of time. These thinkers set the stage in the Western tradition for saying both that "God" is

⁴²Whether Plato believed we could know the essence of the Forms is a matter of debate. Middle Platonism said this was impossible by reason but was possible by mystical encounter.

wholly other and that we must posit such an idea because it serves a vital role in our metaphysics. Hence, assuming the existence of an ultimate metaphysical principle, or "God," is necessary for thought even though the essence of this principle is wholly beyond our understanding.

The Jewish thinker, Philo of Alexandria, places Plato's Forms in the mind of the Jewish God. Nevertheless, he affirms that we cannot know God's essence or say anything about it since to say something is to define it and to define is to limit. Since God is unlimited we are consigned to silence. Philo seeks to escape this transcendental agnosticism by saying that though we could not speak of the divine being itself we can speak of its existence since we see the effects it produces as a cause of the world. A good number of pagan and Christian thinkers have followed Philo in saying that we cannot know the essence of God--who God really is.⁴³ The philosophical and theological attack on anthropomorphism centers on the thesis that we cannot know the essence of God.

Jumping ahead to the modern era, Immanuel Kant held that the noumenal realm is beyond our knowing so God is unknowable. But like the classical tradition, Kant says we must posit the existence of the noumenal realm as a ground for certain practices in life ("God" remains useful for us). God is wholly other than we can know but we must assume a transcendental ideal (the unconditioned condition) in order to explain our own existence. Gordon Kaufman uses the word "God" as the symbol for the ultimate mystery behind human existence.⁴⁴ He speaks of the "real God" which is completely ineffable and the "available God" which is a human construct via our theological imagination. Although we are cut off from knowing anything about this mystery we are forced to construct models of God in order to give meaning to our lives. Kaufman believes God is infinite and so all human

⁴³See Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, 232-245.

⁴⁴See his In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God (Philadelphia: Westminster press, 1981); and God the Problem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

language is inappropriate. Thus, he heaps ridicule on any anthropomorphic conception of God--especially personalistic ones. According to John Hick, God is outside all human experience and language so we cannot talk about God for to do so implies that God is an object within human experience.⁴⁵ The finite cannot contain the infinite so no human thought or words are able to grasp the being of God. There is simply no way of knowing what God really is, whether personal or impersonal. Thus, says Hick, the major religious traditions are all attempts to express the infinite mystery behind the human phenomena we call religious experience. A common thread running through all these thinkers is the belief that there is an infinite qualitative difference separating divinity from humanity.

The appeal to God's absolute infinity argues that thinking of God as personal in a literal way overlooks the fact that the word "personal" when used for God is actually a finite symbol for the infinite which lies beyond the personal. Depicting God in personal symbols, as in the Bible, limits God. J. N. Findlay charges that it is "wholly anomalous to worship anything limited in any thinkable manner."⁴⁶ To say that we can only speak of God within our boundaries is to commit ourselves to belief in a "finite" God.

There are, however, some major problems with claiming God is infinite and wholly other. To begin, the assertion that God is unlike anything in the world may be understood in at least two different senses. Thomas Morris observes that it could mean either (A) God is not completely like anything in the world, or (B) God is completely unlike everything in the world.⁴⁷ It is one thing to assert that God does not share all properties with anything else, but it is quite another matter to say God does not share any properties with anything else. Clearly, I am

⁴⁵John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴⁶Cited in Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 46.

⁴⁷Thomas Morris, Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 20.

rejecting this latter notion.

Furthermore, if "infinite" means without any predicates from within the spatio-temporal realm then we are committed to agnosticism about anything transcendent. Since all of our thought and language occur within this realm we are cut off from that which is beyond it. Søren Kierkegaard understood that our "understanding cannot even think the absolutely different."⁴⁸ If "the finite cannot contain the infinite" then all revelation of God in history, any incarnation and all knowledge of God within the spatio-temporal realm are ruled out. Hick and Kaufman, of course, are more than willing to make such concessions. Yet they still desire to claim that "God" or "the Real" exists. But Feuerbach's criticisms are devastating at this point when he says that what is completely ineffable lacks predicates and what has no predicates has no existence: "the distinction between what God is in himself, and what he is for me destroys the peace of religion, and is. . . an untenable distinction. I cannot know whether God is something else in himself or for himself than he is for me."⁴⁹ If the qualitative difference between God and humanity is infinite then there is no correspondence between God and his revelation, which makes it nonsensical to speak of "revelation" at all.⁵⁰ Thus, it would seem that those who affirm that God shares no properties with anything in the created order are committed to silence concerning anything transcendental (despite their continued talk of it!).⁵¹

Moreover, how do those who claim that the finite cannot contain the infinite

⁴⁸Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, trans. Howard Hong & Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 45.

⁴⁹Feuerbach, Essence of Christianity, 16.

⁵⁰See Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 41 and Stephen Davis, Logic and the Nature of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 142.

⁵¹Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, 158, asserts that those who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of God do not differ from skeptics or atheists.

know this to be the case? It is logically possible that the transcendent is beyond human knowing, but how does the person affirming this know that it is? When McFague claims that all human language "applies properly only to our existence, not God's" how does she know this is the case?⁵² Is she somehow able to discover the real nature of transcendence and inform the rest of us that we cannot speak about it properly? Such people claim both that something is unknowable and that they know something about the unknowable. If someone says, "human language and logic do not apply to God," on what basis can this possibly be affirmed? The answer traditionally given is: on the basis of a preconceived idea of God whereby we begin with a definition of God derived from what is "fitting" for God to be. In the Western tradition it has been judged fitting for God to be outside the spatio-temporal realm and beyond all human speaking and knowing. The problem with this tactic is that the conclusion is affirmed precisely on the basis of human language and logic! That is, we are using human language to speak about something so transcendent and unrelated to us that it is totally ineffable. But if this is so, then how can we say or know anything, including the existence, of this something since existence and transcendence are human thoughts? Tillich sought to evade this difficulty by saying that God did not exist, but was rather "Being Itself." This tactic fails, however, for the term Being Itself is still within the realm of human language and logic and so seeks to communicate something about the transcendent.

What these thinkers are attempting to arrive at is a concept of the ultimate metaphysical principle which transcends all concepts. Kierkegaard scornfully described this quest as "the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think."⁵³ Kirkpatrick correctly says, "an idea or concept of that which transcends all concepts is a contradiction in

⁵²McFague, Models of God, 39.

⁵³Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, 37.

terms."⁵⁴ Vincent Brümmer asks, "if none of our concepts are applicable to God, how can we indicate who it is that we consider to be indescribable?"⁵⁵ According to Kaufman and Hick, it would seem that we cannot and so Feuerbach's question returns: how do they know this something exists at all outside of their own mental constructs?⁵⁶

Why would anyone posit something like divine transcendence outside the boundaries of human language and thought? Perhaps the most common answer is that many people believe that we need a transcendent ground to our existence. Hence, it is the enterprise of providing a "sufficient reason" for our existence.⁵⁷ In this schema the idea of "God" is a functional concept fulfilling a felt human need: God is the tree supplying the lumber for our transcendental building projects. Of course, our assuming it does not mean it exists or does not exist. We are not able to escape our context to establish transcendence.

Can it be appropriate to speak of God being limited (i. e. with qualities and predicates) in any way? Yes. Feuerbach correctly says, "To the truly religious man, God is not a being without qualities, because to him he is a positive, real being. . . . The denial of determinate, positive predicates [to God]. . . is simply a subtle, disguised atheism. . . . Dread of limitation is dread of existence. . . . A God who is injured by determinate qualities has not the

⁵⁴Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 23. He adds, 47, that our speculation about the otologically transcendent tells us more about ourselves than about whether it really exists. Mathematicians have attempted to arrive at the set of all sets. See Timothy J. Pennings, "Infinity and the Absolute: Insights into our World, Our Faith and Ourselves," Christian Scholars Review, 23, no. 2 (Dec. 1993): 159-180.

⁵⁵Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 38.

⁵⁶On the subjectivism of Hick see Paul R. Eddy, "Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal," Religious Studies, 30 (1994): 467-478.

⁵⁷Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 31, is correct that the "principle of sufficient reason" is the motive behind this move.

courage and the strength to exist."⁵⁸ Moreover, all of our thought and language assumes limitation. If we say that God is not the world, but is other than the world, then God is limited for God is not everything which exists. To be an "other" is to already experience limitation. Any statement about God is a limitation for it implies one predicate rather than another.⁵⁹ If we say that God is personal, then God is limited to not being impersonal. Anything we say about God, or God says to us, involves limitations. Either God is unlimited and thus unknowable or knowable and thus has some limits. Consequently, the issue is not whether we must think of God under limitations, but which ones. Those in agreement with Findlay's claim that we should not worship something with any limitations will perhaps find Yahweh--the God of the Bible--disappointing.⁶⁰

It is commonplace for theologians to claim that biblical anthropomorphisms are "accommodations" on God's part to our limited abilities to understand. But how is this known? It seems by first postulating a most perfect infinite being (dignum Deo) and then looking at the biblical revelation. Since the biblical depiction of God does not measure up to this supreme being, the doctrine of divine accommodation is enacted to protect the Bible from charges of falsehood. I do not wish to deny the possibility that God has understandings which may be beyond us. But lurking behind the notion of divine accommodation seems to be the idea that some people know for a fact that there is a divine language which God is unable to use when addressing us. Since God must use our cultural-linguistic context it is seen as impossible for God to communicate with us who God really is. The one asserting this must first demonstrate knowledge that God cannot do this, that it is impossible for God to be involved with us. I do not believe it possible to substantiate such a claim.

⁵⁸Feuerbach, Essence of Christianity, 14-15.

⁵⁹For more on divine limitation see chapter 6 (6.1.6).

⁶⁰See David Clines, "Yahweh and the God of Christian Theology," Theology 83 (1980): 323-330.

As creator, there is a fundamental creator/creation distinction which enables us to say that God "transcends" space, time and the other aspects of the boundaries of created being in the sense that God establishes the parameters for our existence. The doctrine of creation ex nihilo implies that God is ontologically distinct from the creation and not identical with it. So, in a sense, we may say that God is "outside" the world since God is not a creature. This does not, however, mean that God is beyond being for this sort of talk is self-refuting since it never escapes the language of being.⁶¹ But our knowledge of God as creator comes from "inside" the world. We do not reach from the inside to the outside. God reaches us as an insider. Our knowledge and language cannot go beyond the parameters God established for us as creatures. We cannot think and speak of God other than as a being in relation to us. Those who claim that God is completely transcendent in the sense of being outside our boundaries are claiming more than is proper. Any statement we make about God and any statement God makes to us will be from within the conditions God established at creation. All this is to say that the assertion "God is infinite" (totally unlike us) is not a meaningful assertion and arguments based on it should be viewed skeptically.⁶²

2.5.2 *The Appeal to Antinomies*

The second major objection to my view of the divine-human relationship occurring within a shared context arises from theologians who claim that this position ignores the role of paradox and antinomy in theological discourse. Reformed evangelicals, for instance, tend to claim not that everything about God is beyond us, but only that some aspects of deity or the God-human relationship transcend human intelligibility. For purposes of discussion I will distinguish between paradox, mystery and antinomies. Paradoxes are puzzling remarks which go against our normal way of thinking and mysteries are statements which are beyond our

⁶¹See Keith Ward, Rational Theology and the Creativity of God (New York: Pilgrim, 1982), 62.

⁶²See Pennings, "Infinity and the Absolute," 178-9.

ability to fully comprehend. Yet neither of these are nonsense or self-contradictory. Antinomies, however, are statements which are either self-contradictory or inconsistent when taken together with other claims. Evangelical theologian J. I. Packer cites as examples of this sort: the trinity as three in one; the incarnation where the infinite becomes finite or the eternal becomes temporal; and the sovereignty of God and human responsibility.⁶³ Antinomies are on the order of square circles and colorless red cars. Packer says that the biblical revelation contains several claims which simply cannot be reconciled in this world.⁶⁴ Donald Carson agrees: "for us mortals there are no rational, logical solutions to the sovereignty-responsibility tension."⁶⁵

These theologians claim, however, that although antinomies are contradictions for us, they are not for God. They hold that doctrines such as divine sovereignty-human responsibility are only apparently contradictory. That is, they may be genuinely contradictory for us but they certainly are not contradictory for God. It is sometimes said that human logic depends on time and space (the boundaries) so our logic cannot be applied to the way God operates because God is outside of space and time. Even though we are unable to reconcile these truths, God knows how to do so. After citing the "my thoughts are not your thoughts" of Isaiah 55:8, Packer says of the biblical antinomies, "we may be sure that they all find their reconciliation in the mind and counsel of God, and we may hope that in

⁶³Packer, "Paradox in Theology," in eds. Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright and Packer, New Dictionary of Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 491. Perhaps another example, occurs in 1 Samuel 15 where Samuel declares that "Yahweh changed his mind about Saul being king" (15:11 and 35) and also says that God "will not change his mind" (15:29). But this is only an antinomy for those who believe it impossible for God to change his mind. For those who believe God can and does change his mind verse 29 means that God is not going to change his mind in this particular situation regarding Saul.

⁶⁴Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 24.

⁶⁵Donald Carson, Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), p. 218. Though Carson goes on to say that he does not believe the two are actually self-contradictory. But if not, then where is the problem?

heaven we shall understand them."⁶⁶

Several points may be made in response to the appeal to antinomy.⁶⁷ Although the appeal to mystery and paradox are justified, the appeal to antinomy is illegitimate for several reasons. To begin, there is the problem of claiming that an antinomy is only an apparent contradiction. When logicians say that something is apparently contradictory they mean that it only looks, but is not actually, inconsistent for the statements in question can be shown not to be contradictory. If the doctrine of the trinity is either a genuine contradiction or not contradictory at all, then it is not appropriate to call it an "apparent" contradiction.⁶⁸

Moreover, the suggestion that certain doctrines are genuine contradictions for us but not for God is illegitimate since the claim is unknowable. Unless God informs us that such is the case we have no way of knowing. At this point Packer and Carson claim that God has, in fact, told us about such antinomies in scripture. For example, they hold that the Bible teaches both exhaustive divine control over all events and that humans remain morally responsible.

Though most Christians understand the Bible to teach divine sovereignty and human responsibility, they do not understand the Bible to define sovereignty or responsibility in ways that entail a contradiction. In order for there to be an antinomy the terms have to be understood in a certain way. Sovereignty has to be

⁶⁶Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 24. One wonders why we shall be able to understand them in heaven. Will we then escape the boundaries? Will God grant us a different logic? These are possibilities but what reason do we have to expect them?

⁶⁷For further discussion see David Basinger, "Biblical Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?" Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 30, no. 2 (June 1987): 205-213 and Paul Helm, The Providence of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 61-6.

⁶⁸Thomas Morris argues that the doctrines of the trinity and incarnation are not, in fact, contradictory. See his The Logic of God Incarnate (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

defined as meticulous divine control of every single event including human actions, and human freedom must be defined in "libertarian" (indeterministic) terms as the ability to do otherwise than even God desires. Only with something like these definitions will we arrive at a genuine antinomy. Carson and (I believe) Packer affirm exhaustive divine sovereignty but they do not agree with this definition of human freedom. Instead, they opt for "compatibilism" where we are free so long as we act on our desires. Consequently, divine determinism and human responsibility are compatible. But if so, then there is no antinomy because meticulous divine sovereignty is reconcilable by human logic to a compatibilistic understanding of human freedom. Moreover, many theists accept libertarian freedom but understand the biblical teaching on divine sovereignty as "general providence" rather than meticulous providence.⁶⁹ Hence, we have a difference of interpretation of scripture, but neither view entails an antinomy.

Furthermore, even if there are antinomies in scripture where does it say in scripture that such antinomies are not genuinely contradictory for God? How, for instance, does Packer know that the trinity or the divine sovereignty-human freedom antinomies are not illogical for God also? On what basis does he claim to know that God's logic is different from ours? It may well be, but how does he know? The appeal to Isaiah 55:8-9 will not work for, as Helm notes, it is "to be understood as referring to the power of divine grace, not to a logic-transcending omnipotence."⁷⁰

A final point against the antinomy objection is that it seeks to escape from the rules surrounding intelligibility. What philosophers call contradiction, some

⁶⁹David Ciochi's, "Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 37, no. 3 (Sept. 1994): 395-412, correctly points out another problem with the appeal to antinomy: if the antinomy is "intelligible" then there can be no reason to affirm that a logical reconciliation is impossible. Unfortunately, although he acknowledges different understandings of human freedom, he fails to take seriously other views of divine sovereignty. He simply assumes his meticulous providence view is the biblical view.

⁷⁰Helm, "The Role of Logic in Biblical Interpretation," 843.

theologians refer to euphemistically as antinomy or logical paradox. In doing theology we simply have to "play by the rules" of the game and one of these rules is that our discourse must make sense. Interestingly, theologians who claim the right to be inconsistent expect us to make sense of what they are saying. My position here does not rule out paradox and mystery (as defined above) or metaphors and riddles. My position simply excludes discourse about that which lies outside the boundaries of what we can know and experience--that is, nonsense. Davis agrees: "Like it or not, we are stuck with these limited minds of ours; if we want to be rational we have no choice but to reject what we judge to be incoherent."⁷¹ If theology and talk about God is supposed to be intelligible and intelligibility is defined, in part, by logical consistency then antinomies are excluded from theological discourse.⁷²

To be rational in the practice of theology is to enter the domain of public criteria for intelligibility. The exclusion of contradictions from theological discourse is not an idiosyncratic one, but a public one imposed by the community. To be intelligible we have to be able to communicate with one another and this means that we must operate within the boundaries in which God created us. We simply have no other choice but to think and speak within these limits. If we lapse into contradiction or incoherence then we violate some of the conditions of the public criteria by which theology is considered meaningful. I have no desire to be a rationalist, placing logic above God. There may be realities which are incomprehensible to us, which lie completely outside our abilities to understand them. However, if God desires to communicate meaningfully with us then he will have to do so within the conditions of his own creation and one of these conditions is that intelligibility excludes antinomies.

⁷¹Stephen Davis, Logic and the Nature of God, 16.

⁷²Some evangelicals reject the use of antinomies. See, for example, Carl F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), 225-244 and Arthur Holmes, All Truth is God's Truth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 87-90.

2.6 Conclusion to Chapter Two

The appeals to antinomy as well as to God as wholly other or infinite fail to take seriously enough the conditions of our createdness. They are attempts to escape from these limitations and say something meaningful about that which lies beyond our boundaries. Apart from revelation we cannot know that anything exists beyond our boundaries and if, by revelation, we are informed of a transcendent existence we can only understand it by use of our conditions. The quest to get outside our boundaries is an old one attempted by both pagans and Christians alike. But if we take our status as creatures seriously then we shall have to content ourselves with waiting for God's own self-revelation and with understanding this revelation within the conditions of our existence. In other words, we must understand the God-human relationship as taking place within a shared context and so the use of metaphors and anthropomorphic language (in the broad sense) is necessary. Any theological model must be set forth under these conditions.

The Bible portrays God as a personal agent in a literal sense and this implies a shared context for both God and human agents. Consequently, we cannot escape the realm of anthropomorphism. This does not render God less worthy of worship or diminish his majesty for the only God not of our own making is the God who comes to us in Jesus. In Jesus we understand that God adopts human language and experience to communicate with us. The purpose of this thesis is not to reduce God to the limits of human understanding but to propose from within the boundaries of our createdness a model of the divine-human relationship that opens new vistas for our understanding of God and deepens our appreciation of the freedom, love, wisdom and power of God. God has undertaken a project and it is only from within this project in which God is related to us that we know God at all. If God decides to disclose himself to us as a personal being who enters into relationship with us, who has purposes, emotions and desires, and who suffers with us, then we ought to rejoice in this anthropomorphic portrait and accept it as disclosing to us the very nature of God. The personal God who undertakes the

project of creation in order to achieve certain ends and who enters into this project in a decisive way in Jesus is a God who is not afraid of anthropomorphism.

Chapter 3: Old Testament Materials for a Relational View of Providence Involving Risk

3.1 Introduction

It is commonplace that many people develop a risk-free view of providence from scripture. In this model God has a controlling relationship with the world such that all works out just as God desired. Yahweh is the king over the whole earth who reigns over the nations (Psalm 47:7-8). God is the potter and we are but clay in his hands (Is. 29:16; Jer. 18:1-6; Rom. 9:21). God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45), feeds the birds of the fields (Mt. 6:26) and ensures that none of them dies without his will (Mt. 10:29). The metaphors of king and potter have been extremely influential in shaping the theological understanding of providence and the socio-economic setting (particularly feudalism) of the theologians has shaped the interpretation of these metaphors towards an emphasis on divine control with the resulting loss of any reciprocal relations between creator and creature.¹

Granted the popularity of the traditional view, can a biblical case be made for a truly relational model of providence which entails risks for God? Is there material in the scripture, which has either been ignored or interpreted in favor of a risk-free view (due to preunderstandings) that would support an open model of God's relationship with his creatures? The purpose of the next two chapters is to explain the nature of the divine project--what God is working towards and how God goes about accomplishing this goal. It is claimed that there is more than sufficient biblical data teaching that God does not exercise meticulous providence in such a way that the success of his project is a foregone conclusion. Rather, God works with his creatures in flexible ways seeking to obtain the goals he has for them. God genuinely enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with humans, loving them, providing for them, but not forcing his

¹See Anna Case-Winters, God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges (Louisville, KY: Westminster/Knox, 1990), and my "God as Personal," ed. Clark Pinnock, The Grace of God, the Will of Man (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 167-78.

will on them through overwhelming power. Instead, God works through the power of love. Due to space limitations it is not possible here to be exhaustive in covering the biblical material. Numerous texts will be discussed in order to substantiate the claim that the risk model enjoys biblical support. I will follow, somewhat, the order of the biblical narrative itself, though not necessarily a chronological order, developing selected texts in detail so that the reader gains a "feel" for what is actually going on in the narrative.

Before beginning it should be noted that to date only a small number of Old Testament and very few New Testament scholars have addressed the topic from a truly relational perspective. The reasons for this are not hard to come by. First, theological presuppositions color the way scholars approach the biblical text. Vincent Brümmer comments that "Western thought has suffered from a systematic blind spot for relations."² Moreover, despite Abraham Heschel's works on God's relatedness to his creatures, many Old Testament scholars continue to work within the thought patterns of earlier theologies.³ Furthermore, the discipline of biblical theology itself is, since the 1960's, in a state of unsettledness, with no agreed upon methodology or purpose. In the current climate biblical scholars are hesitant to make theological claims from the text. Nevertheless, there are several important studies by biblical scholars (especially those on the function of prayer and divine suffering) which address the issue of genuine reciprocity in divine-human relationships. I will draw upon them, freely adding my own material, to support the contention that God creates a world where he sovereignly decides to experience genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures. In freedom, God chooses not to control everything and so takes risks in his providence!

²Vincent Brümmer, The Model of Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33.

³See Samuel E. Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 225-259.

3.2 The Creation and its Divinely Established Conditions

The doctrine of creation sets the stage for the doctrine of providence so it is important here to take it into account. Broadly speaking, there are two main ways in which the biblical materials on creation (not just Gen. 1-2) are understood: God as the creator of all that exists and God as the victor over chaos.⁴ Both of these ideas have important insights for our study of providence. The notion that everything except God has a beginning has led, in the history of the church, to the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo (creation out of nothing). Although I affirm creatio ex nihilo I agree with most modern studies of Genesis 1 that this doctrine cannot be derived from this text (see 2 Macc. 7:28; Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3). Genesis one can, however, legitimately be understood to refer to an absolute beginning in which God is prior to all else.⁵

Several implications follow from this understanding. First, just as we cannot, in principle, penetrate to grasp that which was prior to the "big bang" so we cannot, in principle, fathom God apart from our relationship as creatures. We ought not speculate about what it means to be God. Instead, we must see what God actually decides to do in relation to the creation in order to know what it means to be God. God defines God. Second, the creation is due to divine grace. God did not have to create, it is the divine wisdom in freedom which brings into existence something which is not God. Since the creation is not necessary, but contingent, one cannot simply draw conclusions about the creator from the nature

⁴Douglas A. Knight identifies six different cosmogonies in the Hebrew Bible and compares them with others in the ancient Near East in his "Cosmogony and Order in the Hebrew Tradition," eds. Robin Lovin and Frank Reynolds, Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 133-157.

⁵On the variety of interpretations and the validity of this understanding see Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 103-117, Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), pp. 11-17, 36-8, and Bruce Waltke, "The Creation Account in Gen. 1:1-3," Bibliotheca Sacra 132 (1975): 25-36, 136-144, 216-228, 327-342.

of the creation without further ado.⁶ Third, God works within limits since for God to say yes to creating this particular world means that God had to say no to other possible worlds. A single positive choice implies a self-chosen limitation with the negation of other options. God has sovereignly decided to create and work with this particular world rather than others. Fourth, God is the sovereign creator for there is no opposition to his act of creating. Yet, we must be careful of basing a doctrine of providence on this aspect of creation since it is an open question (at this stage in our reading of the biblical text) whether God can and will sovereignly create beings over which he does not exercise total control.⁷ We must wait to see what God actually decided to create.

The other main way of understanding the creation texts is under the theme of "conflict and victory" or creatio contra nihilum (creation versus nothing/chaos).⁸ This position notes that Genesis 1 does not actually say that God created everything (e. g. darkness) and that other creation texts (e. g. Ps. 74:12-7; 104), refer to the time when Yahweh subjugated the powers of chaos (Rahab, the sea, etc.) and established order.⁹ These beings stand opposed to Yahweh's way. According to Levenson, these powers of chaos are subjugated to

⁶See Wolfhart Pannenberg, Basic Questions in Theology, 2 vols. trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 2: 138, 171.

⁷A danger of equating the omnipotent power of God's creative act with an omnipotent rule of providence is that it may mislead us into concluding that omnipotence must always get its way, never encountering any serious opposition to the divine rule. This results in a reading of the Old Testament which downplays the fragility of creation and its vulnerability to what we experience as chaos. One might come away with the impression from Genesis 1 that, because of God's almightiness, everything works out exactly as God desires; which is why one must read "the rest of the story."

⁸See Jon D. Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence, updated ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Adrio König, New and Greater Things: Re-evaluating the Biblical Message on Creation, trans. D. Roy Briggs (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1988). Both authors say that the Hebrew Bible affirms both views, but König does more with ex nihilo. Both writers agree that there is no such thing as an absolute nothing in Hebrew thought.

⁹Even the evangelical Waltke, "The Creation Account" (p. 338), admits that Gen. 1 does not teach ex nihilo or that God created these forces.

Yahweh through conflict. Although they are not allowed to retain control they do acquire control from time to time and so pose a threat to Yahweh's sovereign will. The "confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation, and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God's vigilance."¹⁰ The emphasis of the creation story is not on God's absolute sovereignty but on God's "mastery" over his opponents.¹¹ The chaos forces were confined at creation but they, from time to time, mount a challenge against God so God has to subdue them again and again. Some take this view to imply an initial dualism where Yahweh is limited by chaos.¹² But, as Levenson points out, though the Hebrew Bible sometimes affirms that God created chaos and other times denies this, it is clear that Yahweh has the ability to overcome these forces--even if he does not always do so.¹³ There is "no limited God here, no God stymied by invincible evil."¹⁴

Both of these understandings of creation, however, share some important affirmations. In each view God freely creates an environment and sovereignly establishes boundaries which are "good" (i. e. what God desires for our benefit). In each God brings beings into existence and then names them. Such acts testify

¹⁰Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. 17.

¹¹See Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory," Theology Today, 53, no. 1 (April, 1966): 6-8.

¹²Both Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil and König, New and Greater Things, maintain that it was not the concern of biblical writers to discuss the abstract issue of origins. Rather, says König, conflict texts provide comfort and hope for Israelites who are suffering (p. 77). If God overcame chaos in the past then God can do it again. He rejects as "contrived" (without any stated reasons) the view that God created the chaotic forces which subsequently disobeyed him (p. 120). Yet, on pages 72 and 77 it seems to me that König allows for this very reading when he says that certain biblical writers would naturally have assumed that God created these forces which, after creation, became inimical towards God. König fears, rightfully, that important insights are lost when the conflict texts are ignored and ex nihilo is made the biblical view. I believe, however that ex nihilo may be affirmed regarding the question of origins without discarding the significance of the conflict and victory motif.

¹³Levenson believes that the priestly sources sanitized the myth of the Chaoskampf but could not completely rid the Hebrew Bible of "snippets" which refer to it.

¹⁴Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. 24.

to Yahweh's lordship and relationality (to name something is to respond to it). In both God stands against that which works to undo us. God is "for us" and our well-being is dependent upon Yahweh's faithfulness. In both there is hope for the future despite our present experiences of suffering. If God has brought new things out of nothing or has conquered chaos in the past then we may have confidence in God for establishing new and greater things (e. g. the new heaven and earth) and triumphing over the forces of death and disorder in the future.¹⁵ Understood in this way the doctrine of creation provides the backdrop for genuine drama as the biblical story unfolds. As creator, God established an environment for various types of creatures with boundaries set around the forces of chaos which bring disorder, injustice and affliction. As creator, God is not finished being creative for he continues to introduce new things into history. The stage is thus set for what Levenson calls the "dramatic enactment: the absolute power of God realizing itself in achievement and relationship."¹⁶

The second main point regarding the doctrine of creation concerns the strong distinction as well as significant relationship between God and his creatures. God is distinguished from the creatures: God is a distinct other from them. God creates a world different from himself, yet no more different than he desires.¹⁷ The world is neither divine nor made from slain gods as in some of the ancient Near Eastern myths (e. g. Enuma Elish).¹⁸ Nevertheless, between God and his creatures there exists a dynamic relationship. In creation, Yahweh is the king

¹⁵König's, New and Greater Things, is very helpful in connecting the doctrines of creation and redemption. For a study of how the concept of order in the creation and the threat of disorder was expressed in Israel's faith see Rolf Knierim, "Cosmos and History in Israel's Theology," Horizons in Biblical Theology 3 (1981): 59-123.

¹⁶Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. xvi.

¹⁷I owe this formulation to my colleague Dean Fredrikson.

¹⁸For an instructive comparison of these stories see Nahum Sarna, Understanding Genesis (New York: Schocken, 1970), 1-18.

enacting a covenant with his vassal.¹⁹ By virtue of being the creator, Yahweh has prior claim upon the creation. It is not free simply to do whatever it wants. Rather, it is to acknowledge its lord and follow his instructions. As will be seen, however, despite Yahweh's almighty power in creating and his claim as king upon the creation, the unfolding of the intended relationship is not guaranteed, but it is, given God's resourcefulness, a live option.

Third, God establishes structures within the creation over which humans have no control without thereby eliminating all freedom and development.²⁰ Regarding these structures there is no a priori way of knowing them (contra Platonism). If we want to know how the world works, then we must look to see how it functions rather than speculating about how the universe ought to be structured according to some humanly manufactured ideal. If the creation and the structures it contains are the result of divine freedom then we cannot deduce from first principles the way the world ought to be. Emil Brunner is correct when he says, "never can thought of itself build up the idea of a contingent, non-necessary, freely-positing world."²¹ Moreover, if we want to know what sort of relationship comes about between the creator and the creatures, we must look to revelation to see what exactly God has decided to do. For, again, no preconceived notions of creator or omnipotence or the most perfect being inform us what sort of relationship God actually chose to have with his creation.²² God sovereignly

¹⁹For this interesting comparison see Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, pp. 140-8 and König, New and Greater Things, pp. 31, 76.

²⁰One may say that God creates order out of chaos even though not all chaos is removed. On how God both brings order out of chaos and chaos out of order see D. J. Bartholomew, God of Chance (London: SCM, 1984).

²¹Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of God, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 147.

²²Thomas Morris, Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 28-45, believes that perfect being theology when buttressed by creational theology and biblical theology can arrive at the best concept of God. He acknowledges that "the method of perfect being theology needs a revelational control. But it's also true that perfect being theology itself can act as an interpretive constraint on how we read the Bible" (p. 43). We should not, he says, ascribe to God "any limitations which imply imperfection" (p. 85, emphasis his). In my opinion, the classical

establishes the conditions of the creation and what sort of relationship he will have with it. We cannot deduce our understanding of providence from some notion of God. Rather, we must look to see how God has actually decided to exercise providence. Furthermore, God retains his freedom so that the exercise of providence does not have to be uniform or unchanging.²³ Only revelation informs us whether providence remains always the same or whether it is subject to changes.

What sorts of conditions and relationships does God establish with the creation? God creates beings which are not God and places them in relationship with one another. Various sorts of life forms are created which occupy different mediums (air, oceans and land). This is what God desired for he says it is "good." Particular attention is given to the role of human beings in this creation. They are part of the creation but are given the special demarcation of being in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). Moreover, it is only with the creation of humans that a divine consultation ensues: "let us make."²⁴ Fretheim comments that the "let us" language refers to a divine consultation: "the creation of humankind results from a dialogical act--an inner-divine communication--rather than a monological one."²⁵ From the beginning God (even if viewed as king) is one involved in dialogue rather than monologue. Humans are fashioned after the image of this dialogical God who enters into genuine reciprocal relations with his creatures.

philosophical conception of God has far too often been allowed to overturn the biblical text in favor of what we deem it fitting for God to be (theoprepēs). See my "Historical Considerations" in Clark Pinnock et. al. The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 59-100.

²³The doctrines of static perfection and uniformity of divine action have wreaked havoc on the doctrine of providence.

²⁴On the variety of interpretations of this phrase see Hamilton, Genesis, 132-4. Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. 5, believes it refers to the divine assembly mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible where it "played an active role and made fresh proposals to God, who nonetheless retained the final say."

²⁵Terence Fretheim, The Book of Genesis, The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), vol. 1, 335.

"There are some twenty images of God the creator in these two chapters which, when seen in interaction with one another, provide for a more relational model of creation than has been traditionally presented."²⁶

Take the image of God, for instance, however "image" is defined it at least involves humanity in two sets of relationships: with God and other creatures.²⁷ It is God who decides how similar to himself humans will be and what sort of relationship God will have with them. Humanity may be understood to be in relationship with God since God places the responsibility of caring for the world in the hands of humanity. The divine mandate implies that God is the one ultimately responsible for dominion for it is his to give. Dominion is not the right of humanity but the result of a divine gift. Consequently, humans are understood to be distinct others from God who exist in relationship to God. This relationship involves both gift and responsibility. God graciously provides an environment for the sustenance of the humans and calls them into the care of that gift. Moreover, not only does God chose to share existence, but the fact that God delegates responsibility implies that God is willing to share power with humans. God sovereignly decides that not everything will be up to God. Some important things are left in the hands of humanity as God's co-creators. For instance the naming of the animals is left in the hands of humanity. Just as God creates names for things so humans are allowed to create names for things. God grants to humanity something of his own creative power: God is not a power-hoarding deity. There is freedom for humans to be creative within the "rules of the game" God has established. The structure is not so rigid as to eliminate all movement and newness for either humans or God.²⁸ The creation was never intended by God to

²⁶Fretheim, "Creator, Creature, and Co-Creation in Genesis 1-2," Word and World supplement 1 (1992): 13. This is a very helpful study on God entering into responsive relationships with his creatures.

²⁷On the interpretation of the image of God see Victor Hamilton, Genesis, 134-40, 145-7.

²⁸Jean-Jacques Suurmond, Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), maintains that both humans and God are at "play" within the boundaries God has created.

remain completely unchanged. After all, even God says that some "good" things were yet to be created--namely woman (2:18).

In summary, the creation stories depict divine providence as creating an environment for the sustenance of the creatures, granting divine blessing upon them, establishing communities of relationships and bestowing tasks to be accomplished. The divine sovereignty has decreed that it should be this way rather than one of exhaustive divine control. God creates significant others and gives them "space" to operate.

3.3 Freedom Within Limits

Though God grants the creatures space to be genuine others, God desires that this freedom be used within limits. God establishes boundaries for humanity outside of which it is not good for them to be. God provides a garden for Adam's aesthetic enjoyment and physical nourishment (2:9) and in this garden are the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A command is given that he may eat from all the trees except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Humans are not to decide on their own, apart from God, what is good--what is in their own best interests. God establishes the boundaries for creatureliness. If we break through these limits we reject the divine wisdom, implying that God does not have our best interests at heart. We are not created to live our lives separate from God, but in trusting confidence that God loves us and gives his commandments for our good. We honor God and keep the creation heading in the direction God intends when we acknowledge our creaturely limits.

Significantly, God does not grant the humans permission to trust God or not trust him as though our trust in God was optional. Levenson remarks: "for all the language of choice that characterizes covenant texts, the Hebrew Bible never

regards the choice to decline covenant as legitimate."²⁹ God says, trust me, do not eat of this particular tree. A negative consequence is stipulated if they do: they will die (definitely not a "live option"). With the possibility of death an element is introduced which is not intended by God's act of creation. The command and threat of punishment imply the possibility that God's intention for the creatures may fail.³⁰ A meticulous providence where everything proceeds just as God wants has a very difficult time accounting for this (without impugning God's goodness). God desires to bless humanity through a life of loving trust manifested in obedience in the care for the creation and abstaining from seeking to get outside our limits.³¹ At this point God expects humans to trust God and believe he has their best interests in mind. God, in freedom, establishes the context in which a loving and trusting relationship between himself and the humans can develop. God expects that it will and there is no reason to suspect, at this point in the narrative, that any other possibility will come about. A break in the relationship does not seem plausible considering all the good God has done. Yet, a possibility has been introduced by God's commandment. God now places an inevitable decision before the humans. This may be understood as the earliest reference to the biblical theme of testing: will they be faithful to live within the boundaries of their creaturlieness?³² Here we have the sovereign

²⁹Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. 141. He argues that the common notion that the covenant was between two parties who are equally free to assent and dissent is the product of Western political thought for both Adam and Israel already owe their freedom to God (pp. 146-7).

³⁰At this point I suggest a Joban reading. In the book of Job, God and Satan enter into a sort of wager whether Job worships God for who God is. God is confident that Job will succeed. An important difference exists, however, between these two stories. Job is tested to see whether he will trust God if everything he values is taken away. In Genesis, Adam is tested with full blessing of God's created goodness surrounding him. So, it would seem, Adam's trust in God is virtually assured.

³¹John Sailhamer emphasizes that these verses are about trusting God and suggests that in v. 15 God placed them in the garden to "worship and obey" rather than to till the garden. See his Genesis, ed. Frank Gaebelin, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 2.45.

³²For an interesting discussion utilizing testing to argue for a theodicy without blame see Mark S. McLeod, "Religious Plurality and Realist Christianity: Idolatry and the Testing of One's Faith," Faith and Philosophy 11, no. 2 (April, 1994): 224-241. McLeod follows Marilyn McCord Adams in arguing that Genesis 3

risk!

God sovereignly places humans in an environment for their good and expects them to respond appropriately. In this sovereignty God grants humanity space to be a significant other in relation to God. God provides some relational distance as he does not smother them with his presence. By commanding them to trust and obey God also acknowledges the possibility of mistrust and sin. Up to this point Genesis has been silent regarding any opposition to God. Now, God, in making creatures who should love him, but may oppose him, places the risk out in the open. Yet, there is no reason to expect anything except love in return to the loving providence of God for God has, so to speak, stacked the deck in his favor.

3.4 The Implausible Happens

In Genesis three the totally unexpected happens: the naked humans are exposed to a temptation which calls the divine wisdom into question. The issue at stake is whether the divine providence has granted humanity all that is good for them or whether God is keeping back something which would be truly beneficial. The conduit through whom the temptation arises comes from one of God's creatures, the serpent. There is no dualism in this text where something co-eternal with God opposes God. Instead, it is from within God's own creation that beings, distinct from God, seek to establish even more distance from God than God ordained.

The serpent poses a question about what God has said: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (3:1). It is striking that the serpent does not use the expression "Lord God" as does the surrounding narrative of Genesis 2-4. Wenham sees in this "a suggestion of the serpent's distance from God. God is just the remote creator, not Yahweh, Israel's covenant partner."³³

involves the sin of the failure to live within our boundaries (an ontological concept) rather than a sin committed in full knowledge of good and evil (a moral concept).

³³Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 73.

The serpent desires a dialogue about the words of God. Already, we see that God's work and words are open to being discussed and if open to being discussed, then open to question and if open to question, then open to being accepted or rejected. It is through this opening in the created order that the serpent seeks an advantage. Douglas John Hall comments: "Here is the little opening in the tent of creation through which the camel's nose of sin may enter."³⁴

The woman answers the serpent that they are permitted to eat from the trees in the garden except one. That one, she claims, cannot even be touched lest one die. Moreover, she adopts the serpent's expression, "God" instead of Lord God. The woman has opened herself to probing God's command and the serpent takes advantage of that openness by suggesting a different possible future from the one God had proclaimed. Whereas God had said they would die upon eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent says they will not die. Instead, he suggests the half truth that they will have a sort of divine wisdom regarding good and evil. In other words, the serpent claims that God has been holding back something good from his creatures. Does God have their best interests in mind?

This interchange demonstrates that God has made the world in such a way that it is possible to question the divine wisdom: God leaves enough space for trust to develop, but this also allows enough space for doubt. God leaves room in his universe for him to be challenged by his creatures. Why does not God either make the conditions such that challenges are impossible or annihilate the challenge as soon as it originates? The answer, I suggest, is that God has entered into an enterprise whereby he seeks the highest good of his creatures and out of which he desires to solicit the love of his creatures in freedom.

Returning to the narrative, the serpent's claim that their eyes would be opened is proved correct, but not in the way they anticipated. In 3:22 God confirms that

³⁴Douglas John Hall, God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 71.

the serpent was right. The humans have gained new "wisdom" pertaining to good and evil. Unfortunately, in the process the harmonious relationships which God had established for the humans are rent asunder. Both the God-human and interhuman relationships are alienated. For instance, when God questions Adam, the man responds with a tacit accusation at God: it is your fault for creating this woman (3:12). It is clear that both the man and the woman call into question the divine wisdom, claiming that God's providence is not very good. Only God has a perspective that understands the created order as a whole and the needs of each part. But this is rejected in their act of mistrust. Their eyes are opened and they do see the world differently. It is not, however, what God intended.

In rejecting the divine wisdom the possible but implausible happened.³⁵ There was no good reason to reject God's blessing and provision. There was every reason in the world to trust the wisdom of the creator for the well being of the creature. There is never a good reason to sin, only rationalizations. When God inquires of the humans why they have done this only lame excuses are brought forth. After all, what sensible explanation could be given for rejecting divine grace? Sin is fundamentally irrational, there is no cause for it given the goodness of God's creation. In light of this Paul Fiddes suggests that human sin was "something strange to God" in that it was not planned and God now has to adjust his project in response to this horrible turn of events.³⁶

Sin is deceptive (Rom. 7:11; Heb. 3:13) and the serpent utilized this when he told another half truth claiming they would not die (i. e. physical death). God had declared emphatically that they would die on the day they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Again, the narrator has the serpent being

³⁵I prefer this to Barth's "impossible possibility." I do not find such language illuminating.

³⁶Paul S. Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 220. Fiddes is responding to those who claim that God could not be "taken by surprise" or have to adjust his plans in any way. If human sin was planned by God then one is forced to hold that it is somehow a necessary instrument for the moral growth of humans.

shown correct and God wrong--sort of. The promised punishment of 2:17 has given rise to several different understandings, but only the two most promising will be discussed.³⁷ Death could have a broader meaning whereby the humans experienced a breakdown in relationships and so, in a sense, "died." Sin is then punished through its distorting effects upon all that humans enter into. The threatened "death" may also have its more straightforward sense of immediate physical death, that is, the death penalty. It often has this meaning in the Old Testament when the threat is from God or a king.³⁸ If it is interpreted as immediate physical death, then God does not follow through with the threat but, instead, expels them from the garden. If so, then we have the first instance in the Bible of what will become a major theme: divine relenting from negative consequences in favor of mercy. God had threatened to terminate the relationship if the humans failed to trust God. But when God faces the sin he cannot bring himself to fulfill this threat. A dire consequence is enforced, expulsion, but God chooses not to end the relationship. Though I prefer the second interpretation, on either one it is clear that God does not walk away from his creation once opposition arises. God continues to work with his creatures showing grace in the face of sin. God is faithful to his commitment to create and the risks entailed in that commitment.

That God remains faithful to his creatures is manifested in several ways. To begin, although there will be an ongoing struggle with sin (symbolized by the serpent), humanity will eventually triumph by crushing its head (3:15). This is probably not a messianic prophecy, but it does suggest some hope for the future.³⁹ Second, God provides for their inadequate attempt to cover their

³⁷It does not mean "you shall become mortal" for they were already mortal. Nor does it mean they were "doomed" to die. For discussion of the meaning of death in this passage see Fretheim, Genesis, 352, Hamilton, Genesis 172-4 and Wenham, Genesis, 67-8, 73-5, 88-9.

³⁸See Hamilton, Genesis, 173.

³⁹This interpretation fits with the context since the next two speeches to the woman and the man both contain judgment and promised blessings. Eve will have pain, but be blessed with children. Adam will suffer toil, but will be blessed

nakedness by providing more durable clothing for them (3:21). God does not leave them exposed under sin but, rather, seeks to modify the situation so that they may cope with their new perspective on the world. Furthermore, God sends them out of the garden, but, as we learn from the rest of the story, God goes with them. He does not abandon them. Finally, God cares for them in that he does not want them to eat from the tree of life and live forever in sin. The realm of sinful estranged relationships, has already shown itself and it will not be a blessing if the humans partake of the tree of life and have never-ending existence in this state. In this case, God is still working for the best interests of the humans and these divine actions may be understood as attempts to restore their trust in the divine wisdom and provision. Is God a fool? Will his attempts at restoration succeed? Only the history of God's activity in history and the human response to it will tell.

3.5 God Suffers on Account of His Sinful Creatures But Will Not Abandon Them

Despite God's continued efforts to work with his creatures, sin becomes ever more pervasive. Whereas in Genesis 1:31 God "saw" everything that he had made was very good, in 6:5 we are told that God "saw" that humanity was very wicked. Whereas God formed humans into life (2:7) humans form their thoughts towards evil. It is emphatically asserted that "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (6:5). Clearly, "creation has miscarried."⁴⁰ God takes full responsibility for creating these beings who have turned towards sin and it is just this responsibility which brings such grief to God (6:6). God regrets his decision to go ahead with the creation given these tragic developments. He is extremely disappointed at how things are turning out. Despite all the blessings God has provided, humanity turns away from the divine love. This pains God in his very heart. The narrator says that human hearts are continuously evil while the

with food. Hence, the speech to the serpent probably does also. On this see Hamilton, Genesis, 198-200. On the issue of a protoevangelium see the discussion and bibliography in Wenham, Genesis, 79-81.

⁴⁰König, New and Greater Things, 77.

divine heart suffers the pain of rejection. God is open to and affected by what he has made. God forbears with the sin of humanity but it takes its toll on the divine life. The cost to God is great in terms of personal suffering.⁴¹ God cares and caring leads to pain when it sees the beloved destroying herself. Philip Yancy suggests that in Genesis "God learns how to be a parent" and regarding God's heart being filled with pain he says, "behind that one statement stands all the shock and grief God felt as a parent."⁴² Fretheim concurs: "God appears, not as an angry and vengeful judge, but as a grieving and pained parent, distressed at what has happened."⁴³

God is involved in the situation and it affects him deeply. Whatever God decides he will never be the same again. God now knows what it is to experience grief. It has entered into the very heart of God. The divine decision is to erase the creatures he has made for he is sorry that he made them (6:7). The flood could reverse God's act of creation for if God destroys it all then God seems to be giving up on his project. At first the judgment sounds as though nothing will be left "but Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord" (6:8). This time God "saw" someone in whom he could take pride, someone who was going in the direction God intended. Consequently, God does not give up hope, he will continue his project through Noah's family. In Noah God finds a possibility for the future: a future yet open despite the pervasiveness of sin.

After the judgment God renews his commitment to Noah and the entire human family from him, saying that he will never again flood the earth and providing a sign

⁴¹In fundamental opposition to this interpretation is Richard Creel, Divine Impassibility, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 141-6, who holds that a mature lover does not grieve if he is rejected by the free choice of another. For him, God is emotionally impassible and remains perfectly happy whether we choose for or against his kingdom.

⁴²Philip Yancy, Disappointment With God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 63-4. It should be noted that Yancy qualifies the divine learning to mean the taking on of new experiences since he affirms divine foreknowledge.

⁴³Fretheim, Genesis, 389.

as a promise (9:11-12).⁴⁴ God makes a covenant with his creation that though there may be future judgments never again will virtually everything be annihilated. The sign of the rainbow is given by God as a reminder to himself that he will never again trod this path (9:15). It is perhaps the case that though human evil caused God great pain, the destruction of what he had made caused him even greater suffering. Make no mistake, it was a righteous judgment. Nevertheless, God decides to try different courses of action in the future.⁴⁵

3.6 The Divine Purpose: Creating a Relationship of Trust

In the life of Abraham we witness the development of a relationship between God and Abraham. Abraham's faith in God matures by fits and starts and God's confidence in Abraham grows. The divine goal of developing people who love and trust him comes to fruition in this patriarch.

God calls Abraham to leave his homeland and travel to a place not yet revealed so that God may grant him land, posterity and a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1-3). The land of promise is not a safe land for while there he experiences famine as well as war with some raiders. God had promised to bless Abraham but all he has seen thus far is famine, strife and war. He does not yet possess any of the land nor does he have any children. God appears to Abraham in a vision informing him that his reward shall be very great (15:1). For the first time in the story we have dialogue between Abraham and God. God has made promises to Abram but it is only through the dialogue and Abraham's petition--making his requests known to God--that the promise shall come about. Prayer is important for God's activity in the world. According to Abraham Heschel God is not at home

⁴⁴It has been suggested that the sign of the rainbow symbolizes an archery bow pointing toward God. If so, then this is self-imprecatory on God's part. See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, Truth is Stranger than it Used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 148.

⁴⁵YHWH actually changes his mind twice in this story, once to destroy and then to never again destroy (6:5 and 8:21) and both reversals are based on the same data: humans are sinful.

where his will is defied. Thus, "to pray means to bring God back into the world. . . . to expand his presence. . . . His being immanent in the world depends on us."⁴⁶ Abraham boldly puts his question to God: You promised me children, but I have none. Are you going to do anything about this? (15:2-3). God responds by specifying that children will come forth from Abraham's body and promises innumerable descendants. Abraham's response is one of faith: he believes God that he will have a son. This expression of trust and confidence in God is precisely what God is looking for in people and so God proclaims that Abraham is in proper relationship to God (15:6).

The dialogue continues with God reiterating the promise of the land to which Abraham inquires what assurance God will give him that he will possess it (15:8). A trusting relationship with God coexists with questions. God does not consider these questions impertinent or a display of deficient faith.⁴⁷ On the contrary, God answers his questions. Moreover, to this last question God puts his own life on the line by passing through the sacrificed animals (15:9-21). In his relationship with Abraham God proclaims, in effect, "may I be cut in two if I fail in my promises to you." This act of self-imprecation reveals just how committed God is to Abraham. God is willing to become vulnerable for the sake of his promise. God's way into the future for the blessing of the human race is bound up with this man.

In this vision God gives assurance to Abraham that God will be faithful to his promise. Nevertheless, God forewarns Abraham that rough times are ahead for his descendants (15:13-16). It should be noted, however, that God does not here speak with precision about who will cause them trouble and the timing is ambiguously stated.⁴⁸ Apparently, God wants Abraham to know that difficult times lay ahead,

⁴⁶A. Heschel, The Insecurity of Freedom (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), 258.

⁴⁷See Hamilton, Genesis, 429.

⁴⁸See Fretheim, Genesis, 446-7, 449.

but God will be faithful to his promise long after Abraham has departed from the scene.

In chapter sixteen Sarah comes to the conclusion that the divine promise is not going to come through her so she gives her maid, Hagar, to Abraham in order to have a son. Some interpret this as a lack of faith on the part of Abraham and Sarah: human scheming instead of faithful waiting on divine providence. But this reflects a misunderstanding of how providence works. God has not told them through whom the child will come so why should they not use the brains God gave them? Moreover, the facts that it is God who names the boy (16:11) and that the divine promise to Hagar, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count" (16:10) uses the same language God had given Abraham, should lead one to rightfully conclude that Sarah was correct and the promised son shall be Ishmael. There was nothing improper or faithless in their decision. Genesis acknowledges that God works through human planing.⁴⁹

In chapter seventeen God continues to clarify his will, saying that the promised line shall come through Sarah. Abraham's response is two fold (17:17-8). First, he considers what God has to work with: both he and Sarah well past the child bearing years. Second, he petitions God that God go with what is already available: Ishmael. Abraham would rather stick with what he has than risk some new venture. God reassures him that Ishmael shall be blessed, but makes it clear that God will establish his covenant with the son Sarah shall bear. When Sarah hears of this she considers it a pipe dream (18:12) and the Lord responds by asking whether anything is too difficult for God to perform (18:14). This statement should not be abstracted into some sort of philosophical principle. The point of the question is that God expects them to have faith that God can perform what he has promised. True, God works with what is available in any given

⁴⁹See Pretheim, Genesis, 451-2.

situation, but humans are not to delimit the divine possibilities.⁵⁰ If God says it is yet possible for them to have children, then it is possible.

Abraham waited a long time for God to clarify and then deliver what was promised. Through all this he has matured in his faith. In light of this the reader is shocked to read that God puts Abraham to the test (chapter 22) to see whether he has faith.⁵¹ Although the reader is informed at the beginning that this is a test, Abraham is not. For him, the command to offer Isaac up as a sacrifice could mean that God has repudiated his promise. But Abraham has grown in his faith. God has overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in giving him Isaac and so he now trusts that God will provide a way into the future, fulfilling his promise, despite this baffling command. That he has confidence in God is manifested in his statement to the servants that he and Isaac would return to them (v. 5) and his answer to Isaac that God would provide the offering (v. 8). The long journey provides opportunity for second thoughts and one wonders whether Abraham will follow through. Abraham continues on and just as he prepares to follow through on God's instructions, God prevents him from doing so. God had desired to see whether Abraham trusted him and it is now clear to God that he does: "for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (22:12).

God's intention is not the death of Isaac but the testing of Abraham's faith (22:1). The test is genuine, not a fake. Brueggemann says that this test "is not a game with God; God genuinely does not know. . . .The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in the awareness of God. He did not know. Now he knows."⁵² The statement by God, "now I know," raises serious theological

⁵⁰See Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 159.

⁵¹For a thorough and enlightening discussion of this chapter see Fretheim, Genesis, 494-501.

⁵²Brueggemann, Genesis, 187.

problems regarding divine foreknowledge.⁵³ Because of this many commentators either pass over this verse in silence or dismiss it as mere anthropomorphism. It is often suggested that the test was for Abraham's benefit, not God's. That this is not the case is made clear that the only one in the story said to learn anything from the test is God! Abraham no doubt did learn something in his relationship with God but that is not the point of the text. If one presupposes exhaustive divine foreknowledge, then the text is at least worded poorly, if not outright false.⁵⁴

If the test is genuine for both God and Abraham, then what is the reason for it? The answer is to be found in God's desire to bless all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count. Will he be faithful or must God find someone else through whom to achieve his purpose? God has been faithful, will Abraham be faithful? Will God have to modify his plans with Abraham? In 15:8 Abraham had asked God for assurance. Now it is God seeking assurance from Abraham. God had unilaterally made promises to Abraham, yet there was a conditional element for God wanted Abraham's obedience in order to bring about the promise (18:19) It is clear that God's purposes require a faithful and trusting Abraham. There is risk involved for both God and Abraham. God takes the risk that Abraham will exercise trust. Abraham takes the risk that God will provide a way into the future. Abraham's confidence in God proves to be well placed for God does provide an offering.

After the test God renews his promises of land, descendants and blessing to all people (22:15-18). Moreover, God twice says that he will do this because Abraham has been faithful. These remarks continue to discomfit commentators due to later

⁵³On the Talmudic and medieval discussion of this verse see Seymour Feldman, "The Binding of Isaac: A Test-Case of Divine Foreknowledge," ed. Tamar Rudavsky, Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic, Jewish, and Christian Perspectives (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985), 105-133.

⁵⁴In a chapter 5 I will seek to demonstrate that one view of divine foreknowledge--incrementally obtained--would interpret the text in the same way I have here (see 5.5).

theological debates about merit. Abraham's obedience does not here merit the divine blessing for that had already been given. Rather, as Moberly remarks: "a promise which previously was grounded solely in the will and purpose of Yahweh is transformed so that it is now grounded both in the will of Yahweh and in the obedience of Abraham."⁵⁵ God will work in the world but not apart from people of faith. Human faith and action make a difference to God in the fulfillment of his plans. In choosing to be dependent upon human beings for some things, God takes the risk of being either delighted or disappointed in what transpires.

3.7 God May Be Prevailed Upon

God has bound himself to his creation. God makes himself available to his people. In being available God provides access that people may call upon him. Abraham prevailed upon God in attempting to alleviate the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33). In this narrative God takes the initiative and, in the visitation of the three men, provides the opportunity by which Abraham may bring his case before God. The divine decision was yet open and God invited Abraham into the decision making process. God chooses not to exercise judgment without the human input of this man he trusts. In cases such as this it becomes clear that God considers others as having something significant to say. Because God desires a genuine relationship he is open to his creatures, especially through prayer. Prayer serves, says Balentine, "as a microcosm of one of the Hebrew Bible's most important theological claims: the relatedness of God and humanity."⁵⁶ Fretheim adds that "prayer has to do with that which brings the human and the divine factors into the fullest possible power-sharing effectiveness."⁵⁷ Through these prayers we see that God sovereignly chooses not to govern the world without our input. Whether it is wise for God to do is another matter.

⁵⁵R. W. L. Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah," Vetus Testamentum 38 no. 3 (1988): 320.

⁵⁶Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 38.

⁵⁷Terence Fretheim, "Prayer in the Old Testament: Creating Space in the World for God," ed. Paul Sponheim, A Primer on Prayer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 57.

In a fascinating and mysterious text Jacob also prevails with God.⁵⁸ In Genesis 32 Jacob is returning to his ancestral home in deep fear of what Esau will do to him and his family. When Jacob is alone a man encounters him and they wrestle all night long, neither gaining the advantage. Towards daybreak the adversary requests that Jacob let him go. By now Jacob has guessed this person's identity and so refuses to let go until he is blessed. Jacob's request is granted. He is blessed and given a new name, Israel: he who strives with God. Afterwards, Jacob acknowledges that he has been with God in a rather extraordinary way. Jacob had wrestled with God and prevailed. God did not overwhelm him with superhuman power but entered into the match in such a way as to ensure a "fair fight." God wants to see what Jacob is made of. Apparently, Jacob is made of stout stuff for God cannot get away and so asks Jacob to release him. Jacob refuses to do so until God blesses him. In this we understand that Jacob is not the superior for He seeks the blessing from the superior. Jacob understands that God is a God of blessing. A God who is favorably disposed towards him, despite, I might add, the fact that Jacob is a scoundrel. Moreover, it was God who took the initiative to engage Jacob. Jacob could not have wrestled with God had God not desired it. God is truly gracious in making himself available to both esteemed characters such as Abraham and scoundrels such as Jacob.

3.8 Joseph, a Risk-Free Model?

The story of Joseph being sold into slavery and his eventual rise to rulership in Egypt commonly serves in discussions of providence as the paradigm. Actually, it is not the story but a particular interpretation of Joseph's remarks to his brothers in Genesis 45:4-9 which has become normative for understanding providence as risk-free. As a result many of the texts discussed in this chapter are either ignored or dismissed as mere anthropomorphism. I acknowledge that a

⁵⁸See Fretheim, Genesis, 565-570 and Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 64-71. Some scholars see in this story, and others, a "demonic" side of God. See, for instance, Jack Miles, God: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1995). For a careful refutation of this theory regarding Gen. 32 and other texts see Fredrik Lindström, God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1983).

risk-free reading of the text is possible where God so arranges all the details in such a way that Joseph inevitably rises to leadership and so saves his family and the Egyptians from famine.⁵⁹

Fretheim, however, points out several problems with a risk-free reading of the Joseph narrative.⁶⁰ First, the text explicitly ascribes responsibility for selling Joseph into Egypt to the brothers (37:28; 45:4-5). Second, Joseph's remarks in chapter 45 should be read in light of his more reflective comments in 50:19-21. There Joseph tells his brothers that they committed evil in selling him. They sinned against him (42:22). It is problematic, to say the least, to ascribe sin and evil to God. The text says that the brothers want to kill him but one of them persuades the others not to and has a plan for rescuing Joseph. So much in the story is dependent upon the brothers decisions and God's activity is in response to their actions. Finally, in 50:20 Joseph suggests that what they intended for evil, God intended for good. In other words, God has brought something good out of their evil actions. God was not determining everything in Joseph's life but God did remain "with" him (39:2).⁶¹ The divine presence does not mean the removal of famines, sibling hatreds, or being sold into slavery. It does mean that God will be working from within the situations to redeem them.

How should Joseph's remarks that God "sent" him to Egypt and made him ruler of Egypt (45:5, 7, 9) be understood? First of all it should be remembered that Joseph has used language like this before. In 43:23 he says that God gave the money back to his brothers even though Joseph admits that he had the money put in their sacks (see 42:25, 28). Furthermore, the remarks of 45:5, 7 and 9 occur

⁵⁹Yet even the risk model affirms that God can unilaterally intervene in human affairs--if he so decides.

⁶⁰Fretheim, Genesis, 646.

⁶¹For a helpful discussion of God being "with" the biblical characters see Donald E. Gowan, Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 54-75. He points out that this expression usually occurs in times of danger.

at a tense time in the dialogue. Joseph's brothers are emotionally wrung out with anxiety and are fearful for their lives due the ruse Joseph has played on them. Moreover, Joseph is brought to tears in the presence of his brothers, desiring reconciliation. Now is not the time for condemning words. Rather, he desires to vanquish his brother's fears. Although he acknowledges that they sold him into Egypt he suggests that everyone look on the bright side--what God has done through this. Their lives and those of the Egyptians have been spared the devastating effects of the famine. Joseph plays down the human factors in how this has come about and elevates the divine factor in order to allay their fears. After things have settled down and reconciliation is assured, Joseph says to them that what they intended for evil, God intended for good that many people would live (50:20). It is the glory of God to be able to bring good out of evil human actions. But nothing in the text demands the interpretation that God actually desired the sinful acts. The text does not say that God caused or necessitated the events. In fact, the text is remarkably silent regarding any divine activity until Joseph's speeches. Up till now, the events could have been understood without reference to divine activity at all. In fact, compared to the other patriarchal stories God is strangely absent and Joseph never invokes God! In retrospect, Joseph identifies God in his life working to preserve the lives of others.

3.9 God Works With What is Available

The book of Exodus begins with God working behind the scenes (much like the Joseph narrative) making use of the opportunities which arise through human agency. The king of Egypt, fearful of the growth of the Hebrew minority, embarks on a plan to reduce their numbers. He first afflicts them with "toil that breaks" (1:13), making their lives bitter with forced labor. When that does not succeed he orders the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys when born. The midwives, however, "fear God" and so foil Pharaoh's scheme. God makes use of the faith of these lowly woman to limit the evil of the mighty king. Finally, Pharaoh commands the baby boys to be thrown into the Nile river. Why the Nile? Most

likely because it was considered the divine source of life for Egypt. Pharaoh may be thinking: "give them to the god of the Nile and let him be the judge whether they live or die." If so, then we have the beginning of a contest between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt to see who is truly providential.

The story then focusses on one Hebrew boy and his deliverance. Again, God works through women. One Hebrew woman does not want her baby drowned so she places him in an "ark" and has her daughter stand guard by it. This mother does not "leave everything in the hands of God!" Indeed, she takes active steps to insure the well being of her child. No doubt many Hebrew babies were drowned or eaten by animals in the Nile. This mother does all she can to prevent that from happening to her son. Again, God is not mentioned but as we know from the rest of the story God makes use of the actions of this mother and daughter to eventually bring deliverance to the Hebrew people.

While the Hebrew daughter is standing guard a daughter of Pharaoh comes to bathe at the spot where the basket has been placed. Did the Hebrew mother know this? It seems she is gambling on the Egyptian princess taking mercy on her son.⁶² The princess, unlike her father, takes "pity" on the boy. She hires the boy's mother to nurse him and takes him into her own home to raise him as her son (2:9-10). Again, it is women who intervene to counterdict Pharaoh's decree. God will utilize the decisions of the Hebrew mother as well as Pharaoh's daughter in order to work against the evil king. But everything is not here being worked out according to some divine blueprint. That would be reading into the story and raise an insufferable objection: that God wanted the oppression and the death of the Hebrew boys so that he could save one of them. The narrator does not ascribe any role regarding these matters to God in these first two chapters. Instead, the focus has been on human activity. But, as will become clear later in the narrative, God makes use of the actions of these women to bring deliverance.

⁶²See Roy L. Honeycutt, Exodus, Broadman Bible Commentary vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 325.

Consequently, God takes a risk since these people could have failed--they could have acted differently and let the boys die. If so, God would have to find another means of liberating his people and the story of Exodus would be different from what it is.

It can be difficult to read these first two chapters of Exodus without having the "rest of the story" in mind. Knowing that everything works out in the end, it may be tempting to read a divine blueprint into the narrative--where everything happens exactly as God desires. Since everything turns out "good" in the end we tend to forget that terrible suffering occurred and many Hebrew babies died. Why did God not prevent the oppression in the first place? Why do we read of the deliverance of only one Hebrew boy? Why not give Pharaoh a brain aneurism to prevent his horrible decree? After all, later on in Exodus God will bring about the miraculous. Why not here? The only answer I have for these troubling questions is that God works with what is available in the situation and even miracles depend upon the context. God has chosen not to ride roughshod over his creatures but to work through the resources available in seeking redemption. That God is concerned is made clear in 2:23-5 where the cries of the Hebrew people make an impact on God. The cries for help stimulate God and with the death of the king of Egypt, new possibilities are opened for God which leads to the call of Moses.

In Exodus 3 we learn that God wants to work through Moses in order to deliver the Israelites. In the presence of the divine holiness Moses, however, disagrees with God, raising five excuses why he is not the right man for the job. At the beginning of the dialogue it is not a foregone conclusion that Moses will work with God. The divine presence does not ensure that God will get his way. As the dialogue progresses God seeks to answer each of Moses' concerns. Moses first remarks about his own inadequacy to which God replies that he will be with him (a repeated theme in the patriarchal narratives). Moses, however, is not comforted for he next requests that God reveal his name. In the ancient Near East

it was commonly thought that knowing the name of someone--even a god--gave one a degree of power over that person. On this basis Moses calculates that God will not reveal the divine name to him.⁶³ The revelation of the divine name (3:15) implies a certain intimacy in relationship which will allow Moses to prevail upon God. In other words, God makes himself available and vulnerable.⁶⁴ God grants this request to Moses, repeats his concern for the Israelites and proceeds to inform Moses what will happen in Egypt. He instructs Moses to gather the elders of Israel together and inform them of what God has disclosed. Moreover, Moses is told that the elders will believe what Moses says. He is then instructed to take the elders with him to Pharaoh and request a time for sacrifice to Yahweh. Finally, God informs him that only after a struggle will the people be released.

This lengthy divine speech is usually understood to imply foreknowledge of the future whereby God discloses precisely what will happen in advance. In light of what actually happens, however, not all of these statements come to pass exactly as "predicted." First, the elders are never said to appear before Pharaoh. Instead, Aaron takes their place (5:1). The reason why Aaron takes their place is stated in 4:14 where God concedes to Moses' self-appraisal of being a poor public speaker. God's original plan was for Moses to be the negotiator. But God goes to "plan B" in order to help Moses, demonstrating divine flexibility in his plans and willingness to adjust to human requests. Second, whereas God had said the elders would believe Moses, Moses asks: "what if you are wrong about this?" (4:1). Brevard Childs remarks that some commentator's have attempted to avoid the force of Moses' question.⁶⁵ Walter Brueggemann correctly notes that Moses' statement that they will not listen to his voice "is a direct refutation of the

⁶³See H. L. Ellison, Exodus, Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 20.

⁶⁴See Terence Fretheim, Exodus, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 65.

⁶⁵Brevard Childs, The Book of Exodus, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 77.

assurance given by God in 3:18." ⁶⁶ Instead of telling Moses that he has a false understanding of divine foreknowledge, God provides Moses with three signs for the purpose of convincing the elders that Yahweh has appeared to Moses. Apparently, God thinks Moses' point a legitimate one for he gives him the signs saying, "that they may believe you" (4:5). Attempts to escape this conclusion by claiming that the signs were solely for Moses' benefit ignore the fact that three times God says the signs are for the purpose of convincing the elders (4:5, 8, 9). Moreover, God concedes the possibility that Moses is right when God acknowledges that the first wonder may not compel belief. A reason is given for the second sign: "it shall come about that if they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign" (4:8). Furthermore, God grants a third sign to be used if the elders do not believe the first two signs. "If" language implies a somewhat uncertain future.⁶⁷ In other words, God admits to Moses that he does not know for certain how things will go but graciously gives Moses special help to achieve the divine purpose.

What can be said of all this? First, God does not rebuff Moses for questioning the divine word. God takes his question seriously and is open to challenge. Second, we should understand that some of God's unconditional utterances about the future are open to being recast in light of new situations. If this is the case then there is no contradiction between 3:18 and 4:8-9, one saying that they will listen and the other saying they may not. God may make remarks about future human actions which are highly probable, though not certain.

The divine statement that Pharaoh would not let the people go without a struggle is based on his knowledge of the king's stubborn nature. It is not an inviolable

⁶⁶Walter Brueggemann, The Book of Exodus, New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 716.

⁶⁷See Fretheim, The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 47-9.

future where Pharaoh is without choice. It may be objected that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart implies that he can only do what God determines he will do. In which case God does not work with the resources available, rather, God simply decides the way things shall go. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is commonly cited in discussions of divine sovereignty to demonstrate that God is in full control of even oppressive and disastrous situations.

The text will not support, however, such a view of sovereignty.⁶⁸ When we hear the word harden in reference to God we normally think in terms of complete control. But the three Hebrew terms used in the text (kabed, hazag and gashah) have the general meaning of to make something strong or heavy or to encourage (reinforce) someone.⁶⁹ The other occurrences of these words in the Old Testament do not carry deterministic overtones.⁷⁰ If it is deterministic then one wonders why God must harden his heart more than once. "It is important to note," says Fretheim, "that an act of hardening does not make one totally or permanently impervious to outside influence; it does not turn the heart off and on like a faucet."⁷¹ After all, God hardened the hearts of Pharaoh's servants (10:1) yet they understand the destruction taking place and plead with Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go and serve Yahweh (10:7). Divine hardening does not remove their decision making capacities or their ability to take a different course of action.

That the divine strengthening still leaves Pharaoh with alternatives is indicated by the conditional language employed in 8:2; 9:2 and 10:4. God proclaims that particular judgments are coming if Pharaoh does not release the people. If,

⁶⁸On the nature of divine sovereignty in Exodus see Terence Fretheim, "Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus: A Collision of Images," Horizons in Biblical Theology 11 no. 2 (Dec. 1989):31-56.

⁶⁹For bibliography on hardening see Walter Kaiser, Towards an Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 253.

⁷⁰See Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, God's Strategy in Human History (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1983), 155-77.

⁷¹Fretheim, Exodus, 97. The following discussion is indebted to Fretheim's excellent study (pp. 96-103).

however, Pharaoh is so under divine control that he cannot let them go then the use of "if" by God does not make sense. By uttering a conditional God is saying to Pharaoh that he does not have to persist in his intransigence, he may repent. If, however, God is controlling Pharaoh such that Pharaoh cannot do otherwise, then God's speech is deceitful.

The narrative asserts the stated purpose of God is to be glorified and that the Egyptians would "know that I am Yahweh" (7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14; 14:4, 8). Gowan, following Zimmerli, argues that this formula means more than intellectual awareness of a fact; it means to become oriented towards Yahweh in one's life.⁷² God intends to bring about changes in the life of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, not just with Israel. It hardly glorifies God if Pharaoh is not a genuine opponent, a puppet for God to manipulate. God and Pharaoh are involved in a real conflict, one that is not settled by overwhelming divine power.

Moreover, Pharaoh repeatedly hardens his own heart before God ever hardens it. God is intensifying what Pharaoh has already decided upon. Pharaoh is steadfast in his course of action and God strengthens his resolve. But why, it may be asked, would God do such a thing, especially when Pharaoh is on the verge of letting the people go? I think that God is trying to push Pharaoh out of his comfort zone and even further away from God in the attempt to get Pharaoh to come to his senses and repent.⁷³ Pharaoh has positioned himself in a sinful state where he is satisfied but God "gives him over" to further judgment. God ups the ante in the increasing destruction of the Egyptian economy. Furthermore, the plagues are, I believe, directed against the Egyptian pantheon--showing the utter futility of the patron deities to protect Egypt.⁷⁴ Pharaoh is pushed by God to

⁷²Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 137.

⁷³On the divine hardening of people for redemptive purposes see Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 1.191-2.

⁷⁴See Ex. 12:12, Nahum Sarna, Exploring Exodus (New York: Schocken, 1987), 78-80 and John J. Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1971), 86-129.

decide: either stick with his old deities and remain steadfast in his oppression in which case he will suffer further judgment, or repent and call upon Yahweh--the god of whom he said he did not know (5:2). What God desires is the redemption of Pharaoh and to this end the plagues are deployed. However, as Gowan remarks: "All this destructive activity seems to have failed to accomplish the purpose that is emphasized so strongly throughout the passage, except that Israel was persuaded" (15:31).⁷⁵

To adapt an illustration from Fretheim, Pharaoh is in a canoe heading down a swift river. As the river narrows towards the waterfall it picks up speed. There are ample warnings along the way, one can hear the roar of the falls and see the spray rising up from it. One must either heed the warnings and get over to the bank or stay the course and suffer the consequences. There does come a point when it is too late to turn back and all of one's decisions come to a head. But such a doom was not in place from the beginning. Whether Pharaoh steers to the bank or goes over the edge, the Egyptians will know that Yahweh has done these things and so will be glorified.

In making use of the resources available, divine sovereignty does not exercise absolute control over the human order. God does not easily get his way with either Moses or Pharaoh. God persuades, commands, gives comfort, and sometimes brings judgment in order to get humans to sign on to his project. The picture presented is one where God genuinely wrestles with his human creatures. Regarding the non-human creation, however, the book of Exodus presents a very different picture of divine sovereignty where there is little, if any, resistance.⁷⁶ The plagues, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the provision of food and water in the wilderness all testify to Yahweh's ability to make use of the created order. These forces do not appear resistant to the divine will as is the case with human

⁷⁵Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 139.

⁷⁶See Fretheim, "Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus," 35-7.

agents. God can make use of the processes in nature to produce some quite unusual events. Again, God makes use of the resources available in the created order. God elects to work in and through the world he made in order to deliver and provide for his people.

3.10 Divine-Human Relationality In The Covenant

God created in freedom. God elected to work with Abraham in freedom. In freedom God elected Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau and the Israelites over the other nations. In these cases divine election comes first but election must be understood as resulting from the divine love for the sake of relationship. Consequently, a conditional element enters the scene: will the people accept the divine election and be faithful to it? In election God freely takes the initiative and then, freely binds himself by promise and covenant to creation, Abraham and Israel. God now establishes a covenant with the people. After Sinai, "the entire history of Israel, as portrayed in the Bible, is governed by this outstanding reality. Covenant consciousness suffuses all subsequent developments."⁷⁷ While camped at Sinai God institutes a covenant with the Israelites:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Ex. 19:4-6).

In gracious freedom God establishes a covenant--a working arrangement with the people of Israel. In grace God delivered the people from their bondage in Egypt. In his mightiness he brought them to himself. This act is described with the metaphors of a mother eagle (cf. Deut. 32:11-4) and of a father carrying his son (Deut. 1:31).⁷⁸ Both these metaphors depict powerful help and concern for the

⁷⁷Sarna, Exodus, 134.

⁷⁸On the eagle metaphor see Walter Kaiser jr., Exodus, Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 415.

people. The first words of the covenant are about God's gracious acts of deliverance and closeness--"brought you to myself." Whatever word follows in the covenant, its foundation is laid in grace. In the divine-human relationships grace is always first.

In response to divine grace God expects the people faithfully to keep the covenant. Although no stipulations are given at this point God desires obedience to his word. But even the commandments will have the people's best interest in mind for they will be for their good (Deut. 6:24; 10:13). In response to the divine grace God desires that the people exercise trusting obedience to his word. God is still in the work of developing people who love, trust and obey him. God has already displayed his mighty love for them. Now he wants a loving response from the beloved. Brueggemann comments: "While Yahweh's initial rescue is unconditional and without reservation, a sustained relation with Yahweh is one of rigorous demand for covenant."⁷⁹ The bestowal of the covenant promise was solely Yahweh's prerogative and was not conditioned by anyone. Human participation in the covenant promise and the blessings it entailed were conditional.⁸⁰ God initiates the relationship and intends for it to be one of give-and-take. The covenant involves reciprocity but this is due solely to God's free decision.

Eichrodt describes the covenant relationship as "bilateral."⁸¹ He acknowledges, however, that it is not a covenant between equals for God is the superior partner. The covenant truly involves partnership but "bilateral" is perhaps not

⁷⁹Brueggemann, Exodus, 834.

⁸⁰See Walter Kaiser Jr. Towards an Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 93-4, 111, 130, 156-7.

⁸¹Walter Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament in 2 vols., tr. J. A. Baker, OTL (London: SCM, 1961), 37. Balentine claims that the majority of Old Testament theologies, including those of Eichrodt and Von Rad, are deficient on divine-human relationality. The relationship has been described in one-sided terms where divine solicitation of human input was regarded as unworthy of deity. See his Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 229-249.

the best term for the divine-human covenant. König prefers the term "monopluristic" since it emphasizes the fact that the covenant is one-sidedly established by the Lord yet, it also conveys the sense of mutuality between God and the people.⁸² God brings about the covenant in gracious free love. God is not forced into this relationship. Inside the covenant relationship exist boundaries and obligations for both the people and God. God, the king, wants a relationship with the people, the vassal, not with automatons who can do nothing but what the programmer designs. God is dependent upon the people to ratify and fulfill the covenant.⁸³ He expects them to be responsible and to contribute (within the limits of their createdness) to the relationship. God binds himself to the covenant people and will do what is appropriate and legitimate (within the limits he has established) for their well being. God is deeply involved in history. Moltmann comments: "The more the covenant is taken seriously as the revelation of God, the more profoundly one can understand the historicity of God and history in God."⁸⁴

Blessings are promised if the people faithfully trust the covenant God: they will be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The text does not explain what this means. I suggest that it involves a ministry on the part of the Israelites to the rest of the world. Through them, all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). As God's "treasured possession" they would serve to direct people to God. The question is whether Israel will fulfill this calling. God places his project for the future of the world into their hands. He will work with them but God sovereignly decides to make his project dependent upon this people. They cannot do it without God; God will not do it without them. Again we see risk involved for God makes his redemptive work vulnerable--will anyone faithfully

⁸²Adrio König, Here Am I: A Believer's Reflection on God, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 128-9.

⁸³Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. xxx, says the aspect of divine dependence upon the people has generally been missed.

⁸⁴Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God, tr. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 271.

keep the covenant? Will the people become a holy nation? Will they love God with all their strength (Deut. 6:5) and show love to their neighbors (Lev. 19:18)? A reading of the Bible reveals that, overall, God was very disappointed with Israel in this regard. The cultus failed to produce godly people and when prophets were sent their message went largely unheeded. After centuries of struggling with the people, God expresses his exasperation with them: "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people" (Isa. 65:1-2 NRSV). One can almost picture God jumping up and down, waving his arms shouting "here I am!" to little avail.⁸⁵

3.11 Divine Goals With Open Routes

The breaking and renewal of the covenant in Exodus 32-4 sheds important insight into the divine-human relationship.⁸⁶ Especially significant in this regard are the prayers of Moses. The worship of the golden calf (Ex. 32) constituted a grievous breaking of the covenant. The event precipitates a rather heated and tense exchange between God and Moses. God's speech begins and ends by telling Moses to leave him immediately (32:7, 10). Moreover, God proclaims that they are Moses' people thereby implying they are not God's. Finally, God informs Moses of a new plan of action: God will destroy the people and start over again with Moses. Moses will then have a role similar to Noah's. "God is prepared to scuttle Israel as the promised 'great nation,' and to reassign and redeploy the great Abrahamic promise of Gen. 12:2 to Moses."⁸⁷ Certainly it is within the divine freedom to do this. By starting over again with Moses, God would remain faithful to his basic commitment while basing his specific options and responses at any one time on the unfolding events and human actions.

⁸⁵More will be said on God's success and failures in working with humans in the section on Acts 10-15 and Romans 9-11 in the next chapter.

⁸⁶See Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 217-243.

⁸⁷Brueggemann, Exodus, 931.

Moses, however, does not agree with God. Instead of leaving, Moses risks the divine wrath in order to intercede for the people.⁸⁸ He believes it possible to alter the divine word and to this end he gives three reasons why God should not follow through on his promised course of action (32:11-3). First, he says the people belong to God for God is the one who just delivered them. Second, the Egyptians may ascribe "evil motives" to God.⁸⁹ Third, he reminds God of his promise to Abraham. Now God could have rebutted all of Moses' reasons: (1) yes, God delivered them but he has no confidence in them; (2) He does not care what the Egyptians think because he has healthy self-esteem; (3) He is keeping his promise to Abraham since Moses is one of his descendants. Or, God could have replied that he is sovereign and can do what pleases him. But God gives no such answers. Instead, the text simply says that God changed his mind and did not do what he said he would. Apparently, Moses has such a relationship with God that God values what Moses desires. If Moses interprets God's intentions in an unfavorable way and God values his relationship with Moses, then God must either persuade Moses or concede his request. It is unlikely that Moses presents God with new information. The real basis for the change in God's decision comes from a forceful presentation by one who is in a special relationship with God. With Moses' prayer the decision-making situation is now altered for God.⁹⁰ Being in relationship to Moses, God is willing to allow him to influence the path he will go. God permits human input into the divine future. One of the most remarkable features in the Old Testament is that people can argue with God and win! Fretheim comments: "Hence human prayer (in this case, intercession) is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people, and the world. God may well adjust modes and

⁸⁸On these intercessory prayers of Moses see Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 135-9 and Patrick D. Miller, They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 270-4.

⁸⁹On the ascription of evil to God in such prayers see Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 127-9.

⁹⁰See Fretheim, "Prayer in the Old Testament," 60.

directions (though not ultimate goals) in view of such human responsiveness."⁹¹

After Moses visits the idolatrous scene he returns to Yahweh, continuing his intercession (32:31-4). He requests that God forgive the people. This time, however, God does not grant his petition: punishment will be meted out. Moses does not receive everything he requests. Furthermore, God says that the divine presence will not accompany the people. Instead, he will send a messenger (angel). The reason given is that God is worried that if he dwelt in their midst he would destroy them (33:3). Even in anger God is concerned for their well being and believes this will be a suitable arrangement. Yet, 33:5 indicates that the issue is not finally decided for God is watching the people to see their response. When Moses next prays he makes a complaint and a request. He complains that God has not revealed the identity of this "messenger." On the basis of his special relationship with God he asks, "show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight" (33:13).

In response to Moses' complaint, God again changes his mind and says that his "face" (the divine presence) will go with the people. To which Moses replies that if God himself does not go with them, then he does not want to go for it is Yahweh's presence which distinguishes the people of Israel (33:15-6). Concerning Moses' request it is not entirely clear what Moses is asking when he says "show me your ways." Cassuto suggests an intriguing interpretation.⁹² What Moses desires, he says, is to know the criteria by which God decides when to forgive and when to punish. In this way Moses will be able to determine when he should intercede knowing he will be successful and when he should not attempt it. God remains silent about this until, perhaps, after Moses' next request.

God acknowledges his special relationship with Moses whereupon Moses seizes the

⁹¹Frøtheim, Exodus, 287.

⁹²U. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, tr. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 433.

opportunity to request God to "show me your glory" (33:18). Again, it is not clear what Moses desires. Perhaps it is the desire to be radically close to God, to be face to face. The divine response is not to give Moses everything he asks, but, rather to grant Moses insight into the divine goodness and the meaning of the divine name (Yahweh). God says that it is enough for Moses to know that God is gracious and compassionate (33:19). But the exercise of these qualities is, finally, up to God. Moses may request forgiveness for the people but it is ultimately up to God's discretion when to grant it. What Moses needs to know is that God is a God of grace and compassion. To this end God then provides Moses with a theophany where the divine character is revealed. Yahweh is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," he forgives iniquity yet will not neglect needed judgment upon sin (34:6-7).⁹³ These are not abstract attributes of God but, rather, characterization of who God is in relation to his people. This is what humanity needs to know in order to live in relation to God. Informed of these divine characteristics we may make our way in the world with God. His steadfast love renewing us, his justice challenging us and his mercy comforting us.

In this fascinating series of prayers we have seen that Moses does not get everything he requests. Yet, it is clear that God does take Moses' concerns seriously, even to the point of twice changing the divine plan. We are not told what God would have done had Moses failed to make these petitions. The text is clear, however, that Moses became a partner with God in shaping the future. Patrick Miller observes that Moses did not pray "thy will be done" for it is the divine will that we call upon God and even argue against God.⁹⁴ There is no self-surrender on Moses' part, rather, in prayer he enters into a relationship of reciprocity. Gowan says,

⁹³On the significant changes between these verses and the earlier statement in 20:5 see Fretheim, Exodus, 302. Mercy and grace are clearly extended here!

⁹⁴Patrick D. Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer," Word and World 23 no. 4 (Fall 1993): 361-2.

The picture of God presented to us throughout the Old Testament is that of a God who has chosen to work with, rather than just upon human beings, so that humans (in this case Moses) are given the chance, if they will accept the responsibility, to contribute to a future that will be different from what it would have been, had they remained passive.⁹⁵

Prayer encourages dialogue not monologue. By speaking up he made an impact on God. God chooses not to leave the future solely in our hands, but neither does he decide that we should simply leave it in God's hands. God sovereignly decides that the route into the future will involve a genuine divine-human partnership.

Balentine comments:

prayer is a constitutive act of faith that creates the potential for newness in both God and humanity. Neither partner remains unaffected or unchanged after the discourse of prayer. . . . in [the] Hebraic understanding God is open and receptive to change. . . . [grounded in] God's unrelenting commitment to be in relationship with humanity.⁹⁶

3.12 Excursus on Divine Repentance

The biblical references to God changing his mind have created no small controversy in the history of interpretation.⁹⁷ Such texts raise a number of issues. One concern is whether divine repentance implies that God is fickle or untrustworthy. If God can change his mind is it permissible to trust God for anything? Yes, because as the biblical narrative progresses it becomes clear that God remains faithful to his overarching goals. For instance, in Exodus 32 whether God destroys the Israelites and begins again with Moses or decides to continue working with the people, God would be faithful to his promise to Abraham and his

⁹⁵Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 231-2.

⁹⁶Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 268-9.

⁹⁷See Lester J. Kuyper, "The Suffering and the Repentance of God," Scottish Journal of Theology 22 (1969):257-77.

project of developing a people of faith.⁹⁸ But God has different options available and it is not a foregone conclusion which he shall choose. Sometimes God allows for human input to influence which option is realized. As God permitted Abraham's intercession for Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33) so now Moses is allowed incredible access to God. With or without human input God remains faithful to his project of redemption. God shows steadfast love and sticks to his overarching goals which he has made known through his promises. God remains unchangeable in his commitment to this project of salvation but remains flexible regarding precisely when, where and how it is carried out.

Another issue which the divine repentance texts raise concerns the conflict between divine repentance and divine immutability and foreknowledge. Theologians from Philo to Calvin have asserted that it is impossible for the divine mind to change. For Calvin, God can no more change his mind than he can be sorrowful or sad.⁹⁹ Biblical texts about God changing his mind, according to Calvin, do not describe God as he truly is but only as he appears to us. It simply is not appropriate for God to be described as repenting or being sorrowful.¹⁰⁰ If we

⁹⁸W. Bingham Hunter holds that the destruction of all Israelites except Moses would involve breaking a divine promise. He understands Gen. 49:10: "the scepter will not depart from Judah" to be a messianic prediction. Since Moses is from the tribe of Levi the messiah could not have come from Judah had God destroyed that tribe. Hence, God did not change his mind. See his The God Who Hears (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 53. These remarks reflect a common evangelical understanding of prophecy whereby the future is set in concrete and all conditionality is ruled out. Regarding Gen. 49:10 see Fretheim, Genesis, 665, 668 where he observes that this text is not a full-blown messianism. Evangelicals tend read more into prophecy than is actually there and this is especially true concerning messianic prophecy which is a late development in the Old Testament.

⁹⁹See John Calvin, Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, tr. John King, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 1.248-9 and Institutes, 1.17.12-14.

¹⁰⁰I believe that Calvin is here following the long tradition of ruling out certain scripture texts because they do not fit with a preconceived notion of what is fitting for God to be (dignum Deo). See my "Historical Considerations" in The Openness of God. For a discussion of Calvin and some of the church fathers on divine accommodation see Ford Lewis Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," Interpretation 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1977): 19-38. Unfortunately, Battles never inquires as to either how Calvin knows God has to accommodate himself or what criterion Calvin uses to elevate one biblical truth above another.

assert that God does do such things it would imply "either that he is ignorant of what is going to happen, or cannot escape it, or hastily and rashly rushes into a decision."¹⁰¹ Any of these options make God look foolish and are not fitting ascriptions to a transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient and immutable deity. The repentance texts are anthropomorphisms.¹⁰² Reformed philosopher Paul Helm distinguishes between "the anthropomorphic and the exact language of Scripture" so that the "statements about the extent and intensity of God's knowledge, power and goodness must control the anthropomorphic and weaker statements."¹⁰³ Otherwise, he claims we make God in our image. Bruce Ware, following Calvin, suggests a criterion for distinguishing anthropomorphic from literal texts in the Bible: "A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him."¹⁰⁴

At least three problems arise with this approach. First, how does one know which text transcends the other? One possibility would be to claim that texts which explicitly deny that God has certain human characteristics are the transcendent ones. In this case the passages which say that God will not change his mind because he is not human (Num. 23:19, 1 Sam. 15:29) describe God as he really is and force a reinterpretation of the repentance texts to mean something other than what they say.¹⁰⁵ What then, is one to do with Hosea 11:8-9 where God repents

¹⁰¹Calvin, Institutes, 1.17.12.

¹⁰²Reformed theologian James Daane, The Freedom of God, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 90-1, observes that decretal theologians have been interested only in those anthropomorphisms which imply an internal divine response to creatures. He claims that for decretal theology God is not personally affected by creatures and so God is not in a personal relationship with the world.

¹⁰³Paul Helm, The Providence of God, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 54, 52.

¹⁰⁴Bruce Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 29, no. 4 (Dec. 1986):442.

¹⁰⁵For more on this "two-layered" approach to interpreting scripture see my "Historical Considerations," 94-5.

because he is not human? Scripture asserts that God both repents and does not repent for the same "transcendent" reason that he is not human! In this approach the judgment of which texts mean what they say and which ones mean something other than what they say is dependent upon the theological control beliefs of the interpreter.¹⁰⁶

Another problem is that this approach seems to abstract the "will not repent" idea from the contexts in which they occur. The texts which say that God will not repent refer to specific situations in which God refuses to reverse his decision. God refuses to allow Balaam to change the divine mind and curse Israel (Num. 23:19). God rejects Saul's pleas to keep the kingship in his family (1 Sam. 15:29).¹⁰⁷ If one reads these "I will not change my mind" texts in their historical settings it becomes clear that they are not abstract principles of timeless truth. Rather, they speak of God's steadfastness in certain concrete situations to reject the human petition. But some do understand divine predictions to be immutable truths.¹⁰⁸ After all, do not texts such as "has he spoken and will he not perform it?" (Num. 23:19) and the test of a prophet (Deut. 18:21-2) imply that whatever God speaks as a prediction will happen? The answer is both yes and no. It is yes in those instances just mentioned (e. g. the rejection of Saul) where God decides to go with one particular option. But the answer is no in a great many instances where God does indeed speak and does not perform it due to divine repentance (e. g. Jonah's announcement of the destruction of the Ninevites and the prolongation of Hezekiah's life in 2 Kings 20). God, utilizing his wisdom in conjunction with input from the human

¹⁰⁶See my "God as Personal."

¹⁰⁷On this text see Terence Fretheim, "Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Constancy, and the Rejection of Saul's Kingship," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 47, no. 4 (Oct. 1985):595-602. Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 226, disagrees with Fretheim's explanation. Gowan claims that the texts on divine repentance (especially 1 Sam 15) are in tension with one another and cannot be reconciled.

¹⁰⁸On Deut. 18:21-2 in this regard see Francis Beckwith, "Limited Omniscience and the Test for a Prophet: A Brief Philosophical Analysis," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 36 no. 3 (Sept. 1993):357-62.

relationships, freely decides when he shall carry out the prediction and when he will alter it--but either way the decision remains faithful to his redemptive project.

A final problem with this approach lies in the fact that many today admit that God experiences changes in emotions but continue to affirm foreknowledge. It is claimed that God knows from all eternity that, for instance, Saul will disobey God at a particular point in history, God nevertheless experiences a genuine change in emotion from joy to grieving over Saul. It is questionable whether it is coherent to affirm both that God has always known of this event and that God now has changing emotions about that event. Furthermore, Fretheim identifies a moral problem with this view. "For God to say, for example, 'I know that I will be provoked to anger by the sin of David with Bathsheba,' runs into tough moral ground. God should immediately be angry at the point of God's knowledge of the sin, and not just at the point of its occurrence. But the texts say that God was provoked to anger at a particular historical moment, and not that some previous divine provocation was realized."¹⁰⁹ The notion of change in God is problematic for the doctrine of foreknowledge.¹¹⁰ This is, in part, the reason why Calvin along with many others affirmed a strong doctrine of divine impassibility and/or that God's knowledge of the creatures is totally independent of the creatures.

A better approach is to acknowledge that all these texts utilize metaphor.¹¹¹ Metaphors do not provide us with an exact correspondence to reality but they do provide a way of understanding reality. No single metaphor captures the biblical God. Rather, a number of metaphors are used in order to build up a portrait of God. In the Bible some metaphors are more pervasive and are used to qualify

¹⁰⁹Fretheim, Suffering of God, 42. That past, present and future are real for God see pages 40-4.

¹¹⁰For biblical documentation on change in God see Richard Rice, "Biblical Support," The Openness of God, 22-50.

¹¹¹See Fretheim, Suffering of God, 1-12.

others. For instance, God as loving both pervades and qualifies other metaphors. God is not just any king or father or hen, he is a loving one. Fretheim refers to these pervasive and qualifying metaphors as "controlling metaphors" and demonstrates that divine repentance is a significant controlling metaphor in the biblical narrative.¹¹²

Fretheim's excellent studies on divine repentance contain several important insights.¹¹³ I will now summarize those parts significant for my discussion. First, the metaphor of divine repentance is pervasive in the Old Testament. At least thirty five times God is said to repent or not repent (this includes only the times nicham is used, not all the times the narrative depicts a change in God).¹¹⁴ God is said to repent of something he has already done such as creating (Gen. 6:6) or making Saul king (1 Sam. 15:11, 35). God decides not to repent about certain matters. For instance, electing David king (1 Sam. 15:29) or when divine judgment has become inevitable (Jer. 15:6). God sometimes repents of what he said he would do or has already begun to do (Ex. 32:14). In these cases God changes his mind either because the people repent or someone intercedes (e. g. Moses) or simply because the divine compassion overrides the divine anger.¹¹⁵ The prophets learned that God is free to change his mind. In the words of Heschel: "[They] had to be taught that God is greater than His decisions."¹¹⁶ God cannot be compelled to repent nor be prevented from repenting for divine

¹¹²See Terence Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," Horizons in Biblical Theology 10, no. 1 (June 1988): 47-70.

¹¹³Terence Fretheim, "The Repentance of God, 47-70; "Divine Foreknowledge," 595-602; and "The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7-10, Hebrew Annual Review 11 (1987): 81-92. Also helpful is the study of nhm with God as subject in Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Bible vol. 24a (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 638-679.

¹¹⁴On nicham see H. Van Paunak, "A Semantic Survey of NHM," Biblica 56 (1975): 512-532.

¹¹⁵See also, J. P. Hyatt, Exodus, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 307, Kaiser, Exodus, 479, and Anderson and Freedman, Amos, 644-5.

¹¹⁶Heschel, The Prophets, 2.66.

repentance is neither automatic nor predictable. Whereas Moses succeeded in getting God to change his mind, Samuel was unsuccessful in his attempt on behalf of Saul.

Second, "Divine repentance is in fact found within a variety of traditions, northern and southern, early and late: Jahwist/Elohist; David-Zion; Deuteronomic History; eighth-and seventh-century prophets; exilic and post-exilic prophecy; psalmody."¹¹⁷ It cannot be dismissed as belonging to some small band of esoteric teachers. The theme is widespread throughout Israel's history. Third, the repentance metaphor also occurs in a wide variety of genre. Two very important usages in this regard are when it occurs as divine speech (where God says "I repent") and in creedal statements. Basic creedal affirmations call attention to what is most important for Israel's faith. In two such statements God is described as "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, and repenting of evil" (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Divine repentance is here placed right alongside the divine grace and love as a key characteristic of God. David Allen Hubbard remarks: "So dominant is this loyal love, so steeped in grace. . . and mercy. . . that it encourages Yahweh to stay open to changes in his plans. . . . God's openness to change his course of action. . . has [in these two passages] virtually become one of his attributes."¹¹⁸

However, it may be objected that divine repentance is literally impossible since God has exhaustive foreknowledge of future events. In a later chapter I will argue that even foreknowledge does not necessarily rule out divine repentance. Here I wish to establish that there is sufficient biblical warrant for calling into question the belief in divine foreknowledge, at least certain understandings of foreknowledge. In his book, The Suffering of God, Fretheim details a vast amount of evidence to show that the Old Testament does not affirm (at least not

¹¹⁷Fretheim, "Divine Repentance," 54.

¹¹⁸David Allen Hubbard, Joel and Amos, Tyndale Series, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 35 & 58.

uniformly) divine foreknowledge.¹¹⁹ Here I have space only to summarize his main points and list a few of the scripture texts he discusses.

That the future is open is indicated by four types of divine speech acts. To begin, there are the occasions where God says "perhaps" the people will listen to my prophet and "maybe" they will turn from their idols (e. g. Ezek. 12:1-3; Jer. 26:2-3). Moreover, God says, "I thought Israel would return to me but she has not" (Jer. 3:7; cf. 32:35). God is here depicted as not knowing the future with certainty. Next, God makes utterances like, "if you repent then I will let you remain in the land" (Jer. 7:5). Such "if" language--the invitation to change--is ingenuine if God already knew they would not repent. If God foreknows from the moment he gives the invitation that it will be pointless, then God is deceiving the people by holding out a false hope. On the other hand, if God is genuinely inviting the people to change, then the future is not yet decided. Third, scripture mentions occasions where God "consults" with certain people of faith in deciding the course of action God will take. God does this with Abraham concerning judgment upon Sodom (Gen. 18) and Amos (Amos 7) regarding judgment upon Israel. God, in freedom, decides not to decide without consulting these figures of faith or, as with Moses (Ex. 32) decides to change his decision in response to Moses' intercession. Finally, God asks questions which are not merely rhetorical. God agonizes over what to do with his sinful people (Hos. 6:4; Jer. 5:7). When God asks, "What am I going to do with you?", God is seeking a response from the people. God desires dialogue for if the people will join in dialogue reconciliation is yet possible. By asking such questions God puts a decision to the people and judgment is not yet inevitable.

In addition to this evidence I would add some further points. First, that God does not know the future has already been discussed above in connection with the testing of Abraham where God learns that Abraham really trusts him (Gen. 22) and with Moses challenge to a divine "prediction" that the elders would believe him

¹¹⁹Fretheim, Suffering of God, 45-59.

(Ex. 4:1). It is God who acknowledges that Moses was correct and the elders might, indeed, not believe him. Moreover, biblical characters do not seem to believe that divine forecasts are inevitable. Even though God had told Rebekah that "the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23) in reference to Jacob and Esau she does not believe this divine word will come to pass without her taking some risky actions (Gen. 27:5-17).¹²⁰ The text does not suggest that the oracle fixes the future for her sons. She certainly did not leave this "prediction" in the hands of God. The oracle expressed what God desired on the matter and God enlisted Rebekah's help to this end (a risk God takes in the patriarchal culture). The common assertion that Rebekah's actions were sinful (much like Sarah's in Gen. 16) reflects a docetic view of divine activity in the world. God has sovereignly chosen to work through his creatures, allowing their actions to be significant to the divine project.

It is often thought that Joseph's dreams indicate a revelation of divine foreknowledge since everything comes to pass as was "predicted." For instance, Joseph dreamed that his brothers and parents would "bow down" to him (Gen. 37:6-9). But neither Jacob nor Joseph's brothers believe they have to do as the dream suggested (37:8, 10) and, as a matter of fact, Joseph's parents never do bow down to him!¹²¹ It is commonly overlooked by proponents of foreknowledge that some predictions in scripture either do not come to pass at all (e. g. Jonah and 2 Kings 20) or not in the exact way they were foretold (e. g. Gen. 27:27-40 where Jacob's blessing is qualified by Esau's blessing and Acts 21:11 where it is incorrectly predicted that Paul would be bound by the Jewish authorities and handed over to the Gentiles).¹²² One would think that a God with foreknowledge

¹²⁰See Fretheim, Genesis, 521, 523, 538.

¹²¹See Fretheim, Genesis, 601.

¹²²Actually, the Roman authorities rescued Paul from the mob and they bound him, not the Jewish authorities. Of course, one could argue that the prediction did come true in a "general" sense. I agree, but those who affirm divine foreknowledge are the ones using such prophecies to claim God knows the future in detail. If so, then either God or the prophet cannot get the details straight.

would get such details straight.

3.13 Divine Wrath and Mercy Within the Context of Covenantal Relationality

Within the covenant relationship between God and the people, God is described as caring deeply about the relationship. At times God becomes angry and at other times shows mercy. Abraham Joshua Heschel's monumental study, The Prophets, so wonderfully brings out these twin themes. He eloquently describes the passion of the divine-human drama with all the ebb and flow this relationship involves. Heschel's remarks on the divine wrath and how it relates to mercy have deeply influenced this section, and I might add, much of my thinking on God.

Philo and many of the church fathers were appalled at biblical references to divine wrath since it was not considered appropriate for God to be angry.¹²³ Consequently, references to divine wrath were either allegorized or simply equated with punishment. Either way a volatile emotion was kept safe from the divine nature. It should be acknowledged that wrath can be a dangerous emotion for us, one that sometimes threatens to undo us, and so it is understandable why we might have reservations about ascribing it to God. But scripture unashamedly does just that. We have already seen in Exodus 32 that Yahweh is a God who gets angry. But Heschel is right in holding that wrath must be understood as an aspect of the divine pathos--it is a distancing of the relationship. For Heschel, "pathos" means God is concerned. He is not apathetic towards us. In other words, divine wrath must be discussed in connection with the divine-human relationship. As part of God's pathos towards us wrath is an instrument in the divine hands, not an attribute of God. It is a secondary and never the primary pathos towards us. God's wrath concerns the divine displeasure at a particular situation in history, not an essential attribute. It is not the creator's fundamental stance

¹²³See Heschel, The Prophets, 2.58-9, 79-86 and my "Historical Considerations," 69-80. For a survey of contemporary approaches to the relationship between divine love and wrath see Paul Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God, 21-5 and Donald G. Bloesch, God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love, Christian Foundations (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 139-145.

towards his creation. Hence, all attempts to balance wrath (or justice) with love as equal attributes of God are misplaced.

Even as lawgiver God is not expounding a moral code of sheer justice. Rather, the covenant stipulations pertain to righteousness or the right ordering of relationships. Heschel writes: "Righteousness goes beyond justice. Justice is strict and exact, giving each person his due. Righteousness implies benevolence, kindness, generosity."¹²⁴ Crime in Israel is not primarily a violation of a law, but a sin against the living God. It is a breaking of the fundamental relationship between creature and creator. Consequently, justice and righteousness must be understood within the divine-human relationality which God established.

God is judge over his people but this must not be understood in the Western legal sense of being a neutral decision maker. Judges in Israel were advocates for the people, displaying concern for the needy and oppressed. Deborah, Gideon and David sought to liberate the people and put societal relationships in the state God intended. Judges in Israel were to emulate the divine judge who is "the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing" (Deut. 10:17-8). God is a judge who loves his creatures and desires their well being.

Even when the divine judge pours out his wrath there is love behind it. This idea is aptly summed up by Heschel: "the secret of anger is God's care."¹²⁵ Divine wrath bespeaks divine concern. God cares deeply about his beloved--the creatures he made--he is not indifferent towards them. God cannot stand to see the beloved ruin herself so he actively seeks her renewal. When those efforts are rejected

¹²⁴Heschel, The Prophets, 1.201.

¹²⁵Heschel, The Prophets, 2.72.

God becomes angry. The divine wrath is a response to being dismissed by the one he loves. The break in relationship brings grief to the heart of God.¹²⁶ God is personally involved, he has made himself vulnerable and that vulnerability has been betrayed. The breaking of the relationship is like a divorce and its impact on God is real, it changes him.

As grief moves to anger God takes steps to change the situation. Divine suffering results in attempts at reconciliation. God brings punishment upon his people that they might be redeemed (Hos. 6:1). Unlike our tendencies there is purpose in the divine anger and once this purpose is achieved it may vanish in an instant. Heschel explains: "The anger of the Lord is instrumental, hypothetical, conditional, and subject to his will. . . . Far from being an expression of 'petulant vindictiveness,' the message of anger includes a call to return and to be saved."¹²⁷ The purpose of God's wrath is to open a future for the broken relationship. God sometimes imposes great suffering upon his people as a means of discipline. "The Lord is long-suffering, compassionate, loving, and faithful, but He is also demanding, insistent, terrible, and dangerous."¹²⁸

Yet, it remains true that beyond the dangerous wrath of God lies his mercy. God is ever ready to repent in response to his people's repentance. These ideas are wonderfully portrayed in Judges 10:6-16. In this passage the Israelites worship other gods, forsaking Yahweh. In response Yahweh delivers them into the hands of foreign oppressors who mistreat the people for eighteen years. Finally, the Israelites cry out to Yahweh confessing their sin. That God is still angry at them is made clear by the divine speech to them. God says that he has taken care of them and repeatedly protected them from enemies, "yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the

¹²⁶On divine grief see Fretheim, Suffering of God, 109-113.

¹²⁷Heschel, The Prophets, 2.66.

¹²⁸Heschel, The Prophets, 2.65.

gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress" (10:13-4). Yahweh has had it with these people, he will no longer deliver them. He challenges them to seek help from her adulterous lovers. God is here depicted as a wounded lover speaking strong words of rejection. Yet the people of Israel do not believe the divine rejection final for they immediately put away their idols and serve Yahweh. Even though God has said in no uncertain terms to leave him alone for he will not help them, they persist. They do not take the divine wrath as the final word. And, indeed, it is not, for when "Yahweh could bear the misery of Israel no longer" (10:16) he raised up Jephthah to deliver the people he so emphatically said he would never deliver.

That God's wrath is real, yet subsumed under mercy is brought out repeatedly in the prophets. Hosea speaks of the inner turmoil God goes through in relation to the faithlessness of his people: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? . . . My heart is turned over within Me, all my compassions are kindled. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (11:8-9). God is not like us in that his compassion is more fundamental than his anger.

The Old Testament displays movement in its understanding of divine wrath and mercy. The decalogue in Exodus places the divine wrath upon idolatry before it mentions God's lovingkindness (20:4-6). Although the extent of lovingkindness is greater than wrath, there is a conditional placed upon love: to those who love God. However, when God revises this statement later in Exodus after Israel's apostasy with the golden calf several changes are made which reflect a greater emphasis on the divine love (34:6-7).¹²⁹ First, the order is reversed; divine love is placed first before mention of punishment of sin. Second, the conditional is removed, calling attention to God's unconditional love. Third, many new elements are added in describing the divine nature: God is "compassionate and

¹²⁹See Fretheim, Exodus, 227, 302.

gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness," and "forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." Only after this is the reference to judging mentioned and it is not included in the list of divine attributes. Moreover, in the creedal formulations of Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2 these verses are again modified. God is still gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, but a new element is added: God repents of his judgments upon sin. Moreover, the reference to not clearing the guilty has been dropped. As God works with his people a clearer picture emerges of who God is in relation to his people. There is divine wrath and it can be terrible but it serves the purpose of attempting to bring the people back from a life of death. God puts before the people the ultimate choice: "I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life" (Deut. 30:19-20). Again we see the divine risk: will anyone love, obey, and hold fast to him so as to have life? The divine project is to give genuine life to his creatures. God's wrath and mercy are not arbitrary, but elements in bringing that project to fruition.

3.14 The Absence and Presence of God

"The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 32:11). "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). The biblical writers sometimes speak of an incredible intimacy with God while at other times they speak as though God cannot be found. Some texts refer to God's great provisions for the people and the closeness of God at these times while others, especially the lament tradition, call divine providence into question.

Fretheim distinguishes three aspects of divine presence in the Old Testament.¹³⁰ There is the structural or general presence of God where God can never be said to be absent from his created order. Next is the accompanying presence with his

¹³⁰Fretheim, Suffering of God, 61-5.

people throughout their journeys (even into exile). Finally, there is the tabernacling presence where God chooses to dwell in a specific place among his people. To these I would add a fourth: God's acts of deliverance or special provision where people experienced the divine presence in miraculous providence. This last type of presence usually occurs when God is either beginning a new work (notice the cluster of miracles in Exodus), validating that God has been with a prophet (Ex. 4:2-8), or demonstrating Yahweh as the true God (1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 18-9). All four types of presence are due to divine grace and reveal God's desire to be present in an intimate way with his creatures. God makes himself approachable. God is holy and transcendent but these terms must be understood within the divine relatedness to his people, not as some abstract "wholly other."¹¹¹ The holy God is one who may be approached by his creatures--even "face to face" for Moses. Holiness pertains to the way in which God establishes his presence among the people, not some other worldly transcendence.

Presence has to do with relationship. The distance between those in the relationship decreases as they freely share themselves. Becoming close means being available and vulnerable. The relationship may backfire and one may be taken advantage of and hurt. In this regard it is not surprising that the divine presence is affected by human action. Although God is never considered entirely absent in the Old Testament--those who ask, "where are you God?" expect God to hear it--God may withdraw his special presence from individuals or from the temple (Ezek. 8:6). Sometimes God's presence is removed in order to test someone (e. g. Hezekiah 2 Chron 32:31 and Job). At other times the divine absence is a response to sin where God "hides his face" (Micah 3:4) from the evildoers. But this is certainly not true of every case where God is felt to be absent. In the complaint Psalms there is no mention of sin and God's absence is seen as

¹¹¹See Fretheim, Suffering God, 70-1.

irrational.¹³² In these cases no reason given and the supplicant is simply dismayed that God has withdrawn (e. g. Psalm 44). Such texts are another reminder that we are allowed to call God into question. One's relationship with God is not so unambiguous as to prevent all skepticism.¹³³ Many a biblical writer faulted God for not acting and attempted to prod God into action. Brueggemann believes that these laments "the petitionary party is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk."¹³⁴ God is vulnerable to being misunderstood by failure to act and this places the relationship between God and the petitioner in tension.

An offshoot of this type of divine absence is the complaint, "why do the wicked prosper?" (Jer. 12:1). If God is so almighty and concerned about widows and orphans, then why does God not act? The "lament tradition" does not ask God for strength to cope with the situation, it cries out for divine action to change it. This tradition asks, where is the divine presence in oppressive situations?¹³⁵ To such questions no definitive answers are given. A couple of possible answers are that God is slow to anger but will eventually bring judgment about and that sometimes the resources through which God wants bring judgment are not yet available.

The prophet Habakkuk bitterly complained about God's absence in the midst of the violence and injustice of his day (1:1-4). He demands the divine presence to do

¹³²See Fredrik Lindström, Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms, trans. Michael McLamb (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1994) and Samuel Balentine, The Hidden God: the Hiding Face of God in the Old Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 45-79.

¹³³See J. L. Crenshaw, "The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," eds. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel, The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events (New York: KTAV, 1980), 1-19. That questioning of God is early in the Old Testament is attested in Judges 6:13.

¹³⁴Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 36 (1986): 59.

¹³⁵See Balentine, "The Lament Tradition: Holding to God Against God," Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 146-198.

something about it.¹³⁶ He will not remain silent and accept the status quo as ordained by divine providence. In response God reveals that the Babylonians shall invade Israel as a punishment for sin (1:5-11). God has been waiting for the Babylonians to grow in military might that he might make use of them. Habakkuk is dismayed and upset that God would use a people more wicked than the Israelites to punish the Israelites. He rebukes God for such an outrageous plan and accuses God of approving evil (1:12-17). God responds by asking Habakkuk to trust him and by giving him a vision in which God thoroughly condemns the evil practices of both Israelite and Babylonian (2:2-20). Habakkuk, armed with a better understanding of God's hatred of sin, prays, "in wrath remember mercy" (3:2). The book concludes with Habakkuk saying that he is terrified about the coming invasion for it is going to be rough. Nevertheless, he confesses his trust in God his savior. That is, he believes that the divine wisdom in bringing judgment upon the people is for their redemption--God has their best interest in mind. Habakkuk acknowledges that the divine absence as well as the divine presence in judgment are aspects of God's redemptive project.

3.15 The Potter and the Clay: an Examination of So-Called Pancausality Texts

"Like clay in the hands of a potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (Jer. 18:6; cf. Is. 29:16). The Old Testament describes God as directing the paths of people and kings (Prov. 16:9; 21:1), of making "dumb and deaf, seeing and blind" (Ex. 4:11), and of bringing calamity upon the people of Israel (Is. 45:7; Amos 3:6). The simile of potter and clay along with the pan-causality texts just cited are typically used to claim that every single thing that happens should be ascribed to God for God gets exactly what he wants.¹³⁷ This idea is

¹³⁶For the placement of Habakkuk's prayers in the lament tradition see Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, 183-9 and Miller, They Cried to the Lord, 70-9. Balentine also discusses how such questioning of God is risky for it destroys old worlds and builds new ones (292-5).

¹³⁷The metaphor of potter and clay has, according to Louis Berkhof, played a dominant role in Calvinism. See his Systematic Theology, third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946), 120. Examples of those who cite these pancausality texts in order to claim that God tightly controls every detail in history include: John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?," 119-123 and Jerry Bridges,

so taken for granted that scholars give little or no thought to the claim that the Old Testament writers considered every single event to be brought about by God. Hence, all the evidence we have already surveyed indicating that God is in a dynamic give-and-take relationship with humans and that in this relationship God sometimes does not get what he wants, is overturned. It is claimed that the verses just mentioned are the "clear didactic" passages while the others surveyed are mere anthropomorphisms. The verses interpreted as affirming divine pancausality of everything tell us the truth of the matter! Is this so?

A significant problem with this approach lies in the hermeneutical malpractice on the part of many commentators and theologians to quickly jump from particular statements to universals. For instance, Calvin, after citing the texts about God sending wind to feed Israel with birds and cause Jonah's ship trouble, says, "I infer that no wind ever arises or increases except by God's express command."¹³⁸ Moreover, after citing some particular divine blessings and judgments upon the Israelites, he claims that not a single drop of rain falls without God's explicit command.¹³⁹ That God made use of wind and rain in his relationship with Israel is clear, but these particular actions in historical situations must not be turned into universal principles. This common practice of extracting a universal idea from a particular historical statement is used to overturn the pattern of the divine-human relationship we have discussed above. But in our survey of the scriptures it was seen that God has sovereignly decided not to "control" everything and that his purposes can be rejected. This pattern of open relationship discloses the divine character and the project God desires to accomplish.

"Does Divine Sovereignty Make a Difference in Everyday Life?," 209-213, both in eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995).

¹³⁸Calvin, Institutes, 1.16.7.

¹³⁹Calvin, Institutes, 1.16.5.

How then, should these so-called pancausality texts to be understood? Fredrik Lindström's God and the Origin of Evil: A Textual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament provides a careful and detailed study of these texts. He began his study with the intention of confirming the thesis that the Old Testament writers believed that everything which happened was specifically controlled by God. In the process of working through the texts, however, he came to the opposite conclusion: that none of the passages cited as affirming divine causality of all good and evil do, in fact, teach this. The basic problem, he says, is that commentators rush to assert a universal principle instead of placing the texts in their literary and historical contexts as well as conducting semantic field studies on the key terms.¹⁴⁰ Although Lindström's study covers a large number of texts space limitations here allow coverage of only those most commonly cited in support of divine pancausality.

Isaiah 45:7 states that "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things." Does this mean that God is responsible for every single act of good and evil in the entire cosmos? Not at all, for as Lindström observes the entire section pertains to YHWH's dealings with Israel, not the entire cosmos. This is evidenced by the terms used. "Light" ('ôr) is not used in Isaiah 40-55 to refer to cosmic creation. Rather, it is used as a metaphor for political liberation from the Babylonians (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 53:11). The same is true of "darkness" (hōšek) which is a metaphor for misfortune and captivity (42:7; 47:5; 49:9) and also of the creation verbs (ysr, br' and 'šh) which are used in this section to depict God's bringing about the impending liberation of Israel. At this point opinions differ concerning the particular historical event to which "darkness" refers. König and others believe that it

¹⁴⁰Lindström, God and the Origin of Evil, 208-9 issues a scathing attack on biblical scholarship for its general failure in this regard. My own suspicion is that the pancausality of the Stoics had a tremendous influence on the classical concept of God. Add to this the influence of German Idealism upon modern biblical scholarship and one has a recipe for overlooking the particulars of historical life for the universal truths of reason.

refers to Israel's experience of the exile.¹⁴¹ That is, their removal to Babylon is the calamity which YHWH made against them. Lindström, however, sees here an antithetical reference. That is, "the positive phrases 'who forms light' and 'who makes weal' have to do with YHWH's saving intervention on behalf of his people, while the negative phrases 'who creates darkness' and 'who creates woe' refer to YHWH's destruction of the Babylonian empire"¹⁴² In either case the conclusion is the same: Isaiah 45:7 refers to the specific experiences of Israel in exile and not to divine pancausality. The "I the LORD do all these things" alludes to the promise of the return from exile, not to every single event that happens in life.

In Amos 3:6 we read "Does disaster befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?" This is commonly taken to mean that any and every calamity--every earthquake or terrorist bombing--which happens in the world is due to God. But this is not Amos' meaning for he has a specific historical occasion in view. The prophet asserts that it is Yahweh who is bringing calamity upon Israel.¹⁴³ The people were unwilling to recognize YHWH's hand against them (4:1-6; 9:10). They refused to believe that God would punish them for their sins so they sought other explanations. Amos declares that God reveals his judgments upon Israel to his prophets (3:7). The people should make no mistake, it is Yahweh who stands against them. Despite the fact that insurance companies refer to all natural disasters as "acts of God" this verse is not a general principle about divine pancausality. If that were meant then we have some genuine problems for "what sense would there be in God's punishing an evil action which he was himself in the last instance the cause of? What, for example, are we to gather from the fact that YHWH will punish the Ammonites for having ripped up pregnant women in Gilead (Amos 1:13) if the exegetes are correct in assuming that the ultimate cause of

¹⁴¹König, New and Greater Things, 61-2.

¹⁴²Lindström, God and the Origin of Evil, 198.

¹⁴³On Amos see Hubbard, Joel and Amos, 149 and Douglas Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 325.

all evil is YHWH himself (3:6)?"¹⁴⁴ Moreover, if God is thought of as "the ruler of history" such that all events in world history flow from his hand and if it is asserted that the biblical writers assumed this, then it makes no sense to say that the prophets proclaim that God is now bringing about this or that particular event since all events, in fact, are brought about by God (even if by secondary causes). If God foreordains every detail that happens then it is incredible that things go so badly and so absolutely contrary to God's stated will. Finally, Amos 3:7 asserts that no calamity befalls a city unless God reveals it to his prophets. If this were a universal then one would expect God to inform us of terrorist bombings prior to the calamity! If Amos 3:6 is used to support divine determinism of all urban disasters then, according to 3:7, there should be prophetic revelations concerning them. I am not aware of any such modern day revelations for the Oklahoma City bombing or the massacre of the children in the Scotland gymnasium. Problems such as these do not arise, however, if Amos 3:6 is understood as a particular pronouncement of divine judgment upon the sins of Israel.

The same line of interpretation holds true for Lamentations 3:38 which reads: "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?" Although many take this to refer to disasters in general rather than the calamity of the Israelite exile, Lindström's study demonstrates that a contextual analysis shows that only a singular historical event is in view. The verses immediately prior to 3:38 assert that "bad" which has come upon Israel is due to her sin. There is no arbitrary judgment or capricious action by God here. The context following 3:38 follows the same sequence of ideas as Deuteronomy 30:1-3, the covenant treaty. Deuteronomy 28-30 refers to blessings and curses, life and death depending on whether the covenant people remain faithful to God. The book of Lamentations has these treaty curses in mind when it is said that passers-by will

¹⁴⁴Lindström, God and the Origin of Evil, 118. Lindström observes that the majority of scholars seek to deflect this criticism by claiming that YHWH does not cause sinful human behaviors, only natural disasters. I would add that many theologians attempt to duck the criticism by invoking the concept of secondary causes or compatibilistic freedom.

shudder (Lam. 2:15, 3:46; Deut. 28:37), they will eat the flesh of their children (Lam. 2:20, 4:10; Deut. 28:53ff.), and their wives will be ravished (Lam. 5:11; Deut. 28:30). Consequently, Lamentations 3:38 asserts that the specific historical calamity of the exile, not all calamities in general, is brought about by God.

Proverbs 16:9 declares that "the human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps" and 21:1 says, "the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." A couple of points may be made about these verses. First, these sayings, along with all the others in Proverbs, should be understood as guidelines for godly living rather than universal principles which always hold true. If one takes every proverb as a universal one will run into contradictions (for they simply cannot all be practiced at the same time e. g. Prov. 26:4-5) and become untrue to life (e. g. it is not always true that a quiet answer turns away wrath, Prov. 15:1). Moreover, the proverbs about human plans and YHWH's purposes should be seen within the book's call for seeking the covenant God's wisdom in our planning. The God of Israel desires that his people seek his input rather than doing what they (on their own) think is best. Just as with Adam in the garden, so for the people of Israel, one cannot chart a wise course through life without trusting in divine wisdom (Prov. 20:24). God does direct his people's steps (16:9) and guide the king of Israel (21:1) when they seek God's wisdom. When they do not, then as we have seen, God stands against them. Though some kings "did right in the eyes of the Lord" (e. g., 2 Chron. 20:32; 25:2), others, such as Saul, did not, in fact, do what God wanted them to do (e. g., 1 Sam. 15:11; 2 Kings 16:2; 2 Chron. 28:1). If we take this proverb as a universal then we have the problem of explaining why God became angry with so many Israelite kings for breaking the covenant when the kings were only doing what God wanted. How could YHWH desire the breaking of his covenant when this hurt him so? Furthermore, if we universalize this text to include all kings everywhere then we have to conclude that all the evils they have committed in history is exactly what God wanted from them since they, like water, could not

but go in the direction God's hand determined.

In Exodus 4:11 God responds to Moses' plea of being an inadequate public speaker by saying that he is the creator of the human mouth and is responsible for the dumb and deaf, seeing and blind. Some interpret this to mean that every single case of physical defect is specifically brought about by God. They "are not merely the product of defective genes or birth accidents. Those things may indeed by [sic] the immediate, but behind them is the sovereign purpose of God. . . . No person in this world was ever blind that God has not planned for him to be blind."¹⁴⁵ Others interpret this verse as a statement that God is Moses' creator so Moses should trust that God can use him despite this weaknesses. As creator God has bestowed gifts of human sensation and God takes full responsibility for creating a world in which such gifts might become defective. This is a general statement that such things happen in God's world. Fretheim observes: "The text does not say, however, that this divine activity is individually applied, as if God entered into the womb of every pregnant woman and determined whether and how a child would have disabilities."¹⁴⁶ Evangelical commentator Walter Kaiser comments: "While God was not to be blamed for directly creating any defects, his wise providence in allowing these deprivations as well as his goodness in bestowing their ordinary functions mirrors his ability to meet any emergency Moses might have suggested."¹⁴⁷

Another point which needs to be made is that the created order and especially the human order have been given integrity and otherness by God. Neither the creation nor the human are God for God is a distinct other. Although the creation owes its being to the creator, God grants it space to be different. In working with his creatures it is sometimes the case that God seems to act alone, demonstrating his

¹⁴⁵Bridges, "Does Divine Sovereignty Make a Difference?," 211.

¹⁴⁶Fretheim, Exodus, 72.

¹⁴⁷Kaiser, Exodus, 328.

special providence. At Jericho God instructed the people to enact an absurd military tactic, in the wilderness God miraculously fed the people, and in Hezekiah's day he overthrew the Assyrian army. Normally, however, God "feeds" the people through their wise agricultural practices and grants them victory over enemies by exercising sound military strategy (e. g. Ai). Although God occasionally takes center stage (usually at the beginning of a new work) doing things for the people, normally God provides the wisdom which humans need for living properly in the created order. Furthermore, even in the miraculous God uses the resources available in the created order (e. g. wind to part the Sea of Reeds and locusts to destroy crops). Sometimes God is said to directly control the natural elements while other texts ascribe them a degree of autonomy (e. g. Hag. 1:10-11).¹⁴⁸

Finally, something must be said about the metaphor of potter and clay. Just as with other metaphors for God, such as hen, rock and father, the metaphor of potter says something true about God's relationship with his people--but not the whole truth or even the only truth. There is an element of truth in describing God as a mother hen but it is not the sole truth and not every aspect of being a hen should be attributed to God. Similarly, in certain respects God can rightfully be described as a potter, but God is not a potter in all respects. To the Western mind clay is inanimate and cannot resist the potter. It is thus not surprising that this metaphor serves as a controlling metaphor in many theological discussions of providence since it comports well with the notion that God meticulously controls everything. We are simply clay in the potter's hands. In the words of Berkouwer: "Scripture nowhere suggests that God's work is limited by human activity."¹⁴⁹

The use of the potter and clay metaphor in the Bible does not, however, sustain

¹⁴⁸See Fretheim, Suffering of God, 73-4.

¹⁴⁹G. C. Berkouwer, The Providence of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 127.

such a conclusion.¹⁵⁰ In Isaiah 29:15-6 and 45:9-13 the metaphor occurs in a debate about whether God has the right to perform certain actions. Some people, far from being passive "clay," were claiming that God was doing things which he had no right to do. Isaiah responds by saying that God, as creator and potter, is fully within his rights in these cases. If God, in sovereign concern for his people decides it is best to bring judgment upon them, that is his prerogative.¹⁵¹ In Jeremiah 18 it is also a question of divine prerogative. Does not God have the right to change his plans regarding Israel? Cannot God change his mind about a prophecy he has given if the people's behavior warrants such a change (18:7-10)? The metaphor of potter and clay leads some people to expect a clear assertion of God's complete control of Israel. But such is not the case for Jeremiah repeatedly speaks of the conditional ("if") in connection to both Israel and God. If she repents then God will relent, if she is recalcitrant then God may change his mind regarding the promised blessing (7-10). Brueggemann refers to this as "Yahweh's responsive sovereignty."¹⁵² The fact that Israel can take initiative violates the metaphor since clay cannot take initiative. So the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is not exactly like that of a potter and clay. For Jeremiah the word of the Lord does not foreclose the future but it opens up new possibilities. Yet, it also calls the people to a decision which will affect the future for both God and themselves. In this respect God is like a potter who, when the clay does not turn out as anticipated, changes his mind and works to reshape the clay into something else. But why would the clay not turn out the way God intended? Either because God is not a skilled enough potter or there is some defect in the clay. If God exercises meticulous control over his

¹⁵⁰Here again I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to one of Fretheim's excellent studies: "The Repentance of God."

¹⁵¹A. Van De Beek, Why? On Suffering, Guilt, and God, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 105-7 reads these texts as supporting divine arbitrariness. I wish to affirm the divine freedom in these passages but God's actions here are not arbitrary since they pertain to the divine project.

¹⁵²Walter Brueggemann, To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: Jeremiah 1-25, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 161. Brueggemann has some very helpful observations on this passage.

clay then the problem is definitely with God. The texts using the potter metaphor, however, place the blame on the clay which resists the will of the potter. Neither Isaiah nor Jeremiah consider the clay (the people) to be inanimate objects incapable of resisting the divine potter. Rather, the divine potter desires to shape the human clay into a particular type of vessel: one that responds to the divine love with trusting obedience resulting in a kingdom of priests. God is carrying out the project of creating a people who are holy and loving. The potter wants a vessel that redounds to his glory. But this particular clay has rejected the divine project. The people do not want what God wants. Hence, the potter/clay metaphor must be understood in terms of the give-and-take relationship which God has sovereignly established. It should not be understood as teaching total divine control over all things since the biblical writers do not make use of this aspect of the metaphor.

To sum up, God does bring about particular blessings to his people as well as particular calamities in response to their breaking the covenant. But God is not behind every single event that happens in life. After all, biblical figures sometimes attributed evil deeds to God but, as it turns out, were quite mistaken (e. g., 1 Sam. 23:7; 2 Sam. 4:8; 18:31).¹⁵³ The so called pancausality texts refer to specific actions of God and must not be understood as generalizations about divine action. Moreover, God is indeed a potter and king, but one whose clay and subjects sometimes cooperate with and sometimes rebel against divine initiatives. At times the rebellious subjects even kill the king's messengers. The clay refuses to be shaped in the direction the potter desires. In response, God sometimes brings events to a determined head and at other times allows events to go their way. This results in a messy view of providence. Deism and determinism offer more straightforward perspectives. But God has sovereignly decided to providentially operate in a dynamic give-and-take relationship with his creatures.

¹⁵³See John Boykin, The Gospel of Coincidence: Is God in Control? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 66-8.

3.16 Divine Love and Humiliation

God loves his creation and out of love takes steps to redeem it when it goes astray. God sovereignly makes himself vulnerable because he cares for, and gets involved with, his creatures. We have already seen how the divine love is expressed even in wrathful judgment. God will not stand idly by and watch his beloved ruin herself. The love God has for his people is neither indifferent nor soft, but a powerful love that acts in the best interest of the beloved. Several metaphors are used to describe the depth of this love. God carried Israel in his arms as a father carries his son (Deut. 1:31). Israel is God's firstborn child (Ex. 4:22) to whom God gave birth and nursed as a mother (Isa. 49:15). God longingly remembers the period of his betrothal to Israel (Jer. 2:2). Finally, Hosea uses one of the most intimate metaphors from human experience: God is Israel's husband.¹⁵⁴

In addition to these strong metaphors we have already seen that God's love and concern take preeminence in the theophany given to Moses (Ex. 34:6-7) and in two of Israel's creedal statements (Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2).¹⁵⁵ As God worked with his people more and more love took center stage as the key characteristic of God.¹⁵⁶ Yahweh loves with an "everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3) and so continues in his faithfulness. Hosea says that despite such faithful love God's beloved

¹⁵⁴For a study of this metaphor see Nelly Stienstra, YHWH is the Husband of His People: Analysis of a Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993).

¹⁵⁵On the development of this formula in the Old Testament and further bibliography see Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 241-3, 263 no. 25.

¹⁵⁶I acknowledge that there are some texts in which God is described as sending an evil spirit against Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) or inciting David to the census so he can punish Israel (2 Sam. 24:1). These texts do offer some tension with the divine love, but even the most problematic text where God incites David and then gets angry with him, Yahweh's fundamental concern for the covenant people is not doubted (2 Sam. 24:14, 16). David does not understand all that God is doing but he knows that God is merciful. For a refutation of the identification of God with "demonic" elements in the Old Testament see Lindström, God and the Origin of Evil. I have not addressed the development of the demonic or the Satan figure even though they are significant in showing that there is a definite war going on between God and other powers. Gregory Boyd has a two volume work forthcoming on this subject from InterVarsity.

committed adultery which produces anguish in God. There is no good reason for his wife to leave him, Israel's faithlessness is inexplicable. Despite her turning to prostitution God seeks her out and desires her return. God is willing to humiliate himself by restoring this disreputable woman as his wife.¹⁵⁷ Hosea describes God as a husband but it is not the typical human husband who would divorce his wife, wanting nothing more to do with such a harlot. It is difficult to imagine a human husband who would do what God does for it would mean self-humiliating in the face of one's community, a loss of respect from one's peers. God, however, is the true husband whose ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8). God suffers the humiliation and risks taking back his unfaithful bride in the hope that the relationship can develop into one of mutual love and respect.

3.17 Conclusion to Chapter Three

According to the Old Testament God has, in sovereign freedom, decided to place himself in fundamental relatedness to his creation. It is a world in which he grants genuine integrity to his creatures and singles out human beings for a special relationship involving genuine give-and-take dynamics. The divine-human relationship is to be one of reciprocal love. God loves his creatures and desires to bless them with all that is in their best interest and so God expects the humans to trust him. Despite human rebellion God remains faithful to his project seeking restoration of the broken relationship. As things progress we discover that God initiates new developments yet is open to input from his creatures. God has a goal but remains flexible as to the details of its accomplishment. Sometimes God's plans do not bring about the desired result and must be judged a failure.¹⁵⁸ The covenant history records many disasters and setbacks for God. Nonetheless, God resourcefully tries out different paths in his efforts to bring his project towards a successful completion. God's activity does not unfold

¹⁵⁷For other texts on divine humiliation see Fretheim, Suffering of God, 144-8.

¹⁵⁸See Miles, God: A Biography, 187-194.

according to some heavenly blueprint whereby all goes according to plan.¹⁵⁹ God is involved in a historical project not an eternal plan. The project does not proceed in a smooth, monolithic way, but with surprising twists and turns since the divine-human relationship involves a genuine give-and-take dynamic for both humanity and God.

The type of relationship God displays towards his people is not one of control and domination but rather one of powerful love and vulnerability. God establishes the relationship in such a way that he risks the possibility of rejection. The divine project of developing people who freely enter into a loving and trusting relationship with God lacks an unconditional guarantee of success. Will anyone trust God? This initial question was met with some disappointment by God. God expected positive results but all things have not gone as God desired. Yet, God continued to invest himself in the project in the hope of regaining what was lost. The Old Testament reveals how God is going about this and the incredible persistence of God in seeking to bring his project to fruition.

¹⁵⁹John Rogerson argues that the belief in an unfolding divine plan is read into the Old Testament from Nineteenth-century meliorism. See his "Can a Doctrine of Providence be Based on the Old Testament?" eds. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie, JSOT sup. 67 (Sheffield: JSOT press, 1988), 529-543. Bertil Albrektson, History of the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel (Sweden: Gleerup, 1967), 81, says the Old Testament does not affirm a divine plan that embraces all of history.

Chapter 4: New Testament Materials for a Relational View of Providence Involving Risk

4.1 Introduction

Many of the same ideas we just looked at in the Old Testament are brought out in the New. Again, I shall not attempt to cover all the New Testament in demonstrating that God enters into genuine give-and-take relations with humans in which God takes risks. Rather, I shall focus on the person and work of Jesus for it is in Jesus that God does something radically different in terms of the divine-human relationship. God had spoken before through the prophets, now he speaks through the Son (Heb. 1:1-2). It is in Jesus that God "tabernacles" or dwells among us in a most distinct and revealing way (Jn. 1:14). In the divine incarnation in Jesus we have the ultimate anthropomorphism! God becomes human: a most scandalous thing for a deity to do. Gregory of Nyssa remarked that it is the incarnation and cross of Jesus which manifests the transcendent power of God in a more luminescent way than miracles or the vastness of the creation.¹ If Jesus is the ultimate revelation of who God is and what humans are supposed to be in relationship to God, then we should pay particular attention to the way divine providence works in the life of Jesus. It is strange that most studies of providence say little or nothing about the words and works of Jesus. Works on providence typically pay a lot of attention to the relationship between the ideas of omnipotence and goodness and ignore the life of Jesus as revelatory of providence. Barth criticized Protestant orthodoxy (including Calvin) for being "blatantly 'liberal'" in deriving the doctrine of providence primarily from the concept of absolute omnipotence instead of Jesus Christ.² When the Bible is used it is common that Joseph or Job (understood from a risk-free model) function as the paradigms for understanding providence, but Jesus virtually never. Not only does the classical tradition fail to begin with Jesus, it also, as Gorringer observes, passes over the Old Testament motifs of God as servant and as one who suffers in favor of the metaphors of king and lord understood by "direct and non-

¹Gregory of Nyssa, The Great Catechism, 24.

²Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1960), 3.3.30-3.

inverted analogy with earthly rulers."³ The task of a Christian doctrine of providence is to understand the "foolishness of God" in the life of Jesus. When this is done we can appreciate the power of faithful love and understand that everything is not unfolding according to some eternal movie which God produced. In Jesus we see the genuine character of God which is altogether different from the options of omnipotent tyrant and impotent wimp.

The plan here is to look at some of the events in the life of Jesus and some of his teachings to see what providence entails before examining some other passages in the New Testament. Whereas there are a number of Hebrew Bible scholars writing on the topic of providence from a relational perspective, the same cannot be said for New Testament scholarship. One exception is E. Frank Tupper who has produced an insightful study: A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God.⁴ Tupper examines several episodes in the life of Jesus (primarily from the Gospel of Matthew) in order to see what is being said about providence and I will summarize his discussion. Then I shall discuss God's attempt to unite Jews and Gentiles into one body in the church since this has significance for divine risk in providence.

4.2 The Baptism

"This is my Son, the beloved" (Mt. 3:17). Tupper begins his study with the baptism in order to clarify the type of relationship Jesus had with God.⁵ Jesus is described as the "beloved" Son, a filial relationship akin to that of Abraham and Isaac. Moreover, Jesus prayed to the "Father" and taught his disciples to do the same (Mt. 6:9) revealing that God intends for us to have a filial relationship with him. From the beginning God intended to bless his creatures

³T. J. Gorringer, God's Theatre: A Theology of Providence (London: SCM, 1991), p. 58.

⁴E. Frank Tupper, A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995). His book is an enlargement of his earlier "The Providence of God in Christological Perspective," Review and Expositor, 82 (1995): 579-595.

⁵Tupper, Scandalous, chapter 1.

with his presence. In Israel, Yahweh brought his presence near to the people in various ways. Through Jesus we can experience the divine presence as Abba or Father.⁶ It is not some remote deity of justice or distant creator who comes to us, but the heavenly Father who desires to bless us through Jesus. The king of creation does not come in intimidating fashion to domineer over us as in the traditional monarchical model of providence. Instead, the king sends his son in order to reconcile us, making us children of the king and siblings of Christ. God is indeed king and father, but, as we shall see, a very atypical king and father.

4.3 The Birth of Jesus and the Bethlehem Massacre

In reading Matthew 1-2 and Exodus 1-2 one encounters several parallels linking the birth stories of Jesus and Moses. In both there is a royal decree, parents who actively respond to the decree, fearful kings, slaughter of male babies and people on the run from the authorities (exile). The study of these chapters in Exodus disclosed that God chose to work through and so become dependent upon the weak (the Hebrew and Egyptian women) in that situation. God became genuinely dependent and did not merely work through the women in the sense of "secondary causes." It is the same in the New Testament. It is common for commentators to emphasize the unilateral intervention of God--completely independent of all human agency--when speaking of the incarnation.⁷ But such is not the case. In the gospel of Luke an angel informed Mary of God's desire to bless her with a special child (1:26-33). Mary, however, does not simply acquiesce for she does what her Old Testament counterparts did: she ponders it and asked a question (1:29, 34).⁸ No condemnation is issued for questioning a divine plan instead, she receives an

⁶Calvin spoke of God's fatherly relation to us (Institutes, 3.20.36-40), but Van de Beek is correct when he inquires what sort of father Calvin's God is when he pushes the baby carriage over exploding land mines or beneath moving trucks. See A. Van de Beek, Why? On Suffering, Guilt, and God, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 102.

⁷E. Frank Tupper, "The Bethlehem Massacre--Christology Against Providence?" Review and Expositor 88, no. 4 (1991):417-8, ascribes this to a christology "from above" without reference to the historical events in which Jesus is situated.

⁸In contrast to Zacharias' question, Mary's did not contain an element of unbelief (cf. Lk. 1:18).

explanation. Satisfied, she grants her consent to participate in this activity of God. God does not unilaterally achieve his goal of incarnation by forcing his will upon Mary. God brings it about with the active participation of Mary. If Mary had declined or if Moses' mother had drowned her son then God would have sought other avenues. After all, it is doubtful that there was only one maiden in all of Israel through whom God could work. God is resourceful in finding people and equipping them with the elements necessary for accomplishing his purposes.

In this regard Mary needs some help since she is engaged to Joseph. When Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant he assumes she has been unfaithful and decides to divorce her. Perhaps because it is important that Davidic sonship be conferred upon Jesus by Joseph that God intervenes in an attempt to persuade Joseph that Mary is righteously participating in an act of God. Joseph asks no questions and he consents to cooperate in this event. Even with their help, God's entry into the world is surrounded by scandal. In fact, the lineage of the messiah is cloaked in sexual scandal. In the genealogy Matthew lists four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Tupper observes that, like Mary, each of these women is involved in some sort of sexual scandal and each is an active participant in their respective situations.⁹ In bringing the messiah into the world God seeks the cooperation of people of faith, but he does not draw back from situations lacking public respectability. Mary and Joseph are both placed in an unfavorable predicament in which they may either reject God's desires and keep their public respectability or trust God and subject themselves to possible life-long disfavor among family and friends. They place their confidence in God and give consent to the risk this entails. God places his trust in them, giving his consent to the risks involved. The incarnation does not come about through sheer overwhelming power, but through the vulnerability of being genuinely dependent upon some

⁹Tupper, Scandalous, 95-7. For other reasons for the inclusion of these women see D. S. Huffman, "Genealogy," eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall, Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 255-6 and D. A. Carson, Matthew, Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 66.

Jewish peasants.

While in Bethlehem the Magi visit the family. Several conversations most likely occurred between Joseph and the wise men. One can imagine Joseph's shock when he was informed what the Magi had told Herod. Describing this baby boy as the "king of the Jews" in front of Herod is tantamount to signing his death certificate. Joseph and the Magi would no doubt be troubled by this turn of events. Working with the resources available now that the danger is known, God warns, through dreams, the Magi and Joseph of their danger. Tupper observes that the dreams in Matthew 1-2 are grounded in human awareness of the situation: it is this new information which makes it possible for God to provide the needed warning. In response, Mary and Joseph trust God and flee to Egypt.

When Herod's soldiers arrive they kill all the children two years old and younger, producing great mourning in the village. Matthew then quotes Jeremiah 31:15 claiming that this text is "fulfilled" (2:17-8). Questions flood out of this story. Why did God not warn the other parents?¹⁰ Does God not care for the other children, only this special one? Does God play favorites? What of God's intended blessing for these children and their families? Did this happen according to some predetermined plan? Tupper provides some needed responses.¹¹ First, divine providence is exercised "in conjunction with and conditioned by the historically defined context of time and place, the participation of human agents, the extent of the development in the situation, and the limits and possibilities available."¹² According to the knowledge of Joseph and the Magi, Jesus was the only child in danger. The angel had warned that Herod was looking

¹⁰M. Eugene Boring, Matthew, The New Interpreter's Bible vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 148-9, believes that such questions only arise if we take this story as historical instead of as "confessional language." He thinks Matthew's point is only to affirm divine preservation in the life of the infant Jesus. Even so, Boring cannot escape the fact that Matthew tells a story which potentially calls the divine wisdom and goodness into question.

¹¹Tupper, Scandalous, 101-2, 113.

¹²Tupper, Scandalous, 106.

for only this child. Working within the limits of the context a warning to all Bethlehem did not make sense. Second, I do not believe Matthew understood Jeremiah 31:15 to be a prediction of a far distant event. Rather, it was seen as a reaction to the exile. Thus, this verse from Jeremiah is "fulfilled" in the sense that what had happened before is being repeated.¹³ It was neither predicted nor desired by God. The Bethlehem massacre was not the will of God neither was it planned beforehand by God. Instead, it reveals that the will of God in every situation is not fulfilled.

4.4 The Temptation of Jesus

Just as God had tested Abraham and Israel in the wilderness to see whether they trusted him, so now the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil (Mt. 4:1).¹⁴ Leaving aside the debate whether Jesus could have failed the test, I wish to focus on the sort of messiahship the temptation narratives disclose.¹⁵ That Jesus is the son of God is not doubted by either the devil or by Jesus, rather, the issue in the temptations is the proper role of Jesus as the son of God, the messiah.¹⁶ In Genesis 2-3 we saw that God's word was open to interpretation, an opening which the serpent exploited. With all the messianic speculation going on in second temple Judaism, there were various understandings of what the messiah would do. The devil uses this state of unsettledness to see what path Jesus will take. Will he use his privileged status to turn stones into

¹³Also, it is interesting that later in Matthew Jesus calls a child to him and says "it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish" (18:14). In these words, which occur only in Matthew, Jesus speaks of the compassion of God for the children.

¹⁴On these parallels see Carson, Matthew, 112.

¹⁵Some people believe that Jesus could not have failed this test because he is God. This claim, however, is based upon preconceived notions of what it means to be divine instead of paying attention to the actual way of God in the world. How does one know that it is impossible for the divine son to fail a test? Why cannot the incarnation involve the genuine experience of vulnerability and testing? After all, Jesus' experience in Gethsemane seems to be just that.

¹⁶For various interpretations of the temptation see Boring, Matthew, 165.

bread in order to feed, not only himself, but others? Will he apply certain scriptures to himself to the effect that the son of God cannot be harmed physically? Both of these would meet common messianic expectations and carry tremendous political weight. It was expected that the messiah would rule the world. Would Jesus take the devil's path in achieving this end? The world in which Jesus lived was one of brutal foreign military oppression, ruthless political and religious leaders among his countrymen, poverty, and lack of shalom. Jesus could take the path whereby all this could be overcome in rather quick fashion. Some of Jesus' contemporaries understood the Old Testament to warrant such a path.

In the end all authority will be given to Jesus (Mt. 28:18) but it will come about through the way of death and resurrection. The way of God will not be achieved through overwhelming power or invulnerability. Jesus acknowledges his place as a creature of God dependent upon divine provision which entails the possibility that he shall go hungry and succumb to injury. Jesus accepts the finite conditions of existence as blessing from God. Consequently, he does not accept the Old Testament "prediction" that the messiah would be immune from bodily harm (Ps. 91:11-2) as applicable to himself. Jesus trusts in the same providence which covers all humans. This involves acknowledging the risk and vulnerability we experience in life and handling it responsibly. Providence does not mean protection from the frailties of life. Jesus chooses the path of faithful trust in God the father in the midst of life's uncertainties. "What does it mean to worship and serve the Abba God?" asks Tupper. "It includes the renunciation of dominating power and overwhelming force as the way to accomplish the will of God."¹⁷ The way of God in the world is not a display of raw omnipotence, a love of power, but the power of love. It is in this that Jesus trusts.

4.5 Confession and Transfiguration

¹⁷Tupper, Scandalous, 133.

Wherever Jesus travels people are discussing his identity. In Matthew 16 Jesus asks his disciples what the word about him is on the street. Most believe Jesus is some sort of great prophet. When he asks his disciples for their opinion Peter declares that Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God (16:16). Jesus informs Peter that he is correct and orders the disciples not to reveal his identity to others. Moreover, he begins to instruct them that as the messiah he will suffer, be rejected, killed and raised to life again (16:21). Jesus repeats this message several times on his way to Jerusalem but the disciples fail to grasp it. Their preunderstanding of what it means to be messiah filters Jesus' words. The messiah was to be an invincible, dominating ruler, rendering the pagan gods impotent and forcing the pagans to acknowledge the only true God. The messiah would rid Israel's temple and land of pagan pollution.¹⁸ There is certainly enough material in the Old Testament to support these claims (but there is also enough room for God to decide to take a different path). It is not surprising then, that Peter openly rejects the notion of a vulnerable, suffering messiah (16:22). Who desires that sort of risky road? For Jesus, the way of the messiah will be one of vulnerable love not political might. This was hard for the disciples to grasp given their particular reading of Old Testament messiahship (and it is difficult for us to accept given our views of omnipotence).

Matthew follows up this story with the transfiguration episode. Commentators regularly point out the numerous linkages in this story to the life of Moses.¹⁹ Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses leading a new exodus (see Lk. 9:31). The imagery might have led the disciples to conclude that their views of what the messiah will do were correct: Jesus will overthrow the oppressive foreign regime in liberating the people. In fact, there will be another exodus but with some key

¹⁸See N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 473-4. On the connection between the messiah and dominating power see William Placher, Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 9-17.

¹⁹For discussion see W. L. Liefeld, "Transfiguration," Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 839-40.

differences. There will be a killing of the first born son, only this time it will be God's son rather than the sons of the oppressors. There will be liberation from the power of sin and death rather than liberation from tyrannical political power. The exodus will take place through the weakness of God on the cross rather than through the powerful yet destructive plagues. Tupper suggests that we have here an "exodus in reverse." At the least, we can say that although Jesus is the new Moses and the prophet par excellence, God is going about things in a quite different fashion.²⁰ During the transfiguration God says again that Jesus is his "beloved son with whom he is pleased" and that we should listen to him (17:5). God approves of the way of Jesus in the world, a way of trust in the loving father despite the vicissitudes of life. In Jesus, God is going about things in a new way even while being faithful to his purpose; we do well to pay attention.

4.6 Compassion, Dialogue and Healing Grace

The gospels record Jesus performing a variety of miracles. He healed many, but certainly not most, of the sick in Israel. Jesus showed concern for those around him. At one point after teaching and healing for three days in a remote place Jesus said, "I feel compassion for the multitude, because they have remained with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not wish to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way" (Mt. 15:32). Thus, when Jesus feeds the four thousand, the miracle does not occur out of thin air. Rather, it comes about in a context where the people have entered into relationship with Jesus and Jesus works to enlarge the resources available. Divine providence occurs within historically contextualized settings. Miracles such as this do not just happen anytime, anywhere for any reason. The messiahship of Jesus is being demonstrated and the people are open to this message. God works through this setting and the available resources to bless them.

²⁰One can say with Van de Beek, *Why?*, that the reading of the Old Testament legitimately provides for a world-ruling messiah, but that God simply chose differently in Jesus.

Many of the stories of healing are presented as a result of dialogue with Jesus. From this is seen that a willingness to enter into relationship with Jesus is an important element in the healing. In one such story a Canaanite woman beseeches Jesus to have mercy on behalf of her daughter (Mt. 15:21-8). Jesus does not immediately address the woman who persists that he pay attention to her thus causing a "scene." Finally, Jesus tells her that his mission is to Israelites alone. She refuses to accept this answer and bows before him begging for help. Jesus says, "it is not good to give the children's bread to the dogs" (15:26)-- his mission is to the Israelites. The woman refuses to give up, however, and comes back with a rejoinder which acknowledges the propriety of Jesus' mission but still wants a blessing. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table" (15:27). Like Jacob wrestling with God she refuses to let Jesus go until he blesses her daughter. In response, Jesus grants her petition and her daughter is healed. It does not seem that Jesus was originally going to give her what she desired. The dialogue in the text suggests that she persuaded Jesus that her request did fit into his mission. Jesus here reveals an openness even to Gentile women.

A couple of other healings exhibit Jesus' openness to others even to the point of changing his plans. In Luke 8:43-8 Jesus is on his way to heal a young girl when a woman, ritually unclean according to the levitical code, reached out from a crowd and touched him. When Jesus inquires who touched him she remains silent, for she knows that anyone she touches is made ceremonially impure. Finally, she confesses her deed and her motive. After she enters into dialogue and expresses trust in Jesus, Jesus responds: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (15:48). Commenting on this story Moltmann says that Jesus "grows from the expectations of the sick and in this atmosphere learns what the kingdom of God in its reality is."²¹ In another instance, some friends bring a paralyzed man to Jesus but they cannot get close to him since there is a crowd in the house

²¹Jürgen Moltmann, Jesus Christ For Today's World, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), p. 15.

(Mk. 2). Undeterred, they go up on the roof, dig a hole, and let their paralyzed friend down in front of Jesus on ropes. No dialogue takes place in this encounter but their actions speak louder than words. In light of their faith Jesus heals the man.

The faith, or lack of it, in others deeply affected Jesus and his ministry. Mark says that Jesus could not perform many miracles in Nazareth due to the lack of faith by the people in the community (6:5-6). It is not that their unbelief completely tied God's hands but it did seriously alter what Jesus would have done had they been more receptive to his message.²² Not only did the response of the community affect what Jesus did, it also disturbed him. "Apparently Jesus had not anticipated the reaction of the people"²³ for "he was amazed at their unbelief" (6:6). Oftentimes, what God decides to do is conditioned upon the faith or unbelief of people. As James says, we have not because we ask not (4:2).

In these stories some people believe that God is doing something special in Jesus and so are willing to enter into trusting relationship with him. At times, Jesus does not seem interested in granting their requests, or in the case of the paralytic was not planning on performing a healing because he was busy teaching. Jesus did not intend or plan to heal the woman with the hemorrhage or the daughter of the Canaanite woman.²⁴ Nevertheless, Jesus shows himself flexible and open to what arises in the situations, making use of them in trusting service to his heavenly father. The particular acts of providence manifested in the ministry of Jesus are dependent upon the attitudes and responses of the people

²²See Larry W. Hurtado, Mark, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 90.

²³Lane, Commentary on the Gospel of Mark, 204.

²⁴I recognize that the no-risk view of providence will interpret all of these stories in a quite different fashion. For the no-risk view nothing in the stories occurs for Jesus' benefit but only for the benefit of others (i. e., Jesus wanted to reveal to the people the state of their faith--after all Jesus was not testing to see if they had faith since the no-risk view affirms that Jesus already knew that).

he encounters. What God wants to accomplish is brought about only when others enter into a relationship of faith. Jesus wanted to do some things, but was unable due to a lack of faith in the community. In light of these stories we see that everything does not follow a predetermined plan.

Another point worth mentioning in connection with Jesus' healings is that they reveal that God is opposed to sickness. The people Jesus healed were not made ill by God in order to demonstrate Jesus as the messiah. Jesus is not going around "cleaning up" the diseases God has spread (as is the case if one affirms divine pancausality). Rather, Jesus and the Father stand against that which destroys the health God intends for us.

4.7 Gethsemane: The Pathos of Jesus

Immediately prior to going to the garden the gospels record that Jesus celebrated the passover with his disciples. During the meal he claims that one of the disciples is opposing his mission and will "betray" him (Mt. 26:21; Lk. 22:21; Jn. 13:21). In response, each of the disciples thought Jesus was referring to himself and none thought of Judas. Due to the long history of the villanization of Judas we tend to think Jesus' words are clear and that everything is working out according to some foreordained plan.²⁵ But such is not the case. Jesus undoubtedly had plenty of discussions with his disciples in small groups and individually as they travelled. It is most likely that through such dialogues Jesus and Judas (the treasurer of the group) would have opportunity to discuss and debate the role of the messiah. Perhaps in this way Jesus learned of Judas' staunch commitment to a traditional nationalistic understanding of messiahship. Jesus, who had chosen Judas in good faith to be his disciple (he did not choose him to be the betrayer!) would undoubtedly seek to transform Judas' view of the matter. Jesus had not been successful in reshaping the rest of the disciples' understanding of the messiah and his attempts with Judas also apparently failed.

²⁵As of this writing a new book on Judas is due out which addresses these questions: William Klassen, Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus? (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1996).

But Jesus does not simply give up on Judas. It seems likely that at the passover meal Judas was given the place of honor to Jesus' left (Jn. 13:26).²⁶ Moreover, Jesus' act of dipping the bread into the bowl and giving it to Judas would have been seen as an act of friendship without any negative intentions.²⁷ Through such gestures Jesus was reaching out to Judas, seeking to change his direction. One can envision this scene of intimacy with Jesus looking Judas in the eye, probing him, bringing him to a point of decision. After this moment Jesus says, "What you do, do quickly" (Jn. 13:27). Jesus here pushes Judas to show his cards, to make up his mind regarding what sort of messiah he desires Jesus to be. A risk is involved here since there is no guarantee which way Judas will decide. Judas does "lay down his cards" and takes steps which he believes will force Jesus to show his cards as well. Judas gambles on his hunch that if the authorities confront Jesus it will force him to take on the role of political liberator, becoming a "genuine" messiah. None of this was predetermined.²⁸ Genuine options face both Jesus and Judas. The actual course of divine providence works itself out through and in response to these specific human choices. Jesus sought to change Judas' mind but, apparently, was unsuccessful. Judas leaves the group and goes to the high priest. Jesus had reason to be deeply troubled.

Jesus also leaves and goes to the garden of Gethsemane where he asks Peter, James and John to stay near him and pray. Jesus, deeply troubled (agonia Lk. 22:44) about coming events, needs to pray about them and desires that his friends pray

²⁶See D. J. Williams, "Judas Iscariot," Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 407-8.

²⁷See George R. Beasley-Murray, John, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 238.

²⁸Much is read into Luke 22:22 that this was all predetermined. I understand the verse to mean that Jesus and the father have agreed or determined which path they will take. For a helpful discussion of Judas's betrayal not implying foreknowledge see Lorenzo McCabe, The Foreknowledge of God (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1878), 99-139. See also, Richard Rice, God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will (Minneapolis, Bethany House, 1985), 95-7.

for him and for their own testing in this time of crisis.²⁹ But his closest friends, failing to grasp the gravity of the situation, fall asleep and Jesus alone prays.

Three times Jesus prays the same prayer: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will" (Mt. 26:39-44). Several things should be noted about this prayer. First, Jesus prays to his Father (Abba in Mark 14:36), not some distant and unconcerned deity. Jesus has an intimate relationship with God the father and puts this petition before his father because he assumes God is concerned. Another point to notice is that he does not want to drink from the "cup" about which he has been telling the disciples that he must drink it. The cup is Old Testament imagery for the divine wrath (Isa. 51:16, 32; Ez. 23:32-4).³⁰ Jesus understands that he is being asked to experience death--the reward for sin. Like Habakkuk he peers into the depths of the silence of God, the absence of God in judgment of sin and is terrified by what he sees. He knows that just as in the Old Testament divine wrath was exercised for redemptive purposes, so it will be this time. Even though the love of God is the driving force behind the divine wrath it does not make the experience of the wrath less painful.

Tupper observes a third aspect to this prayer: "The prayer is not the simple petition: 'Give me the strength to drink this cup.' Rather, he prayed: 'Remove this cup from me.'"³¹ Although Jesus has repeatedly attempted to instruct his disciples of the particular path he, as messiah, will take, he has some hesitancy now. Is the path set in concrete? Must Jesus go this route even if he has misgivings? In Matthew Jesus says if it is possible (26:39) and in Luke he says if you are willing remove the cup (22:42). In Mark Jesus claims that it is

²⁹On the agony Jesus experienced see John R. W. Stott, The Cross of Christ (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 73-7.

³⁰See Stott, The Cross of Christ, 76-7.

³¹Tupper, Scandalous, 324.

possible for the father to do this since "all things are possible" for him (14:36). These remarks are commonly ignored because Jesus finishes his petition with, "nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want father." The prayer of submission is used to discredit the prayer of petition. But this ignores the facts that Jesus presented this petition three times and that he requested not the strength to travel the path, but an alternate route. This petition, "remove this cup," is not empty rhetoric but a serious effort to determine the will of God. Jesus wrestles with God's will for he does not believe that everything must happen according to a predetermined plan. Even the son of God must search and seek for the father's will for the son is not following a script but living in dynamic relationship with the father. Together they determine what the will of God shall be in this historical situation. Although scripture attests the incarnation being planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. The path of the cross comes about only through God's interaction with humans in history. Until this moment in history other routes were, perhaps, open. Picking up again the illustration used in God's dealing with Pharaoh, it can be said that Jesus is in the canoe heading for the falls. There is yet time to get over to shore and portage around the falls. Jesus seeks to determine if that option is favorable with his father. But the canyon narrows even for God.

Isaac had asked his father Abraham, "Where is the lamb for the offering?" Jesus is wondering whether his father will supply a lamb. God stopped Abraham from offering Isaac, but God will not stop himself from offering his son. Jesus is the lamb supplied. Providence has taken many a strange and twisting turn on its road to Calvary. In Gethsemane Jesus wonders whether there is another way. But the father and son, in seeking to accomplish the project, both come to understand that now there is no other way. Tupper writes: "In Gethsemane Jesus learned with utmost clarity the limitations within the commitments of the identity of God, the limits that inhere in the freedom of God's love. . . . Now the Kingdom of God arriving with Jesus collided with the limitation of God in the dying of Jesus. The cross of rejection proved inevitable for the incarnation of the Kingdom. So

God could not save Jesus from the cross and be who the Abba God is."³² After his session of wrestling with the father Jesus no longer questions which path to take. Yet the big question remains: will this gambit work?

Scriptural and theological objections are raised against the notion that the cross was not set in concrete prior to the creation. It is suggested that texts such as Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20; and Revelation 13:8, 17:8 conflict with such an understanding. However, it should be noted that Ephesians 1:4 says God chose us in Christ beforehand and 1 Peter 1:20 says God foreknew Christ. Although the verses can legitimately be interpreted as affirming that the cross was foreknown, neither verse necessitates such an interpretation and so there is no problem for the openness model. Revelation 17:8 says certain names have been written in a book from the foundation of the world.³³ Again, this is no problem if taken to refer to something like corporate election. Moreover, Revelation is an apocalyptic genre and care must be taken not to be overly literal. John's point is to assure the audience that God is on their side and they are safe with God.

Revelation 13:8 is a bit more problematic.³⁴ Translators are not agreed as to how to understand the syntax of the verse. What was it in particular that happened before the foundation of the world? Should it be understood in the same way as 17:8, viz., our names are written in the book before the foundation of the world? Or should it be understood that the lamb was slain before the foundation of the world? The NASB and NRSV say it is our names while the KJV and the NIV say it is the slaying of the lamb. The latter view is so ingrained in evangelical thought that either exhaustive foreknowledge is taken for granted (God always

³²Tupper, Scandalous, 325.

³³Those who believe everything that happens in the world was fixed, or at least foreknown, prior to the creation need to explain how this comports with names being blotted out of the book of life (Rev. 3:5). It would seem that either total foreordination or foreknowledge would exclude the possibility of revising the book.

³⁴See George Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 181.

foreknew about sin and the cross) or divine determinism (God decided all this would happen) is assumed. But even if one goes with foreknowledge or foreordination neither view interprets Revelation 13:8 literally! It is not literally the case that Jesus was slain prior to the creation for he was slain during the reign of Pontius Pilate.

The openness model could go with modifications of either translation. Perhaps God thought out different possibilities--what might happen if sin comes about or does not come about--and planned different courses of action in each case. In each one the incarnation was planned, but it takes on different rationales depending on which case comes about.³⁵ Hence, it could be said that God planned from before the foundation of the world that the Son would become incarnate. But God did not know which of the rationales for the incarnation would be actualized until after sin came on the scene. In any event one does not have to conclude that God was caught off guard.

Another option is to say that the language of Paul and John should not be stressed in a literalistic fashion, but understood as praise for God's longstanding wisdom in accomplishing salvation for sinners. Hence, "before the foundation of the world" is a way of referring to the extremely long time that God's wisdom has been working towards the salvation of his sinful creatures.

Paul Helm, a Reformed thinker, raises a theological objection when he argues that the fall must be presupposed in order to make sense of salvation for if there was no fall into sin the incarnation is rendered unnecessary. He believes that without human sin and Christ's redemption from it, God's character would not be fully manifest.³⁶ Colin Gunton provides the proper response to this objection

³⁵Another possibility is to affirm a cosmic fall prior to the Adamic fall such that God thinks it likely that humans will succumb to sin. In which case the death of the son is incorporated into the divine plan for creation.

³⁶Paul Helm, The Providence of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 100, 215. Is Helm suggesting that God "needs" the fall?

when he takes the "Scotist view" arguing that "had there been no fall, it would still have been the Father's good pleasure to come into personal relation with us through the incarnation of his Son."³⁷ For Gunton, the incarnation is necessary to the intended perfection of the creation for the praise of the creator.³⁸ So, God had always intended the incarnation but it took on additional significance in light of sin. Before leaving this point it should be noted that the "Scotist" position on the incarnation is compatible with divine foreknowledge of the fall since it only maintains that God had a purpose for the incarnation antecedent to the fall. The view that the incarnation was not planned until after God learned (in his foreknowledge) about the fall implies that although Christ may now be the decisive turning point for human history, he was not so in God's original plan.³⁹ Hence, a major readjustment in God's purposes must be posited such that the incarnation becomes a contingent matter (unless one affirms supralapsarianism). This "contingency plan" means that even though God had foreknowledge, the divine risk in creating could not be avoided.⁴⁰

Finally, a word about Acts 2:23 which says that Jesus was handed over to the Jewish leadership according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. This verse is commonly taken to refer to the "paradox of divine sovereignty and human

³⁷Colin E. Gunton, Christ and Creation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 96. On the history of this view see Eugene TeSelle, Christ in Context: Divine Purpose and Human Responsibility (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 35-45 and Robert North, Teilhard and the Creation of the Soul (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1967), 120-162.

³⁸Herbert W. Richardson, Toward an American Theology (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 126 suggests a similar idea when he says, "Since, therefore, God created the world for Sabbath holiness, He must personally enter the world and dwell therein." Paul R. Sponheim, Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 93-6 utilizes Richardson in holding that the incarnation was more than restorative since it was intended from the beginning in order to establish a special sort of relationship between God and his creatures.

³⁹See Tesell, Christ in Context, 45.

⁴⁰This claim will be explored in detail in the excursus in chapter 5.

responsibility."⁴¹ There is no paradox here, however. It was God's definite purpose (hōrismenē boulē, a boundary setting will) to deliver the Son into the hands of those who had a long track record of resisting God's work. God was not taken off guard by their rejection for he anticipated their response and so walked onto the scene with an excellent prognosis (foreknowledge, prognōsei) of what would happen. The crucifixion could not have occurred to Jesus unless, somehow, it fit into the boundaries of what God willed (boulē, Acts 2:23; 4:28). But this does not mean that humans cannot resist the divine will for Luke says that the Jewish leaders "rejected God's purpose (boulēn) for themselves" (Lk. 7:30). God sovereignly established limits within which humans decide how they will respond to God.⁴² In this light it could be said that God determined that the Son would suffer and die and that he sent him into a setting where, given the history and character of the covenant people, it was quite assured what would result.⁴³

4.8 The Cross of Jesus

Throughout history most talk of the cross of Christ centered around what the death of Jesus accomplished for humanity. In more recent times attention has also been given regarding how the cross affected God. Moltmann asks: "What does the cross of Jesus mean for God himself?"⁴⁴ Through the cross the incarnate God, Jesus, did something which changed both human history and divine history in such a way that neither were ever the same again. In the cross of Jesus the divine-human relationship is affected on both sides. It is a decisive act in which God

⁴¹The idea behind this overworked expression is so taken for granted in the commentaries that the commentators no longer wrestle with the text.

⁴²McCabe, Foreknowledge of God, 104-5, claims that the atonement only required the suffering and death (being mortal) of Jesus, not the cross specifically. Jesus was handed over to die, but "the instruments by whom he finally was put to death were by no means predestined" (105).

⁴³For instance, if a freshman congressman attempts to overhaul the social security system of the United States there is little doubt about the sort of reception he will receive.

⁴⁴Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God, tr. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 201.

defines himself in his relationship to sinful creatures.⁴⁵

What impact does the cross have on humans? The gospels tell us that the earliest response was one of dashing the disciples' hopes against the rocks. They had thought that Jesus was the messiah (Lk. 24:21). But a crucified messiah was an oxymoron for them. A crucified person was accursed of God (Dt. 21:22-3) whereas the messiah was the anointed of God. How could the messiah be godforsaken? It made no sense to them given their interpretive framework of what messiahship meant. Things would not have been any better for a Greek audience since a crucified God was an oxymoron for them as well.⁴⁶ A real king, a genuine messiah, a true Son of God would have come down from the cross demonstrating his omnipotence (Mt. 27:42-3). The impact of the cross did not have a propitious beginning for it seemed to everyone looking on to be utter folly. What a ridiculously stupid and impotent thing for a deity to do!

But "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25 NRSV). There is profound mystery in what God was doing on the cross and I make no pretense of understanding it all.⁴⁷ However, of one thing I am certain: God loves sinners and desires to destroy the evil which enslaves them and somehow the cross expresses how God seeks to accomplish this. The cross does not change God the Father's attitude

⁴⁵On God defining himself through the cross see Paul S. Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 265 and Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism, tr. Darrell L. Gruder, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 363-4. Fiddes correctly observes that the doctrine of God should not be built entirely out of the cross (as perhaps Moltmann) for the suffering of God occurs elsewhere than solely in Jesus. I have sought to show this in my survey of the Old Testament material. Furthermore, I would add that the resurrection must also be taken into account in defining God.

⁴⁶See Moltmann, Crucified God, 214-6.

⁴⁷Vincent Brümmer's The Model of Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) is especially helpful on understanding the atonement in relational terms. See also, Stott, The Cross of Christ, Leon Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956) and for a historical survey H. D. McDonald, The Atonement of the Death of Christ: In Faith, Revelation and History (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995).

towards us as though he hated us until Jesus died whereupon he decided to love us. The Father has always loved his creatures--in spite of sin. As we have seen in the Old Testament God makes himself vulnerable to his creatures. The God who said to Abraham, "may I be cut in two if I break my promise" (Gen. 15) is the God who dies on the cross to fulfill his promise. Although there is no single way of capturing the meaning of the cross since an array of images is required, this much is clear: the cross is God's answer to sin and evil.

That Christ's work on the cross is multifaceted is demonstrated by the New Testament writers' various metaphors and explanations of what Jesus did (e. g. propitiation, redemption, justification, and reconciliation). No single theory of atonement can do justice to the diversity of images of Jesus' act. Without taking a stand on any particular theory I wish to make some observations. To begin, following Vincent Brümmer I understand sin to be primarily alienation or a broken relationship rather than a state of being or guilt.⁴⁸ In this damaged relationship where mistrust has developed, we cannot compel God to love us. There is nothing we can do to merit God's love. Similarly, God cannot compel us to reciprocate his love for that would not be love. In order to win our love God forgives us the injury done to him. God considers the breach in our relationship a greater evil than the harm we have caused and so desires reconciliation. But forgiveness comes with a price: the suffering of the one who has been sinned against.⁴⁹ The injured party must suffer the pain, forgoing revenge, in order to pursue reconciliation of the broken relationship. In this respect forgiveness is not "unconditional" since the person forgiving must fulfill this condition.⁵⁰ Calvary demonstrates that God is willing to pay the cost of forgiveness and work

⁴⁸Brümmer, The Model of Love, 197. The following discussion is indebted to his chapter 8.

⁴⁹See Brümmer, Model of Love, 185, 201-3.

⁵⁰The person forgiven by God experiences unconditional forgiveness in that there are no conditions this person must fulfill in order to obtain divine forgiveness. Yet, there is a condition which the forgiven must meet in order to heal the relationship--accept the forgiveness of the one forgiving and desire that the relationship be restored. See Brümmer, Model of Love, 185.

to bring about reconciliation. Brümmer writes: "Christ's suffering is not merely the paradigmatic revelation of God's atoning forgiveness. Such a revelation is also a necessary condition for this forgiveness."⁵¹ God has humbled himself and met this painful condition necessary for the restoration of the personal divine-human relationship. In Jesus God overcomes the estrangement and provides a way for us to repent and be reconciled.

Looking at the gospels a number of other points may be made. Immediately prior to the crucifixion Jesus celebrated the passover with his disciples. In doing so he claims that he is instituting the "new" covenant through his blood (Lk 22:20). During the commemoration of God's liberation of Israel Jesus implies that he is the new passover lamb sparing the people from the angel of death. In the Old Testament Yahweh suffered because of, with and for the people. Now Jesus does the same. He suffers because of our sins. He identifies with our suffering. He suffers for us in order to restore us to a trusting relationship with God. The death of Jesus is the victory of sonship for he trusted the Father--despite the agony and uncertainty--obediently doing what he and the father had agreed upon. Who will trust in God? Jesus will! Jesus shows us that we can trust the Father even into death. Jesus' filial relationship with the Father gave him the confidence to follow through with his mission.⁵²

But what of Jesus' lament: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is intriguing that the gospel writers record this for it is a scandalous outburst for the messiah to make!⁵³ In quoting Psalm 22 Jesus identifies with the lament

⁵¹Brümmer, Model of Love, 202.

⁵²Clark Pinnock, Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21'st Century (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 99-110 and Paul Fiddes, Creative Suffering of God, 162 emphasize that the cross is more personal forgiveness than punishment, more a filial than legal relationship. Stott, Cross of Christ, 141-9 rejects this claiming that the forensic element cannot be dismissed.

⁵³Some believe that Jesus, in quoting the first part of Psalm 22, has the entire Psalm in mind and so this should actually be understood as including victory. "In first-century Judaism, was the citation of the opening of a psalm designed to recall the psalm in its entirety? Evidence for this phenomenon is

tradition which testified to uncertainty and even betrayal in the midst of trial.⁵⁴ In this lament Jesus identifies himself with our experience of godforsakenness. For the first time in his life Jesus experienced godforsakenness, a terrifying experience for one who had always been close to the Father. He was alone and cried out in dereliction. Yet, in the midst of such suffering Jesus, like his Old Testament counterparts, exhibits an element of faith for it is to the God of the covenant community, his Abba, that he cries out and he expects to be heard and answered. Jesus is still speaking to God, he has not lost his faith. The disciples had deserted him, they could not trust God that this was the way of the messiah. Even Jesus found it difficult to trust in God as he trod this path. Is this really the way of wisdom? Will vulnerability and exposure lead to victory for God?

As was seen in the survey of the Old Testament, God has been walking this path ever since he created. God has known suffering for a long time, but now he experiences it from our side through Jesus. Jesus becomes the victim and yet he is not rendered impotent by it for he demonstrates the way to victory: "Father forgive them" (Lk. 23:34).⁵⁵ The victim refuses to be vindictive. It is through

very late" (J. B. Green, "Death of Jesus," Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, p. 151). Moreover, Moltmann thinks such a view far-fetched since the psalm ends with thanksgiving for deliverance from death "and there was no deliverance on the cross" (Jesus Christ For Today's World, p. 35). For discussion of the interpretation of this cry see William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 572-3; Boring, Matthew, 492; Carson, Matthew, 782; and James L. Mays, "Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion," Theology Today, 42 (Oct. 1985): 322-331. Fredrik Lindström, Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), p. 463 argues that the note of praise at the end of Psalm 22 does not come about until after the resurrection when Jesus says, "go and tell my brothers" (Matt. 28:10) which he takes as an allusion to "I will tell of your name to my brothers" (Ps. 22:23).

⁵⁴On the nature of the lament tradition and its importance for our relationship with God today see Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament" Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 36 (1986): pp. 57-71. Also helpful is Lindström, Suffering and Sin.

⁵⁵Fiddes, Creative Suffering, 32 makes the important observation that we must emphasize that God is victorious through suffering and not rendered impotent by it.

the seeming weakness of forgiveness that Jesus overcomes the sin of the world. To cite the famous words of Bonhoeffer: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. . . .only the suffering God can help. . . .the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness."⁵⁶ From a human perspective a messiah or son of God dying on a cross is sheer folly and weakness. But it is through this "weakness" that God demonstrates genuine power--the power of love. Moltmann says, "Thus suffering proves to be stronger than hate. Its might is powerful in weakness and gains power over its enemies in grief, because it gives life even to its enemies and opens up the future to change."⁵⁷

The cross made a difference to both God and humanity. Through the cross God defeats the "powers" arrayed against his project of establishing a trusting relationship with humans. God is a God of self-giving love and the cross discloses this in an extremely blunt fashion. The cross is the exemplification of the power and wisdom of God--the way of God in the world. It remains, however, a way of vulnerability and risk rather than overwhelming might with guaranteed results. Will this route of being resourceful, receptive and responsive succeed? Will the disciples come to trust in God's way? Will their lives be turned around? Will other people come to trust God through Jesus? Will reconciliation come about? Is God crazy to take this path? Perhaps, by human standards.

4.9 The Resurrection

How does the resurrection of one individual solve anything? Second temple Judaism did not look for a dying messiah and certainly had no expectation of the messiah being resurrected. Tom Wright points out that the term "resurrection" meant for first-century Jews.

⁵⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 360-1.

⁵⁷Moltmann, Crucified God, 249.

The raising to life of all the righteous dead, as part of the dramatic moment, within history, at which Israel's god would return to Zion and restore the fortunes of his people. Now it must be said clearly that at first sight the coming to life of a single dead body. . . would be, though of course exceedingly striking, quite insufficient to make Jews of the time declare that the longed-for redemption, the eventual release from exile, had in fact occurred. . . . [I]t would not at all justify a claim that the person to whom this odd event had happened was therefore the saviour of the world.⁵⁸

The Jews were looking for a general resurrection (Jn. 11:24) not a dying and rising messiah. The cross had shattered the disciples' hopes and the resurrection did not immediately alter this state of affairs. Although the raising of Jesus revived the disciples' hope it did not fulfill it for they ask the risen Jesus if he is now going to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). The problem was making sense of the scandal of a crucified and resurrected messiah given their interpretive framework of providential expectations. They lacked a proper model for explaining the events in a way which connects them to God's project. A new framework had to be hammered out on the forge and this takes time.

Eventually, the disciples and the New Testament writers come to see the resurrection of Jesus as the father's ratification of Jesus' Abba-experience and the victory of the way of love over the way of hatred and death. In order to see it this way familiar readings of the Old Testament had to be modified or even rejected and new understandings developed. The "resurrection" had to be reinterpreted to apply specifically to Jesus. The long-standing expectation of what God would do providentially had to be reshaped to fit what God had actually decided to do. The exact route divine providence took did not line up with their predictions. In freedom and in connection to the historical situation of the day God decided on the path of death and resurrection. Once the path of God became

⁵⁸Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, 399.

clear, then the cross and resurrection became God's definitive answer to human suffering, sin and death. In the resurrection God overcame death with life, despair with hope, and sin with salvation. God did not avoid pain and death, instead, he overcame them. God did not give up on his project when they crucified his son. Rather, he brought something good out of evil. The resurrection of Jesus is the divine ratification both of Jesus' experience of God as Abba and of his loving way with his fellow humans. Suffering, hatred and death do not have the last word. The resurrection gives hope that transforms our relationships, our societies, and, ultimately, the entire cosmos. It is the sign of the new covenant and the promise of a new creation. The cross and resurrection become symbols of such magnitude that Paul says that in light of them nothing, including our own suffering and death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-9). In hope, we look forward to God's ultimate victory over death at which time he will wipe away every tear (Rev. 21:1-4).

In light of what God does in the cross and resurrection three points should be singled out for attention regarding providence. First, Barth is correct when he affirms that God keeps true to his purpose in election but is free to vary the way in which he carries out his purpose.⁵⁹ Even with revelation we cannot presume as to how God will fulfill his promises. In wisdom God decided to fulfill his promises through the particular path Jesus took. In wisdom God decides how he continues to fulfill his promises and the divine wisdom takes the changing circumstances of the world into account. Consequently, God is faithfully free to act providentially in the way he sees fit in response to the decisions his creatures make.

Second, despite our inability to forecast divine providence in light of the cross and resurrection we have solid grounds for trusting that God has our best interests in mind for he did all this to demonstrate his love towards us (Rom. 5:1-11). Moreover, Jesus continues to work on our behalf in the presence of the Father (Heb. 2:18, 9:24). God has been faithful in the past so we look forward

⁵⁹See Barth, Church Dogmatics 3.3 p. 56.

to his faithfulness in the future. Finally, as we look to the future we should expect providence to follow the path definitively revealed in the life of Jesus. That is, we should not look forward to overwhelming power but to the way of sacrificial love. In Jesus we learn that God has chosen to be this way in the world--the way of cross and resurrection. Not only should we expect this of God, it should also be normative for the Christian life.

4.10 Grace, Judgment and Humiliation: Divine Love in Jesus' Teaching

The teaching of Jesus brings out the way of God's love towards a world of sinners. God does not overlook our sin for it must be dealt with in order to bring about reconciliation. Jesus sounds like Yahweh in the Old Testament when he says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!" (Luke 13:34).⁶⁰ Jesus purposed to forge an intimate bond between Israel and God.

This purpose, however, goes largely unfulfilled because Jesus gets himself into trouble with the religious authorities for they do not accept the way of Jesus as the way of God with sinners (Lk. 15:1-2). The term "sinner" in Judaism was a term of exclusion referring to Jewish people who ignored the covenant God. Those who kept the covenant assumed that "sinners" had no place in God's grace and could not be God's people. The Pharisees considered such people outside the acceptable boundary of God's kingdom so they took exception to Jesus' eating with them since sharing a meal implied acceptance. In response, Jesus tells the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin which inform us that God is actively seeking his lost creatures. But the parable of the prodigal son is one of the

⁶⁰This expression of God's anguished love for sinners is a far cry from Jonathan Edwards' view that God hates sinners: "The God who holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you...you are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours." "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in The Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2 volumes (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 2.10.

most powerful descriptions of the depths of God's love and grace.⁶¹ In this parable the youngest son says to the father, "I wish you were dead so I could get my inheritance now." This son shows no gratitude or respect to his father and displays a lack of trust that his father is concerned with his well being. He thinks his father is holding out on him. Jesus' audience would be outraged at such a request for it is truly scandalous. The Middle Eastern listener expects the father to loudly denounce this son and expose him to public shame. Amazingly, however, the father grants his request! The father seems unwise in doing this. Perhaps he is taking the risk that by letting this son experience life apart from him the son will come to his senses and repent.

The son quickly departs from his father's providence and settles in a far country. After a time things turn sour and the son finds himself in destitution so he decides to return to his father, not as a son, but as a hired hand. When the son returns to the village the Middle Eastern listener expects this son to be publicly shamed by the villagers and the father when he returns. Instead, Jesus says that "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him" (15:20). The father refuses to allow the son to experience any scorn from the villagers. In fact, the father humiliates himself by running to meet the son--an act undignified in that culture. When the son begins to grovel in front of him, the father stops him and orders the son to be decked out in finery and a party to be thrown in his honor. These acts would confirm to the villagers that the father had completely accepted him back as a son. The father humiliates himself in order to exalt this wayward son.

Later, the elder son returns from the fields and hears the party going on. Instead of going in and fulfilling his culturally defined responsibilities of

⁶¹The following account is greatly indebted to the cultural and literary analysis of Kenneth E. Bailey's Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke, combined edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 158-206.

helping his father entertain guests, he remains outside. This son also has a troubled relationship with the father. The father again culturally humiliates himself by going outside the house to meet with this son. When the eldest son addresses his father he again insults him by failing to use a title of respect. Moreover, he does not even admit that the sinful younger son is his brother. Pharisees, remember, did not regard sinners as God's people. Nevertheless, the father ignores these insults and tenderly answers, "my child," thereby showing his acceptance of this son also.

In this parable God is depicted as a father but what an unusual father! Both sons publicly insult the father and in both cases the father, in grace, humiliates himself and seeks reconciliation with his children. In terms of providence, both sons fail to trust the divine wisdom and love. God does not force his will on either son. Instead, God risks that his humiliating love and forgiveness will win them back. As head of the household the father he could have resorted to overwhelming power to secure compliance. But God, seeking the reconciliation of both sons, chooses a different path: one of vulnerability and risk.

This same accepting love is found even in such unlikely places as Jesus' teaching on judgment. It is worth observing that when Jesus tells the formal parables of judgment they are all given in the last few days before the crucifixion.⁶² Consequently, they must be interpreted in light of the ministry of grace he was on his way to perform. When this is done it will be recognized that the judgment is precisely for reconciliation--not a settling of scores. Moreover, these parables bring out the teaching of inclusion before exclusion, grace before wrath, acceptance before rejection. No one is excluded from God's grace who was not already included in it. The parable of the king's son's wedding in Matthew 22 illustrates this.

⁶²This section is indebted to Robert Capon's The Parables of Judgment (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

The preceding context makes it clear that Jesus feels the religious authorities have rejected his messiahship and in consequence he tells them that the kingdom of God will be taken away from them (Matt 21:31-46). The broader background for this parable is the messianic banquet spoken of in Isaiah 25:6-9 where it was said that Jews and Gentiles would eat together in God's presence.⁶³ By New Testament times, however, Isaiah's encompassing vision had been curtailed so that Gentiles were thought of as being largely excluded from the messianic banquet. Apparently, the religious authorities thought it was to be an exclusive party with a short invitation list.

In the parable, Jesus says that the king sent out his servants to inform those who had been invited that it was time to come to the party. The initial invitations had been sent out long ago and responded to so that the king could make preparations. But for some reason those invited refuse to come. The king, however, ignores this insult and sends out other servants to ask those invited to come. But again they refuse. Some turn to their business affairs while others openly brutalize and even murder some of the servants. Jesus is saying that just as the Old Testament prophets had been rejected so now the king's son is being rejected. The religious leaders refuse to come to the messianic banquet if Jesus is the messiah. They do not want that sort of messiah. They do not believe Jesus is manifesting God's way in the world.

The king is rightfully enraged at this snub so he has those destroyed who spurned his invitation (there is divine wrath in the New Testament).⁶⁴ Jesus is telling us that there comes a time when the rejection of grace must be dealt with. When

⁶³ For more on this and a discussion of the similar parable in Luke see Bailey, Poet and Peasant, 2.88-113.

⁶⁴ There will be an eschatological judgment (e. g. Mt. 25:46; 2 Thes. 1:7-9). For discussion of the purpose of eschatological judgment and the nature of hell see Jerry Walls, Hell: The Logic of Damnation (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) and William Sigountos ed., Four Views on Hell (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992). For a non-retributionist account of hell see Jonathan Kvanvig, The Problem of Hell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

grace is refused, and refused by murdering the servants of the king, what else is left? Judgment ensues upon those who despise the grace of God. The king did not have to invite these people, he did so out of his magnanimity. Jesus invites them to participate in the newness of life which he brings. If the life Jesus offers is refused what can be left but deadness? The messianic banquet is only for the living.

The parable does not end here, however, for this king is determined to have a party so he sends out more servants to invite anyone and everyone to the feast. The invitations are indiscriminate, including the "good and the bad" (22:10). God does not invite the good and snub the bad. He calls all, including the sinners, to trust in his gracious love. And the people do come, so many, in fact, that the banquet hall is filled with guests (22:10). Here we see God depicted as a king--but what an unusual king! What ancient Near Eastern king would invite the common people, the low-life of the community, and even strangers to his son's wedding?

Unexpectedly, however, a problem arises at the banquet as one individual thinks he can come to the wedding on his own terms. When the king arrives there is one guest not dressed in wedding clothes. The king requests an explanation from this individual but the man remains silent, refusing to accept the king's grace by entering into dialogue. Clearly the king showed love and acceptance to this person but he desires to come to the feast on his own terms. Consequently, he is excluded from the party for there is never a good reason for rejecting grace.

For our purposes it is important to note that in the parable the first invited guests as well as the guests invited as replacements are all recipients of the king's undeserved favor. Nobody in the parable is outside the king's favor. Everybody starts out with the king's acceptance and no one is excluded except those who rule themselves out by refusing to trust in the king's provision.

Jesus taught that God is serious about accomplishing his project. In fact, God brings the project to a climatic moment in the life and work of Jesus. In these parables God is depicted as gracious, willing to humiliate himself, to be vulnerable, yet, all the while working to bring us to a point of decision (judgment). God desires that we trust him and become his reconciled children. God wants a filial relationship with us. Instead of using his power to enforce compliance, God has taken the path of vulnerable, humiliating love which results in the question: will we trust his providence or will we leave for the far country? Will we, like the younger son, return to the father? Will we reject God's way in the world (displayed in the life of Jesus) or accept the gracious invitation to the wedding? These are genuine questions for us as well as for God. They expose the risk God experiences given the route he has sovereignly established to take.

4.11 Various Texts on Providence

Besides Jesus' acts of healing and his telling of parables, there are several teachings of his which are usually mentioned when discussing providence. Sometimes these verses are used to justify the claim that God is micro-managing every tiny detail that occurs in life.

In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their clothes or food since God provides for the birds of the air and the grass of the field. He states his case in absolute terms without moderation.⁶⁵ Does Jesus mean by this that humans are not to plant crops and produce clothes (v. 26)? If we plant, reap and store crops are we acting against divine providence? Hardly, such actions are called for in the covenant regulations (Lev. 19:9-10). Moreover, the birds of the air do not simply sit with their mouths open waiting for food to drop into them.⁶⁶ Jesus says that God provides food for us the question is how God does

⁶⁵See Charles E. Carlston, "Matthew 6:24-34," Interpretation 41 (Ap. 1987): 179-183.

⁶⁶See Carson, Matthew, 179-80.

this. It seems that by the "birds of the air" (v. 26), "the grass of the field" (v. 30) Jesus is harking back to the creation account in Genesis.⁶⁷ Moreover, the lilies do not "toil" (v. 28) and we are not to be "anxious." This possibly alludes to the curse (Gen. 3:16-17). If so, then Jesus, in announcing his Father's kingdom, acknowledges the limits of our creatureliness as well as our plight, but assures his disciples that the Father remains faithful to his own plan of creation and work of redemption. In fact, in Jesus, God has already inaugurated the coming kingdom and we are to "seek first his kingdom" (v. 33). Jesus is not denying the validity of farming or household duties. A carefree existence simply waiting for God's provision to fall into one's lap is not in view.⁶⁸ Rather, his point is that God's provision of life's basic needs frees his followers to pursue the kingdom of God. Jesus knows that we do not live by bread alone but by the word of God (Mt. 4:4). We need bread and we are to produce it but this must never displace our part in God's larger project. Finally, the coming kingdom does not mean that the disciples of Jesus will never go hungry or naked. However, just as God cares for the grass, even if it is burned tomorrow, so God cares for us even should we experience droughts from time to time (6:30). Providence does not mean protection from the vicissitudes of life, but it does mean God will be with us through them.

This last idea is brought out clearly in Matthew 10:24-34 (cf. Lk. 12:1-12). Here Jesus tells the disciples not to fear those who can kill you. Followers of Jesus may fall prey to serious harm and even murder. Nevertheless, they are not to fear those who have the power to put them to death. Rather, they are to fear God who will exercise eschatological judgment (10:28). Again, disciples of Jesus are not to worry about such things. They may be persecuted and killed for following Jesus but they should not be anxiety ridden about it. Even if they die for his sake

⁶⁷See Richard J. Dillon, "Ravens, Lilies and the Kingdom of God: Matthew 6:25-33/Luke 12:22-31," Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 53, no. 4 (1991): 614, 621.

⁶⁸Jesus' own ministry depended upon the gifts of people (especially women) who worked to earn enough to support themselves and give to others.

their heavenly father cares for them. After all, God cares for the sparrows and knows the number of hairs on our heads (both insignificant details of life). Does this mean that God keeps a ledger recording dead sparrows and hair follicles? Or, perhaps, does it mean that no sparrow dies and no hair falls out without God specifically decreeing that it be so? Although some take it in this sense it does not seem to be what Jesus meant.⁶⁹ Rather, Jesus, in sending out the twelve on a mission wishes to encourage them despite the difficulties they will encounter. The issue is much the same as that raised in the Old Testament: if God's people suffer does this mean that God has been defeated? Jesus does not provide an explanation to the problem of evil. Instead, he gives two different responses both of which arise out of the Old Testament.⁷⁰ First, there is a coming eschatological judgment in which the truth will come forth (10: 26-8). Things are not always what they appear to be and God's eschatological judgment will vindicate the sufferings of Jesus's disciples. Second, Jesus appeals to the wisdom tradition in emphasizing the inability of humans to understand life in its totality. God knows the insignificant details of life such as the number of hairs on one's head. Hence, we are not in a position to pass judgment on God for failing to deliver us from suffering. Jesus calls for his disciples to trust God in the face of suffering. He does not say, however, that the suffering is ordained by God. Rather, he says that just as God even cares for sparrows and the hairs of your head, God cares about them even in their persecutions. So, in all this they are not to doubt God's concern for them even in the midst of such horrible experiences. Again, providence does not mean protection from evil. But nothing can separate them from God's concern. In this way the disciples are encouraged to hope in God's future and trust in God's care in order to free them from fearing what others shall do to them.

⁶⁹See, for instance, John G. Cook, "The Sparrow's Fall in Mt 10:29b," Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche, 79, no. 1-2 (1988): 138-44.

⁷⁰See Dale C. Allison Jr. "Matthew 10:26-31 and the Problem of Evil," St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly, 32, no. 4 (1988): 293-308.

In Jesus' day some people thought that all suffering was a direct punishment for one's sins. This issue was discussed in the Old Testament wisdom literature without any conclusion being reached. Although Job, Ecclesiastes and the individual complaint Psalms call into question the belief that all suffering is due to sin, it seems that many people continued to affirm it.⁷¹ In Luke 13:1-5 Jesus is informed about some people whom Pilate had killed while they were presenting sacrifices in the temple. These were God's people offering their worship in the way God had prescribed, yet they met a horrible death. These worshippers of the true God were slain by a pagan ruler. Did God care for them? Or, were they ingenuine worshippers whom God foreordained to be killed in their act of hypocrisy? Jesus asks the question whether they were wicked "sinners." He uses the term reserved for Jews who paid no attention to God's covenant. It would have been assumed by many that they were such sinners because of the way they met their death. But this seems unlikely since, in presenting their offerings, they were fulfilling the covenant.

In the same passage Jesus also speaks of a tower which fell on eighteen people killing them. Was this an accident or God's punishment for their sins? The word on the street held that it was divine punishment. But Jesus refuses to attribute either the tragedy of the worshippers slain or the accident with the tower to their sins.⁷² Jesus does not say these people came under divine judgment. God did not foreordain their deaths. Such events are not what God intends--this is made clear in the life of Jesus. Instead, Jesus makes use of these tragic events to call on his audience to seek God. No one knows when death may come, so place

⁷¹See Lindström, Suffering and Sin. He argues that Old Testament scholarship generally assumes that all suffering is caused by God as retribution for sin, but that this is patently false since there is the realm of Death in which disorder and disease may arise if the divine presence does not subdue them. Hence, some suffering is simply irrational. For a study of the development in scripture rejecting the idea that material well-being is directly proportional to one's character see David L. Thompson, "The Godly and the Good Life in Biblical Thought," Christian Scholars Review 22, no. 3 (1993): 248-266.

⁷²See Walter Liefeld, Luke, Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 970.

your trust in God now (cf. Lk. 12:20).

The same question is raised in John 9:1-5 where Jesus is asked about a man who was blind from birth. Was this caused by his sin or that of his parents? It was assumed that such things did not just happen apart from some moral cause. Some people thought that according to Exodus 20:5 God punished children or grandchildren because of distant sins (even though this teaching was overturned in Ez. 18:20). Others believed that the fetus was capable of sinning.⁷³ Jesus, following the Old Testament, rejects the doctrine that his blindness (or all defects in the created order) is the specific result of sin. For him, such things are opportunities for God's glory to be manifested in compassion and healing. God overrules this "faulty creation" by restoring normality to the man. Jesus stands with God against disease and deformity for they are not what God intends: Jesus is not running around "cleaning up" the sickness God has spread. Moreover, it is an opportunity for Jesus to challenge his audience with its own "blindness" and its need to come to trust in Jesus, the light of the world.

4.12 Conclusion to the Life of Jesus

In summary I would like to make three points regarding Jesus and providence. To begin, in Jesus God "tabernacled" among us displaying God's way in the world. Jesus is the model for understanding God's relationship to the world. In Jesus we see what God is most truly like and what sort of relationship with us God desires. God is not remote or disengaged, but intimate and near.

Second, the way of Jesus is compassion, sacrificial love, and a strong desire for the sinful humans to be cured of their rebellion. He stands against the sin which ruins the beloved and wants to eradicate it, transforming us into godlike creatures. In standing against sin Jesus, nevertheless, stands with the sinner.

⁷³See C. K. Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John, second ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 356 and Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, rev. ed. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 424-6.

In fact, on our behalf Jesus undertakes alienation and death in order to reconcile us to God. If Jesus is the paradigm of providence, then God is fundamentally opposed to sin, evil and suffering.⁷⁴ If Jesus was cleaning up the mess God had caused (e. g. disease and suffering), then Jesus stood opposed to God. But if Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, then never again can God be understood as ordering the destruction of a people for God is the God of the Gentiles also (Rom. 3:29). In Jesus, God identifies with our sufferings and temptations.

Third, just like Yahweh in the Old Testament Jesus displayed a good deal of power over the non-human creation in that he miraculously healed, calmed storms and fed people. And, just like Yahweh, Jesus does not have an easy time getting humans to do the will of God. Humans are much more resistant to divine purposes than the rest of the created order. Jesus had desired to bring Israel together under God, as a hen gathers her chicks (Mt. 23:37), but that intention was left unfulfilled because the people were unwilling to be gathered. Luke explicitly claims that the Pharisees and lawyers "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Lk. 7:30). Such texts fly in the face of Berkouwer's remark that "Scripture nowhere suggests that God's work is limited by human activity."⁷⁵ On the contrary, the teaching of Jesus stands opposed to the theology that everything happens just as God decrees it should and God's purposes are never frustrated.⁷⁶ Furthermore, in Gethsemane Jesus did not get everything he wanted. Sometimes the desires of God are stymied.

⁷⁴See Van de Beek, Why? On Suffering, Guilt, and God, 282-94. For Van de Beek, God has been moving increasingly toward grace and compassion and away from domination and punishing. In Jesus, he sees God as saying he will never again order the extermination of any people or send suffering etc. There is much in his book with which I agree. In the Old Testament section I sought to show, however, that the changes God makes are not those Van de Beek affirms.

⁷⁵G. C. Berkouwer, The Providence of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 127.

⁷⁶Reformed theologian James Daane says that decretal theology does not allow these biblical texts to have their force. Instead, appeal is made to seeing things from the "eternal" or divine point of view in which case all works out just as God desires. See his The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 83-4.

But God is resourceful and faithfully works to bring good even out of evil situations. God needs to be resourceful since, as was shown, the providence God exercised in the life of Jesus was dependent upon human choices and responses. Divine providence took the particular path it did in response to the actions of humans such as Mary and Joseph, the disciples and the religious authorities. The ministry of Jesus displayed openness and flexibility in response to others. He maintained his purposes but was open to modifying his plans in response to the requests of people. In Jesus we come to see God's way as responsive to his creatures, receptive to what they say and do, and resourceful in working with the limited resources available to him in any given situation. God is extremely competent.

Furthermore, in Jesus we see the divine humiliation and vulnerability brought into clear focus. God is not the all determining power responsible for sending everything, including suffering, upon us. The way of God is love. "Jesus Christ is both the consummation and the explicative history of 'God is love.'"⁷⁷ This love is even willing to humiliate itself in the hope that we may be redeemed. The life of Jesus demonstrated service to and suffering with people rather than domination over them. The son of God did not "regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant" (Phil. 2:6-7). In him we understand that God does not have a "compulsive retention of power."⁷⁸ Christology is the great stumbling stone to the classical view of omnipotence. Our views of divine power, providence and sovereignty must pass through the lens of Jesus if they are to come into focus regarding the nature of God. Metaphors such as king and potter must be interpreted in the light of Jesus rather than our normal understanding of kings and potters. After all, in the book of Revelation a search is made for one who can open the seals of a book (Rev. 5:1-14). No one is found worthy to open the book until, at last, the lion of

⁷⁷Adrio König, Here Am I: A Believer's Reflection on God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 40.

⁷⁸Van de Beek, Why?, 164.

Judah appears--the one "who has overcome" (5:5). This is what the disciples expected of the messiah and it is what we, with our traditional understandings of divine power, expect. Amazingly, however, the author changes metaphors for it is not the lion who actually opens the book, but an immolated lamb (5:6). It is the slain lamb which explains the kind of lion God is for it is in this way that God has "overcome" sin and death. This is not what anyone expected--this way of overcoming through suffering, death and resurrection. This way of God is risky, some would even say foolhardy and God, as Philip Yancy remarks, was courageous enough to risk it.

It took courage to endure the shame, and courage even to risk descent to a planet known for its clumsy violence, among a race known for rejecting its prophets. A God of all power deliberately put himself in such a state that Satan could tempt him, demons could taunt him, and lowly human beings could slap his face and nail him to a cross. What more foolhardy thing could God have done?

"Alone of all the creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator," said G. K. Chesterton. The need for such courage began with Jesus' first night on earth and did not end until his last.⁷⁹

4.13 The Jeopardy of God's Project in the Early Church

The book of Acts and the epistle to the Romans provide insights into divine providence as God sought to develop the Jesus movement into a more inclusive body. My comments will focus on Acts 10-15 and Romans 9-11 which I take to address a pivotal time in God's attempt to direct his people toward his vision of what the church should be. The main issue concerns the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's project without having to first become Jewish.

4.13.1 Acts 10-15

⁷⁹Philip Yancy, "Cosmic Combat," Christianity Today 38, no. 14 (Dec. 12, 1994): 21.

God desired to complete his project of forming a people of faith from every nation, race, gender and economic status. Given the disciples' traditional understanding of the kingdom of God this was no easy task for providence to accomplish. In Acts 10-15 God sought to get the disciples to understand that the divine project was to include Jews and Gentiles together in one people of faith. At this point in history the church is essentially Jewish and led by Galileans. The disciples believed God's project was for Israel alone (Acts 1:6). In Acts 6 we are told of a significant number of Hellenistic Jews who join their native cousins in the church. The integration of these two groups caused some initial friction which led to a reorganization of church leadership. But nothing prepared the disciples for the broad program God had in mind. In chapters 10-11 Luke describes God's attempt to get Peter to understand that Gentiles should be welcomed into the church without the obligation of having to become Jewish proselytes. Up to this time no disciples doubted that anyone wishing to be a Christian had to practice the public Jewish observances of Sabbath, circumcision and the dietary regulations.⁸⁰ Christianity was considered solely a Jewish phenomena. Before bringing unbelieving Gentiles directly into the church God selected a Gentile who worshipped Yahweh (a "Godfearer" acceptable to Jewish religion) to be the strategic bridge to full scale immediate acceptance of Gentiles into the church. The Roman centurion named Cornelius was a person given to prayer and caring for those in need (10:2). An angel informs him that his prayers have made a difference to God (v. 4) and that he should send for Peter. At the same time God grants Peter a vision of ceremonially unclean food, commanding Peter to eat it. Peter refuses, telling God he keeps the covenant regulations. This vision is repeated three times, but it is clear that God is not yet successful in getting Peter to understand the message (10:16-7). After the vision Peter accompanies Cornelius's servants back to his house where the entire extended family and slaves have been assembled. Peter then understands that God is accepting Gentiles who have faith (10:34-5). He explains to them that the

⁸⁰See James Dunn, Jesus, Paul and the Law (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1990), especially chapter 7.

crucified and resurrected Jesus is the messiah in whom they should place their trust for the forgiveness of sins. At that time the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to "all those who were listening to the message" (10:44). Upon seeing this phenomena Peter and the Jews with him decide it is permissible to baptize these Gentiles into the Christian community (10:47). When Peter returns to Jerusalem, however, certain Jewish Christians take issue with him (11:2). After he explains the situation to them they conclude that God has accepted the Gentiles into the Christian community (11:18). Despite this initial victory for God, the achievement of his goal for the church was far from sure.

In Acts 13-14 it is Paul who takes center stage with his missionary journey in which some Jews but many more Gentiles come to faith in Christ. However, certain Jewish Christians began to inform these Gentile Christians that they could not be genuine Christians unless they practiced the law of Moses (15:1). Paul and Barnabas strongly disagree with these fellow Christians, precipitating "much dissension and debate" (15:2). It is decided to take the matter to the leadership at Jerusalem. While there the debate breaks out afresh between Paul and some of his fellow Jewish Christians. Again, it must be stressed that this was a debate between Jews who accepted Jesus as the messiah. It is the Christian community which is attempting to discern where divine providence was leading the church in this controversial matter. Moreover, this was no mild difference of opinion, but a full-orbed fight which threatened the accomplishment of God's will for the church. After all, was not Paul guilty of blurring the lines between the covenant people of God and those who were outsiders? Where does the divine presence rest? A very important question indeed. A meeting is called in which there was "much debate" (15:7). During the meeting Peter recounted what God had done in the household of Cornelius, Paul and Barnabas speak of God's signs and wonders among the Gentiles, and James cites a passage from Amos to claim that these events are part of God's project to bring the Gentiles into the community of faith. James suggests certain minimum behaviors which Gentiles should observe in order for Jews and Gentiles to fellowship together as the people of God. Those at the

meeting agree to this and send out a letter stating this accompanied by representatives to the churches where the debate raged.

I wish to make several observations regarding providence related to God's plan of developing both Jews and Gentiles into a unified group of people exercising faith in Jesus. First, to accomplish this plan God was dependent upon the people involved, especially Peter and Paul, to correctly interpret God's actions in these events. Obviously, not all Jewish Christians understood it the same way. God had difficulty in getting the apostolic church to follow his direction in this matter. But through discussion, debate and much reflection they came to agreement. In the letter sent out from the Jerusalem leadership they say "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28). In other words, they claimed that the conclusion they reached through argumentation was the will of God for their particular situation. The will of God was not mysteriously written on the wall of the room, but came through debate and dialogue. God worked through and was dependent upon the debating process such that the outcome was not guaranteed. In being dependent upon the leaders of the early church God took the risk that they would rightly ascertain the path God was leading.

Although God's plan of including the Gentiles in the body of Christ apart from the Mosaic law met with initial success, God did experience some setbacks. In Galatians 2:11-21 Paul describes what has come to be called the "Antioch incident."⁸¹ The Jerusalem council had sent its letters to the churches. At Antioch--Paul's home base--Jews (including Peter) and Gentiles were eating together: a sign of fellowship without religious barriers. However, Peter and Barnabas retreated from this practice when some Jewish Christians sent from James in Jerusalem came to Antioch. After that the Jewish Christians separated themselves from the Gentile Christians. For Paul, this destroyed the unity of the church and derailed God's work. Tragically, there is reason to believe that the

⁸¹See James Dunn, The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity (London: SCM, 1991), 130-5 and Jesus, Paul and the Law, 118-121, 160-3.

Antioch church turned against Paul, forcing him to seek a support base elsewhere.⁸² If so, then God's project was dealt a serious blow. Peter's failure in this incident is particularly troubling for among the apostles he had been the first to promote the inclusion of the Gentiles. It seems that God's original intention was to work through Peter in this matter. In the end, however, he fails and God, resourcefully, turns to Paul to be the stalwart in this matter. It is similar in some respects to the Old Testament situation where God thought Saul would be a good king, but in the end had to turn to David.

Another observation is that God was not, in the long run, very successful in persuading Jews that Jesus was the messiah. Paul brought some to faith in Jesus, but the primary response of his countrymen is to reject his message and force him to flee for his life (Acts 9:22; 13:45; 14:5, 19). The story in Acts is a tragic one for just as the promises to Abraham are beginning to be fulfilled, Israel rejects God's way of fulfillment.⁸³ The book of Acts ends with a speech by Paul to the Roman Jews. (28:25-8). Robert Tannehill observes that this speech "cannot represent a satisfying ending for the author of Luke-Acts. The quotation from Isa 6:9-10 shows that the Jews' refusal to see and hear is anticipated in scripture, but the fulfillment of this scripture means that the 'hope of Israel' (also found in scripture) is not being fulfilled."⁸⁴ God had worked so long to build a covenant people who would trust him into the future, but his project seems to falling apart in his hands for the divine intentions for Israel are not being realized. In response to this reaction Paul decides that his primary mission will no longer be to the Jews but to the Gentiles (28:28; 13:46). This decision had huge consequences for the future of the church since, at least after 130 A. D., the church has been essentially Gentile in its identity. The parting of the ways

⁸²See Dunn, Jesus, Paul and the Law, 161.

⁸³Robert C. Tannehill's "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," Journal of Biblical Literature, 104, no. 1 (1985): 69-85, provides a great deal of evidence from Luke-Acts that God's intentions for Israel were not realized and the tragedy in which this results.

⁸⁴Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts," 82.

took a long time and it was not a foregone conclusion that Christianity would become a Gentile body.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, there are relatively few Jews after this date who believe in Jesus as messiah.

On the one hand it could be said concerning this that God is being flexible and working with the resources available. Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and the early church focussed its attention on persuading Jews of Jesus' messiahship. What else is God to do if the Jewish people, overall, reject his messiah? God's vision of forming a people of God from every race centered around his son Jesus takes a very winding path and certainly meets with a degree of success. The church did develop from an introversionist Galilean sect to become an international conversionist group.⁸⁶ The church did become cosmopolitan and universal in nature. Nevertheless, God's goals met with both success and failure. The fact that the church came to include Gentiles at all means that God succeeded in this intention. The fact that the church became almost exclusively Gentile means that God failed to achieve his purpose here. In fact, the Gentile make up of the church called into question God's faithfulness to his covenant people.

4.13.2 Romans 9-11

Paul's epistle to the Christians at Rome addresses the issue of Jewish/Gentile relations within the body of Christ. Paul wanted to use Rome as his new base of operations and he wanted to be sure they understood his perspective on the Jew/Gentile question lest the Roman church go the way of the Antioch church in failing to understand God's way. I will concentrate on chapters 9-11 since they have traditionally been emphasized in discussions of providence. In fact, failure to grasp this historical debate embroiling the apostolic church has led to a misunderstanding of Romans and especially chapter 9. The issue under discussion

⁸⁵See Dunn, The Partings of the Ways.

⁸⁶See Derek Tidball, The Social Context of the New Testament: a Sociological Analysis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 51-64.

is not eternal salvation and reprobation for individuals.⁸⁷ Although North American evangelicals still cite Romans 9 as the classic text for predestination of individuals and divine pancausality, modern biblical scholarship places the letter in its historic context, arriving at a very different subject-matter.⁸⁸ Consequently, Paul's issue is whether God's election of Israel has turned out a failure since the majority of Jews were not accepting Jesus as the messiah. The danger was that a predominately Gentile church, placing its faith in Jesus, would become arrogant, regard ethnic Israel as hopeless, and believe a mission to the Jews unnecessary.⁸⁹

The covenant faithfulness of God is the topic of Romans 9-11. Paul argues that God has kept his promise to Abraham and is faithfully accomplishing his project. Paul is emphatic that God's project, overall, has not failed but, rather, the majority of his countrymen have misunderstood God's project. Although this misunderstanding is centered in the messiahship of Jesus it has antecedents in the Old Testament. In the survey of the Old Testament material we saw that Israel, from time to time, refused to acknowledge God's work in their midst. So now, they refuse to acknowledge God's work in Jesus as well as the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God apart from observing the public badges of covenant membership (Sabbath, circumcision and food laws). According to Paul, God is accomplishing a new work which was promised from the beginning. The long awaited inclusion of the Gentiles is happening--but not in the way his Jewish brethren thought appropriate.

⁸⁷John Piper takes this approach in his The Justification of God: an Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983) as does Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation?," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 25-40.

⁸⁸See James Dunn, Romans, Word Biblical Commentary in 2 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 520.

⁸⁹This section is greatly indebted to N. T. Wright's, The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992) esp. 231-57 and Dunn's, Romans.

Paul claims that simply being a member of ethnic Israel does not place one in proper standing with God (9:6-13). God freely chose Isaac and Jacob rather than Ishmael and Esau to be the people through whom he would fulfill his promised redemption. Israel, of course, placed its trust in God's election of them, but misunderstood both their status in this election and that God's purpose was always to bring the "non-elect" into his project. Is God not free to accomplish his task in the way he sees fit? Did God not reveal to Moses that it was solely God's decision when and to whom God would show mercy? Paul's point is that if God wants to show mercy to the Gentiles by bringing them into the people of God simply by faith in Jesus without the badges of covenant membership, God is free to do it (9:15-16). Cranfield notes correctly that Paul is not thinking of an arbitrary and unqualified will of God, but of God's merciful will which desires the salvation of both Jew and Gentile.⁹⁰ Furthermore, in the Old Testament we saw that God strengthened Pharaoh's heart in his rebellion in the hopes that it would help him come to his senses and repent. In the same way God now is hardening Israel in its rebellion in hopes she will repent and so be redeemed (see 11:7, 25). For to God to enact his power in this way upon Israel would no doubt seem very strange to Paul's fellow Jews for it is a significant change in God's providential ways. But, as Cranfield notes, the "power" that God exercises upon Pharaoh and Israel is consistent with Paul's use of the power of God in the rest of the epistle: it is God's saving power.⁹¹ God is seeking to accomplish his redemptive purposes which involves bringing Jews and Gentiles together as the new covenant people based on faith in Jesus.

Just as Jeremiah had used the potter metaphor for God in order to claim that God was free to bring judgment on Israel, so now Paul does the same (9:20-22). Dunn notes that divine judgment is for the purpose of eradicating all flaws in the

⁹⁰C. E. B. Cranfield, Romans: a Shorter Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 234.

⁹¹Cranfield, Romans, 234-5.

vessels the potter is making.⁹² God does not wish to leave Israel in this state of mistrusting God's purposes. Paul draws upon the Old Testament theme of divine forbearance giving time for repentance and another theme that divine hardening is for the sake of pushing things to a head.⁹³ Yet, with one major difference since all is inverted. Ethnic Israel is the new Pharaoh, refusing to acknowledge God's ways. It is the covenant people themselves who stubbornly resist the potter's will. They refuse to become the sort of vessel God desires them to be. Concerning the potter metaphor it should be remembered that in the Old Testament we saw that the same metaphor was used and it was pointed out that in some respects the relationship between God and Israel is like that between a potter and clay, but that in other important respects the relationship is not like that of potter to clay. The potter metaphor is useful in highlighting God's directing purpose, but is inadequate to explain why the clay does not go the way the potter desires (unless one wishes to say that God is simply a deficient potter). The relationship between God and Israel is not completely or solely like that between a potter and clay. God is not like a potter in all respects and Israel is not like clay in all respects. God, though wishing to direct his people in a particular way, is not manipulative with them. Although Israel is supposed to follow the ways of the lord, in this instance she resists the will of the potter by refusing to follow in the path divine providence has chosen at this juncture in history. Paul is not arguing for divine pancausality here. This misunderstanding occurs when Romans 9 is divorced from its historical setting and universalized into a timeless truth.⁹⁴ Such hermeneutical malpractice is also done on several Old Testament texts (e. g. Isa. 45:7) and was discussed in section 15 of the previous chapter. In this passage, Paul is not arguing about

⁹²Dunn, Romans, 566.

⁹³Helpful on Paul's use of the Old Testament texts in this chapter is James D. Strauss' "God's Promise and Universal History: The Theology of Romans 9" ed. Clark Pinnock, Grace Unlimited (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 190-208.

⁹⁴Louis Berkhof takes an ahistorical reading of the potter and claims that Romans 9 actually "speaks from a pre-creation standpoint." See his Systematic Theology, third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946), 120.

general principles of providence, but about a specific historical situation between God and Israel. When this is kept in mind the error of pancausality is easily avoided.

God had always planned on including the Gentiles and he is now accomplishing this goal (9:23-33).⁹⁵ This is not a new plan for God, but the bringing to fruition of his plan from the beginning. God did not foreordain Israel's rebellion (9:22). Yet, God accommodates to this situation, making use of it to further his goal of bringing the Gentiles to faith in Jesus. Although God did not cause Israel's unbelief, he is resourceful enough to utilize Israel's rejection in order to bring about something good.⁹⁶

Does God's hardening of Israel mean they cannot repent and come to faith in Jesus? Not at all. In Exodus we saw that divine hardening did not render one unable to change. Paul explicitly says that hope is not lost regarding his kinspeople for God is seeking to use the conversion of the Gentiles to provoke Israel to faith (11:11-27). Trust in God's way is all that is required of them (10:1-13). God intends to reclaim them, they may yet call upon his mercy for "God has shut up all in disobedience that he might show mercy to all" (11:32). This indicates that the overarching purpose of God is one of mercy.⁹⁷ Paul concludes this section by praising the ways of God and claiming that no one would have

⁹⁵See Dunn, Romans, 568-9.

⁹⁶Here I disagree with Dunn (Romans, 671, 690-1) and Wright (Climax of the Covenant, 239-41) who seem to suggest that God specifically brought about Israel's rejection of Jesus in order to direct the gospel to the Gentiles. In Romans I do not think Paul is saying that God caused Israel's unbelief, but, rather, that God made use of it. Wright does not seem consistent in his claim, however, for he says both that God had always intended Israel's rejection (this was the divine plan) and that Israel "did not submit to God's own covenant plan" (241). If God's plan was for Israel to rebel, then it cannot also be claimed that God planned for Israel to submit. Dunn has a similar problem in that he holds that God purposed Israel's unbelief as a means of starting the mission to the Gentiles and he also believes that Israel was to blame for its own unbelief. From Acts 10-15 I sought to show how God first began the Gentile mission from among Jewish Christians. It was only subsequent development that forced God to modify his plans.

⁹⁷See Dunn, Romans, 689.

thought God would bring about his merciful salvation to the world in the way God has done it (11:33-6).

Did Paul win the day with this argument? Did his fellow Jews accept Jesus as the climax of the covenant? Was he successful in achieving equal standing for Gentiles within the church apart from the badges of covenant membership? Did the salvation of the Gentiles stimulate Israel to trust God that Jesus was the messiah? It seems that God achieved some of what he desired but not all. On the one hand Paul certainly won the day regarding Gentile salvation without having to become identified with ethnic Israel. On the other hand the predominately Jewish make up of the early church faded from the scene since fewer and fewer Jews placed their trust in Jesus. Originally, God wanted to redeem the nations through Israel, but ends up attempting to reach Israel through converted Gentiles. Moreover, in my view, God banked his strategy on the Gentile church and it has failed him for, overall, the church has not been the agent God desired it to be in relation to Israel.⁹⁸ This does not mean that God has given up on his goal of uniting Jews and Gentiles into one people of faith through Jesus Christ. God may resourcefully take up other means to accomplish his goals, but he will remain faithful to them.

God has achieved some of what he desired, but not everything. God took the risk of working through the disciples and others in the early church. Some of the apostolic Christians understood the direction divine providence was going while others did not and worked hard against it (witness Paul's detractors). The goals God did accomplish were not easily achieved and there is yet more that God desires to accomplish. God encounters conflict and opposition to his project and in seeking its fulfillment he experiences both victory and defeat.

4.14 The Nature and Goal of the Divine Project

⁹⁸On the controversial "thus all Israel shall be saved" (11:26) see Wright, Climax of the Covenant, 249-51 and Dunn, Romans, 681-3, 691-3.

"By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent his only begotten son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be a propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:9-11). God's project is to develop people who love and trust him in response to his love and manifest their love of God in effective action to others. God takes the initiative of love towards sinners. God is gracious towards sinners and it is this gracious love which enables us to turn from our sin and place our trust in God. Furthermore, it is the divine love which transforms our hearts to be concerned about the wellbeing of others. Salvation brings us into a personal relationship with God such that we actually begin to become godlike in our character. A transformation that anticipates God's eschatological transformation of things in the new heaven and earth.

The New Testament writers see Jesus both as the one who brought divine love to us and also the model for the way we should live. The book of Hebrews speaks of Jesus working to "bring many sons to glory" (2:10). God desires to give us a place in his household. On our way to glory we are faced with temptations to turn away from God's way. Hence, the exhortations not to commit apostasy (Heb. 3:12; 4:1, 6). The author of Hebrews holds Jesus up as our model. He faced temptations and overcame them so he is able to help us overcome ours (2:18). Despite the difficulties and even death Jesus experienced he remained faithful to God's project (3:2). We are to follow his example rather than those Israelites who refused to trust God, desired to return to Egypt and so died in the wilderness (3:7-19). God was not proud of this generation. He had reached out to them repeatedly, but they continually refused to believe God cared for their best interest. Hebrews 11, however, cites people of whom "God is not ashamed to be called their God" (11:16). God is still seeking such people who will trust him despite hardships. The recipients of the letter were going through tough times (10:34) and the author encourages them to "fix their eyes on Jesus" (12:2) in order to faithfully continue in God's way. The author says that God has not

changed his purpose for God remains faithful to his promise (6:17-8). Yet, the hope we are to have does not mean that our lives will be comfortable or that nothing bad will happen to us. In 11:32-39 the author explains that although some people in the Old Testament were successful (by human standards) others were not. Whereas some were victorious in battle others were killed; while some were miraculously delivered, others were martyred. Nevertheless, all these people gained God's approval since they trusted God whether good or bad happened to them (11:39). God was pleased not just with those who conquered kingdoms but even with those who went hungry or were tortured. Providence does not allow us to predict what people of faith shall experience in life.

God's son Jesus was faithful yet he suffered rejection and death. If we begin with Jesus as the model for experiencing divine providence as well as the goal of humanity--what we are meant to be--then our understanding of the role of providence changes dramatically. When people hear the word providence it is common that they think of power and control over all our circumstances. But if we look to Jesus and understand that he is what God wants to produce in us--a holy people--then we will not be concerned with power over others or look to God to manipulate our circumstances so that our lives are comfortable. Instead, we shall seek the way of God, faithfully following his love, perusing sanctification no matter what befalls us. God is seeking to create a people of whom he is proud to be their God. This is the project God has had in place from the creation of the world. God has remained faithful to that project, not giving up on the creation despite our sin. God has demonstrated his faithfulness through all the twists and turns providence has taken.³⁹ And God is not finished yet.

4.15 Eschatology and Providence

God is yet working to fulfill his promises and bring his project to fruition. The eschaton will surprise us in the way God chooses to accomplish his purposes for the future is not set in concrete, it is not unfolding according to a prescribed

³⁹See Van De Beek, Why?, 279.

script. Helpful in this regard is a distinction König makes between prophecies or promises and predictions or forecasts.¹⁰⁰ He points out two basic differences. First, whereas predictions come about only once, promises are fulfilled repeatedly. There are very specific predictions of future events which come to pass (e. g. 1 Kings 13:20-5). "But these predictions have a limited value, exerting no particular influence on salvation history. Distinct from these are prophecies and promises which are repeatedly fulfilled and which decisively influence the unfolding of salvation history."¹⁰¹ König cites several examples of divine promises which the biblical writers claimed were fulfilled on several occasions and in a variety of ways. A prophecy such as "the day of the Lord" (Amos 5:18-20) "finds repeated fulfillment: in the fall of Jerusalem (586 B.C.; Ez. 13:5; Lam. 1:12; 2:1, 22), in the ministry of John the Baptist (Mark 1:2, cf. Mal. 3:1-2), in Jesus' earthly ministry (Luke 4:16-21; cf. Isa. 61:1-2), in the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32), and in Jesus' second advent (2 Pet. 3:12; Rev. 16:14)."¹⁰² Prophecies or promises continue to be fulfilled because God is not yet finished with his project.

The second basic difference between prophecies and predictions is that whereas predictions are very specific forecasts of what is to occur, prophecies allow room for God to fulfill them in a variety of ways--ways which we cannot anticipate. God fulfills prophecies or promises repeatedly, bringing out new aspects of them in conjunction with the new historical situation. As was seen above, despite the messianic prophecies no one anticipated the sort of messiahship which Jesus exhibited. The book of Acts (2:16) claims that the promised outpouring of the Spirit on the "day of the Lord" in Joel 2:28-32 occurred on the day of Pentecost despite the fact that most of the specific "signs" mentioned by Joel did not come about. If this was a prediction then one

¹⁰⁰Adrio König, The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ Centered Approach (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 183-189.

¹⁰¹König, Eclipse, 183.

¹⁰²König, Eclipse, 184.

has the difficulty of explaining why things did not come about as predicted, but if it is a prophecy then God is free to bring it to fulfillment in a way befitting the new situation.¹⁰³ Again, Acts 15:15-18 says that Amos 9:11-12 has been fulfilled. Whereas Amos had prophesied of Israel's return to political glory and rule over Edom, James claims, in Acts 15, that this prophecy has been fulfilled by the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. In other words, James sees that it is through faith in Jesus that Israel will "rule" over the Gentiles.¹⁰⁴ If this was a prediction, then it was a failure for Israel has not ruled Edom. But if it was a prophecy, then it was open to fulfillment in the way the wisdom of God saw fit.

Who would have anticipated such fulfillments? Who could have expected that God would fulfill his ancient prophecies in the way the New Testament writers claim God has done? Van de Beek comments that "the way of God to Christ was not an established road. It is a way which can only be read in retrospect in the light of Christ, not guaranteed in advance."¹⁰⁵ The promises made to Abraham regarding a land, seed, and blessing to the Gentiles have a long history of fulfillment in the Old Testament and in the New Testament they are qualified and universalized. Jesus is the seed of Abraham who climaxes what God intended from the beginning (Gal. 3:16). Through him, Gentiles can become children of Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:29). The people of God look forward to inheriting a "better country" (Heb. 11:16), a "new earth" and a "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:1-2). In all these we see that God is sovereign over his prophecies and can bring them to fruition in the way he deems best fitted to the particular historical circumstances.

¹⁰³Some people believe the cosmic signs were fulfilled in detail at the time of Jesus' crucifixion while others believe they are yet to come. See I. Howard Marshall, Acts, Tyndale (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 73-4 and F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 62.

¹⁰⁴See Marshall, Acts, 252-3 and Bruce, Acts, 293-4.

¹⁰⁵Van de Beek, Why?, 300.

The promises of God should be understood as part of the divine project rather than as some eternal meticulous plan, a project in which God has not scripted the way everything in human history will go. According to König God is working in the world according to the covenant rather than a meticulous plan. He gives several objections to the idea of the plan, the most important being that it casts a shadow on God. For it implies that God fights against (to the point of giving his only son) that which he wanted all along since it was part of God's plan.¹⁰⁶ It is better to see God as working with us in history in order to bring about the fulfillment of his promises as part of his project of developing people who reciprocate the divine love and trust God. Tupper uses the analogy of a master weaver in this regard.¹⁰⁷ The master weaver utilizes the possibilities open at any given time in order to weave his purposes into the tapestry. The tapestry is not finished and God is weaving alongside us to produce it. This is an eschatological model of God's relationship to the world: there is yet more that God is going to do and it is not possible for us to predict the precise way it will go. What we do know, through Jesus, is the direction in which God is headed: producing a Christlike people (Rom. 8:29) to inhabit the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21).

But sometimes the trials of life make it difficult for us to believe that God is working in our lives towards this project. In Romans Paul gives three reasons why we should remain confident in God amidst trials. First, God can use the difficult times in our lives to produce Christlikeness in us. Paul says that tribulations can produce in us patience and build character which should give us hope since, seeing tangible evidence of the Spirit's work in our lives, we should expect even more growth (Rom. 5:3-5). Second, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28, NIV). Paul does not say that all things do in fact work together for good (contra NRSV

¹⁰⁶König, Here Am I, 198-9.

¹⁰⁷Tupper, Scandalous Providence, 58-70.

and NASB) but that God is working to accomplish good in all things.¹⁰⁸ Stott is correct that this latter reading must be rejected "since all things do not automatically work themselves together into a pattern of good."¹⁰⁹ Sometimes even people of faith are worn down rather than built up by trials. Tribulations do not always strengthen one's love of and trust in God. That is what God is seeking to achieve but there are no guarantees. Just because God is at work in our lives does not mean victory is assured. James H. Evans, Jr., comments: "Providence refers not only to God's acts in history but more accurately to God's work in history. . . . God, in African-American religious experience, works in history. To work is to accomplish something in spite of resistance."¹¹⁰ The purposes of God meet with resistance and even God does not always get what he desires. Furthermore, the verse does not say that God specifically sends the trouble into our lives.¹¹¹ Rather, God makes use of the sin, evil, and tribulations--which he has not ordained to come about--attempting to bring good out of evil. Paul is not saying that God does evil that good may come! Third, no part of creation and not even death itself can separate us from God's love in Jesus (Rom. 8:38-9). For Paul, circumstances such as nakedness, danger or personal injury tell him neither that God has abandoned him nor that he has sinned. Instead, he allows the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to be the ground of his confidence in God's disposition towards him. The father of Jesus, who raised him from the dead, does not allow death to have the last word over us for we are, in Jesus, his children. Death itself cannot withstand the coming

¹⁰⁸On the difficulty of translating this verse and discussion regarding whether all things are, in fact, advantageous for Christians see Tupper, Scandalous Providence, 338, Cranfield, Romans, 202-5, John R. W. Stott, Romans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 246-8, and Dunn, Romans, 480-2.

¹⁰⁹Stott, Romans, 247.

¹¹⁰James H. Evans, Jr., We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 75.

¹¹¹This is opposed to Paul Helm, Providence, 116, who claims that God sends the trouble into our lives in order to produce transformation of character. Given his risk-free view of providence such that God accomplishes whatever God wants, one wonders why God wants some Christians to lose their faith since some do lose confidence in God amidst trials. One would think a risk-free God could do a better job.

kingdom of God--the divine project--for God is victorious over death.¹¹²

God is not yet finished with his project. Even after God's definitive work in Jesus there is still much sin and suffering. Things are not automatically put right. Van de Beek points out that "the time between the resurrection and the eschaton is also the time of the Holy Spirit. . . . What the Spirit does is to make known in the world, by way of human agents and human history, the decision that has been made in Christ. That takes time."¹¹³ Furthermore, the way of the Spirit, like God's way to Christ, is not predictable or uniform. No analytic truths or principle of sufficient reason determine the path the Spirit must take for the Holy Spirit is sovereign and free to work the way the divine wisdom deems best. The Spirit is not a computer program designed to follow a prescribed path. The Spirit is resourceful, flexible and patient in seeking to accomplish the divine project in the world. But is the Spirit being successful in this effort? Is the world being saved? Looking at the world one has a difficult time drawing a definitive conclusion. We see evidence for hope in the Spirit, yet, there also appear to be setbacks. The outcome is still open even for God. The way into the future is not closed and sealed. It is not a blueprint which is followed. The Spirit is active and seeking those who worship God in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:23) but action entails the risk of failure. The Spirit may not get what he desires. Nevertheless, we continue to hope in God because God has proven himself faithful time and again.¹¹⁴ He does not give up on us, we have good reason not to give up on him. God has achieved some of what he wants but there is much more to be accomplished.

¹¹²Gabriel Fackre believes that God continues to work towards salvation of people even after death. See his "Divine Perseverance," in John Sanders ed., What About Those Who Have Never Heard? (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 71-95. Donald G. Bloesch, God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 143-4, believes that divine grace pursues sinners even in hell.

¹¹³Van de Beek, Why?, 297.

¹¹⁴See Van de Beek, Why?, 305-16.

4.16 Excursus on Predictions and Foreknowledge

Whereas theology has traditionally emphasized the abstractions of omniscience and foreknowledge the biblical writers stressed wisdom and knowledge God had which enabled God to be of help.¹¹⁵ God has depth of knowledge (Ps. 139:1-6), breadth of knowledge (Job 28:23-4) and does at times declare what shall be (Is. 44:6). But what seems of greater value to the biblical writers is the wisdom of God in his dealings with people (Rom. 11:32). This is especially so in Jesus in whom "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid" (Col. 2:3). For the biblical writers, God's knowledge of the future is not as important as is his promise and faithfulness to it. The classical tradition, with Augustine, has seen foreknowledge as one of the key defining attributes of God.¹¹⁶ Gorringer, however, is more in line with scripture when he writes: "What makes God God is not prediction but promise, God's hesed or covenant faithfulness."¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the ideas of foreknowledge and the predictions assumed to be based on it are so taken for granted today that it must be addressed. In a later chapter I will discuss why foreknowledge is useless for predicting the future or for guaranteeing the end from the beginning. Here I shall limit the discussion to biblical "predictions" and how the openness model accounts for them.

The word foreknowledge occurs seven times in the New Testament (the verb proginōskō Rom. 8:29; 11:2; Acts 26:5; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:17 and the noun prognōsis Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:2).¹¹⁸ Five times it is used of divine knowing in advance and twice it refers to humans having foreknowledge.¹¹⁹ Obviously, if the

¹¹⁵Gorringer is helpful here, God's Theatre, pp. 50-55.

¹¹⁶Augustine says a God without foreknowledge is not God (City of God, 5.9).

¹¹⁷Gorringer, God's Theatre, p. 63.

¹¹⁸See Colin Brown ed., The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 1.692-3.

¹¹⁹I find it interesting that translators (who typically hold to divine foreknowledge) do not translate the two references to human foreknowledge as "foreknowledge." Perhaps they do this because they cannot bring themselves to believe that humans could have the same sort of foreknowledge (though not to the same degree) God has.

term is applied to humans then the mere use of the word "foreknowledge" does not settle our dispute since no human has exhaustive knowledge of the future. When God is said to have foreknowledge the object of the divine knowledge is either Jesus Christ or the people of God (as a group).¹²⁰ Hence, God "foreknows" the incarnation as well as his decision to elect a people of God.¹²¹ Neither of these requires exhaustive foreknowledge of future contingencies, but only knowledge of what God chooses to do.

Aside from the actual term foreknowledge, it is common for evangelicals to focus on scriptural predictions and their fulfillment for apologetic purposes. Usually, these are used to prove either that Jesus was the messiah because he fulfilled all the messianic prophecies or that the Bible is divinely inspired since the predictions are thought to be precisely fulfilled.¹²² At a minimum, the predictions are said to demonstrate that God has exhaustive foreknowledge of the future. In his book, The Only Wise God, William Lane Craig provides a helpful summary of the biblical texts commonly used in this regard.¹²³ Although the passages he cites are compatible with the affirmation of foreknowledge, they do not require it. One goes beyond what the texts actually say in making the claim to divine foreknowledge. For instance, that God "declares the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10) can be interpreted harmoniously with either divine foreknowledge or the openness model defended here. The Psalmist says that before

¹²⁰See William W. Klein, The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 277-8.

¹²¹McCabe, Foreknowledge, 102-110, claims that the death of Jesus as a human was foreordained, but the precise means of death was not foreknown. He says that it is Jesus' death, not how he died, which is the important point in atonement.

¹²²See, for instance, Josh McDowell, Evidence That Demands a Verdict (Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972). For a brief discussion of this sort of interpretation of prophecy in Judaism, Islam and Christianity see John F. A. Sawyer, Prophecy and Biblical Prophets, Rev. ed., Oxford Bible Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153-9.

¹²³William Lane Craig, The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 25-37. Some texts usually cited are: 1 Sam. 23:10-12; 1 Kings 13:2; Psalm 139:4, 16; Isa. 44:7; Dan. 2:28-9; and Lk. 22:34.

a word is on his tongue God knows it (Ps. 139:4). Again, this may be explained by divine foreknowledge or as God knowing the Psalmist so well that he can "predict" what he will say and do. The psalmist expresses this idea in typical poetic fashion.

Craig correctly claims that the scriptures proclaim that God "discloses the future." But this does not settle the issue whether forecasting the future requires foreknowledge or may be explained in some other way. Richard Rice provides an overview of how such disclosures of the future may be understood by the openness model.¹²⁴ First, sometimes God simply discloses what God is going to do irrespective of creaturely decision. God can bring some things about on his own if he decides to do so (Isa. 46:11). But this does not require foreknowledge, only the ability to do it.¹²⁵

Another explanation which accounts for some predictions is that they are conditional.¹²⁶ That is, God declares that something will happen if certain factors come about (Jer. 18:7-10). God discloses what "will" happen, but this is dependent upon human response. For instance, God may declare that judgment is coming if the people do not repent or blessing upon them if they demonstrate trust in him. Sometimes, as is the case with Jonah, the conditional element is

¹²⁴Richard Rice, God's Foreknowledge, 75-81, and his "Biblical Support," in The Openness of God, 50-3. Craig, Wise God, 42-3 and 36 believes these explanations a failure. He erroneously thinks that conditional prophecies require middle knowledge. Moreover, he claims that the openness model denudes the biblical passages of any theological significance. It may denude them of the particular theological significance to which Craig ascribes, but it hardly evacuates all theological meaning.

¹²⁵Lorenzo D. McCabe, The Foreknowledge of God (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1878) agrees and adds the observation that God can also overrule human freedom if necessary to accomplish a divine purpose. McCabe points out that if God does this then the human agents whom God overrules are not held responsible for their actions. In my opinion, McCabe appeals to divine overruling far too often in order to explain predictions and does not adequately consider other explanations available to the openness model.

¹²⁶Proponents of foreknowledge need to explain how a conditional prediction by God can be genuine when God already knows the future result. How is it truly a conditional?

left unstated by God. This is the usual way of accounting for "failed" predictions, where what God said would happen did not come about. For instance, in 1 Samuel 23:9-13 David asked God if Saul would come to the town of Keilah and God said he would. Then David asked God if the people of the town would hand him over to Saul. Again, God said this would happen. But David was not, in fact, handed over to Saul because David fled the area! In these cases if what God says will happen does not come about, then the conditional element is assumed. I agree, but it should be noted that even "successful" predictions may have been conditional also. It is common for proponents of foreknowledge to apply the category of conditional prediction only to failed predictions and to view all fulfilled predictions as manifestations of exhaustive foreknowledge. But some divine statements regarding the future which came to pass were just as conditional--just as dependent upon human response--as those which were unfulfilled. This was discussed in some detail in the previous chapter in the section on divine repentance. Moreover, there is a problem regarding conditional promises which proponents of simple foreknowledge need to explain: how a conditional promise can be genuine if God already foreknows the human response and so foreknows that he will, in fact, never fulfill the promise.¹²⁷

A third way of explaining some predictions according to the openness model is to see them as statements about what will happen based upon God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present. In other words, given the depth and breadth of God's knowledge of the present situation God forecasts what he thinks will happen. In this regard God is the consummate social scientist predicting what will happen. God's ability to predict the future in this way is far more accurate than any human forecaster, however, since God has access to all past and present knowledge. This would explain God's foretelling to Moses of Pharaoh's refusal to grant his request. Nonetheless, this does leave open the possibility that God might be mistaken about some points. In Exodus God thought that the elders of

¹²⁷For more on this see the section on divine repentance in the previous chapter.

Israel would believe Moses, but God acknowledges that Moses is correct in the possibility that they may not believe him (Ex. 3:16-4:9).¹²⁸ God also thought the people of Jeremiah's day would repent and return to him, but they did not (Jer. 3:7, 19-20).

In summary, the openness model holds that divine predictions may be accounted for in one of three ways: as statements of what God intends to do unconditioned by his creatures, declarations of what God will do or what will happen that are conditioned by the creatures, and inferences based upon God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present. When God provides a prediction regarding the future, a key consideration is whether God has the ability to bring it about and the openness model affirms that God does have such power (Isa. 43:13). Yet, God is free to change his path based on his own purposes and his relationship with the creation.

Other factors must also be considered, however. Mention has already been made regarding the distinction between prophecy or promise and prediction (section 14). Prophecies undergo multiple fulfillments and are not stated with a high degree of specificity. After all, who, from reading the Old Testament would have predicted exactly what the messiah would be like? The biblical literalists of Jesus' day rejected him as an impostor, not the true messiah "predicted" in the Bible. Another consideration regards the way the New Testament authors use the Old Testament as a source of "predictions" which are "fulfilled" in the New Testament. Some evangelicals believe that anyone could have read the Old Testament and understood that the messiah would be crucified and resurrected. But, as was shown above, this was not the case in Jesus' day. There is nothing specifically said in the Old Testament that would have led one to predict a dying and raised messiah. But does not Paul claim (Acts 13:32-3) that the raising of Jesus is the "fulfillment" of the ancient promise? Yes, but it must be remembered that the term "resurrection" here has undergone a transformation of meaning. It

¹²⁸See the discussion of this text in section 8 of the previous chapter.

is only in light of what happened to Jesus that the New Testament writers are able to reformulate their understanding of the Old Testament. Berkouwer is correct that it is only after the fact, through faith in Jesus, that the believing community reads these prophecies.¹²⁹

Moreover, care must be taken to understand what the New Testament writers meant when they claim that something Jesus did "fulfilled" some Old Testament passage.¹³⁰ For instance, when Matthew cites Hosea 11:1 as being "fulfilled" by the return of Mary, Joseph and Jesus from Egypt he is well aware that the passage in Hosea is not a prediction at all. It is a reference to the Exodus of Moses' day. For Matthew, such events are not the fulfillment of ancient predictions about the messiah, but, rather, serve to identify Jesus having similar experiences to those of Israel or individuals in the Old Testament.¹³¹ Matthew goes on to say that Jesus' being from Nazareth fulfilled what was written in the prophets (2:23). Boring, who has a helpful section of Matthew's view of prophecy, comments on this verse that "the fact that Jesus came from Nazareth generated a 'prediction' in 2:23."¹³² Today we would probably not word things the way Matthew did. However, in New Testament times it was quite acceptable.

It might be objected that Matthew does claim that things must happen in a certain way so that the scriptures might be fulfilled (Mt. 26:54; cf. Mk. 14:49). Yet, it should be noted that Jesus here fails to say what it is that must be fulfilled

¹²⁹G. C. Berkouwer, The Person of Christ, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 113-154.

¹³⁰Evangelicals tend to understand "fulfilled" to mean only the exact instantiation of some specific Old Testament prediction.

¹³¹The same is true in John's gospel (13:18) where Jesus says the scripture is fulfilled that one who eats with him betrays him. Jesus here applies to Judas what David had applied to Absalom. It was not a prediction, but a similar event. For other examples of this practice see Sawyer, Prophecy and Biblical Prophets, 142-6.

¹³²Boring, Matthew, 154. Boring also makes the insightful observation that Matthew is not writing to non-Christian Jews attempting to convince them by these "proofs" that Jesus is the messiah for Matthew's procedure would be unconvincing. Rather, he writes to believers seeking to build their faith.

and which prophecy he is alluding to. Boring says, it "does not mean that the prophecies are a pre-written script that Jesus must dutifully act out, but that the Scriptures represent the plan and will of God, to which Jesus willingly and trustingly submits."¹³³ Jesus is not referring to some pre-determined plan of God, but to his understanding of the way of the messiah gleaned from the Old Testament.

Another problem is how to explain the predictions Jesus himself made since these are sometimes understood as implying foreknowledge.¹³⁴ Jesus predicted a number of items including his passion and resurrection, the destruction of the temple and Peter's denial. Regarding his passion and resurrection several points should be made.¹³⁵ First, the initial disclosures were veiled and the one that is quite detailed (Mk. 10:33-4) "contains no features which would not be generally known in capital proceedings in Palestine at the time of Christ."¹³⁶ As the time draws nearer Jesus becomes more explicit and though his predictions would later identify him as a prophet, they do not require foreknowledge. Moreover, Raymond Brown observes that it is doubtful that Jesus' initial predictions were all that clear since "the disciples who are supposed to have heard these predictions do not seem to have foreseen the crucifixion even when it was imminent nor to have expected the resurrection (Lk. 24:19-26). . . . One may attribute this failure to the slowness of the disciples, but one may also wonder if the original predictions were as exact as they have now come to us."¹³⁷ Brown's suggestion has some merit since the gospel writers did clarify Jesus' words and actions so

¹³³Boring, Matthew, 477.

¹³⁴Raymond E. Brown, "How Much Did Jesus Know?" Catholic Biblical Quarterly 29, no. 1 (1967): 9-39 discusses the various texts and concludes that Jesus did not have foreknowledge.

¹³⁵For an overview of the issues see H. F. Bayer "Predictions of Jesus' Passion and Resurrection," Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 630-3.

¹³⁶ Bayer, "Prediction of Jesus' Passion," 632.

¹³⁷Brown, "How Much Did Jesus Know?" 14. See also, McCabe, Foreknowledge, 106-111.

that their respective audiences would understand the meaning. After the events, things became clear. Moreover, even if Jesus' predictions of his passion were veiled they were still made and so one must account for them.

Concerning the temple, Jesus said it would be destroyed and that "not one stone would be left upon another" (Mt. 24:2; Mk. 13:2; Lk. 21:6). Brown comments: "If anyone would propose that this represented an exact foreknowledge of what would happen in 70, he need simply be reminded that the gigantic blocks of the Temple foundation are still standing firmly one upon the other in Jerusalem."¹³⁸ This has led many commentators to pass over this prophecy in silence or say that it is fulfilled in essence even if not in detail or to claim that the foundation is not considered part of the temple.¹³⁹ Actually, foreknowledge could still be affirmed if one allows that Jesus is using hyperbole. Nevertheless, I believe Jesus is basing his statement on what he believes will happen as a consequence of Israel's refusal to trust God. In my opinion, this was a conditional prophecy, not set in concrete. If the Jewish people had come to faith in Jesus then this would not have happened.

Regarding the prediction of Peter's denial several things should be noted. To begin, the announcement takes place after Jesus knows that Judas has left to turn him over to the authorities. Thus, Jesus knows that the forces arrayed against him will also come against his disciples. Moreover, according to Luke, the disciples have just had a dispute among themselves as to which one of them was the greatest (22:24). This reveals that the disciples are not in the best spiritual position for coping with the coming events. Furthermore, Jesus informs Peter of an impending spiritual attack on his faith: Satan wants to test him (Lk. 22:31). Jesus is quite aware of the formidable demonic forces ready to put his

¹³⁸Brown, "How Much Did Jesus Know?" 19. I discussed predictions that were not fulfilled or not fulfilled in the precise way predicted (e. g. Acts 21:11) in the excursus on divine repentance in the previous chapter.

¹³⁹See William L. Lane, Commentary on the Gospel of Mark, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 451-3.

disciples to the test.¹⁴⁰ It is on the basis of Jesus' knowledge of the situation that he makes his prediction regarding Peter's denial. The prediction does not come "out of the blue," but arises out of the context of the interpersonal relationships between Jesus and the disciples. Upon hearing the announcement, Peter strongly denies that it will come about. Like his Old Testament counterparts and despite his belief that Jesus is the messiah Peter does not view such predictions as pre-determined to occur for he says that Jesus is wrong in this matter. This is a very interesting point. Against it one could claim that Peter held a deficient view of foreknowledge or foreordination, but it seems more likely that he held to the same view presented in the Old Testament that even with God the future is open and the "prediction" is conditional.

Immediately after this dialogue Jesus encourages the disciples to pray in order to resist temptation (Mt. 26:38, 40-1). They do not take his injunction to pray seriously (they fall asleep) and so render themselves more vulnerable to the possibility of failing to trust God during the coming crisis. In light of these factors I understand Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial to be a conditional one based upon his knowledge of Peter's spiritual state of mind and the situation at hand.¹⁴¹ In this case the "prediction" serves as a warning to Peter: unless he takes some important steps he will fail. Jesus knows both the forces arrayed against him and his disciples as well as the disciples' spiritual unpreparedness for the forthcoming crisis. If Peter and his fellow disciples had followed Jesus' instruction to pray they would have been prepared for temptation and the

¹⁴⁰McCabe, Foreknowledge, 86-94, discusses this point and suggests that Jesus is attempting to teach Peter a lesson concerning the importance of spiritual preparedness.

¹⁴¹Craig, Only Wise God, 36, claims that the denial of foreknowledge to Jesus evacuates such events of all theological significance. He seems to suggest that if Jesus lacks foreknowledge then he cannot be considered a prophet. If so, then it appears that Craig is assuming the truth of foreknowledge and reading the texts from that perspective. But, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, one can be accounted a prophet without exhaustive foreknowledge. Craig correctly observes that the New Testament writers ascribe to Jesus the same sort of predictive ability given to God in the Old Testament. But this does not necessitate foreknowledge.

prediction might not have come about. In which case it is doubtful it would ever have been recorded. However, Peter failed to pray and so he did succumb to temptation. Thus, the conditional prediction was fulfilled.¹⁴²

To sum up, God can predict the future as something he intends to do regardless of human response, or God may utter a conditional statement which is dependent on human response, or God may give a forecast of what he thinks will occur based on his knowledge of past and present factors. The predictions of Jesus may also be understood in these categories. Again, I am not claiming that the theory of foreknowledge fails to explain biblical predictions. What is being claimed is that biblical predictions do not require this theory for their explanation. Now it may seem to proponents of foreknowledge that the explanations of various scriptural texts discussed above are strained and unconvincing. But that is the way those who affirm the openness of God regard the explanations offered on other texts by their critics. "The crucial question," says David Basinger, "is whether the idea is faithful to the overall biblical portrait of God."¹⁴³ The preceding two chapters have sought to show that the openness model is indeed faithful to the biblical portrait of God.

4.17 Conclusion to Chapter Four

Some of the biblical material pertaining to God's relationship to the world has now been discussed. Through this survey I have sought to show the nature of the divine project as one where God sovereignly enters into a relationship with his creatures in a way which involves risk for both God and his creatures. The almighty God creates significant others with freedom, grants them space to be alongside him and to collaborate with him. God expects this collaboration to

¹⁴²I understand the prediction of Judas' betrayal to be conditional as well. See Rice, God's Foreknowledge, 95-7.

¹⁴³David Basinger, "Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?" Christian Scholars Review 25, no. 2 (Dec. 1995): 142. Basinger observes that there is no neutral set of hermeneutical criteria by which to settle the issue.

proceed towards the fulfillment of his goal for creation. God loves us, provides for us and desires our trust and love in return. We see this most fundamentally demonstrated in the life of Jesus who came not to dominate over others, but to reconcile rebellious creatures through the power of love. From the New Testament material we find continuity with many of the same Old Testament themes, but with some significant clarifications. In the life of Jesus we see both the goal God has for us (Christlikeness in the new heaven and earth) and the means of providential care God provides in the attainment of the goal. Jesus trusted his Father, accepting his place as a creature with all the vulnerability this entailed. Moreover, the work of God is dependent upon the resources available in any given situation and the cooperation of humans. God resourcefully works with human attitudes, values and character, seeking to accomplish his project. One may, with many of the Old Testament writers, question the divine wisdom in this regard. Is this the proper way for a deity to run the world? Should God have granted this much liberty to his creatures? Should God have taken the risk in the first place?

In the life of Jesus we see that he is able to exercise greater control over the non-human world than over humans. We also find that miracles are, in part, dependent upon the social context and the relationships people had with Jesus. In these relationships Jesus showed himself flexible and open to adjusting his plans in response to the concerns of others. The way of providence in the life of Jesus did not occur by some pre-determined plan. Everything is not being worked out according to some eternal script. God responds to his creatures and gets involved in the give-and-take of life. God remained faithful to his original commitment, yet worked to fulfill it in ways the covenant people did not anticipate.

Furthermore, in Jesus God demonstrates his love towards us and the cross and resurrection are God's measured response to sin and evil. It is through suffering and humiliation that God pays the cost of forgiveness and overcomes evil. This

is the way that God displays his wisdom and seeks to win our trust. God is seeking to build a people of whom he is proud to be their God. This is the divine project, established at creation, to which God has remained faithful. Yet the path of providence has taken many a winding turn and no one can predict precisely what God will do. But a couple of things remain clear. In Jesus we see the very face of God and so we can no longer doubt that the way of God is a love which desires the eradication of the sin which ruins the beloved. Yet, this love does not force its will on the beloved. Rather, it comes to us in passionate vulnerability. Furthermore, in contrast to the no-risk model, Jesus did not go around "cleaning up the mess" of disease, disasters and misery which his Father had caused. In Jesus we find that he and the Father stand fundamentally opposed to sickness, chaos, and evil. Our views of providence must be grounded in what God actually decided to do in history rather than deducing a normative understanding of providence from eternal principles buttressed with some prooftexts.

The other thing that is clear is that God is not yet finished with his project. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would help us (Jn. 14:16-18, 26). The divine presence is still with us. In the Old Testament the divine promise that God would be "with" his people normally occurred in times of danger. God usually did not remove the danger, but, instead, promised to be with his people through the danger. Likewise, Jesus promised to be "with" us to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20). The promise is that the divine presence is with us even in the midst of difficult times. The Spirit who helps is still working. History has already witnessed the fruit of the Spirit and we hope for more. True, the Spirit has not achieved everything which God desired, but God is making progress in reclaiming rebellious humans over to him in love and faith. The people God redeems are to participate in the covenant, working to enlarge the kingdom. God is working, but has chosen not to work without us. Consequently, humans have been given significant responsibility in the accomplishment of God's project. The exact way God decides to go as well as the degree of fulfillment God achieves in reaching

his goal depends, in part, on us. God's initial risk has not proved a failure since we see evidence of God's work in history. We look forward to God's work in the future when he will abolish death and subject all things to himself (1 Cor. 15:26-8). We have reason to hope since God has repeatedly proven himself faithful in history. Because of the life and work of Jesus we have a solid basis to place our confidence in God's amazing love, faithfulness and resourcefulness. God is wise and competent in carrying out his project and we look forward to its completion.

Chapter 5: Risk and the Divine Character

5.1 Introduction

In this study the overarching theological model of God has been that of a personal being entering into loving relationships with human persons. A key metaphor employed to elucidate this model has been that of risk-taker. As with all metaphors they say something about the subject, but not all that needs to be said. Other metaphors must be utilized to give a full picture of the subject. Nevertheless, the image of God as a risk-taker has been under employed in the Christian tradition despite the significance of this idea in the biblical narrative. Although divine risk-taking is implied by certain doctrines, for example the free will defense, it has been overlooked in many discussions. Only the various forms of theological determinism self-consistently deny divine risk-taking. This chapter explores the impact divine risk-taking has on doctrines such as the divine nature, sovereignty, and salvation.

Before beginning, however, a word on criteria and a definition of providence are needed. The criteria for evaluating a theological proposal, discussed in chapter one, were: (1) concordance with the tradition; (2) conceptual intelligibility; and (3) adequacy for the demands of life. Chapters three and four sought to show that God in personal relationships which involve risk-taking is consonant with the primary norm of Christian theology--scripture, especially in light of the person and work of Jesus. I have argued elsewhere that the history of Christian thought witnesses the attempt to speak of God in terms of personal, give-and-take, relationships.¹ At the same time the element of divine risk-taking in these relationships has been neglected. Consequently, the proposal here explored is in full agreement with the canons of scripture and certain segments of the Christian tradition. Regarding other streams of the tradition my proposal perhaps

¹Though this has not always been done consistently. See my "Historical Considerations," Clark Pinnock et. al. The Openness of God, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 59-100.

only agrees with the intentions and functions, rather than the material content, of their confessions and doctrinal expressions.² The present chapter will focus on the conceptual intelligibility of the proposal. Does it make sense? Is it self-consistent? Does it cohere with other well established doctrines? Does it shed light on some old problems? Intelligibility occurs within particular traditions. Does the model of a personal God gambling in his personal relationships "fit" within the Christian tradition? The purpose here is not a rationalism whereby we seek to establish the transcendental truth of providence by human reason. Rather, the intention is to see whether the proposal meets the standards of rational discourse for meaningful assertions. In this regard, if a theological model contains self-contradictory assertions, then the model pays the price of conceptual coherence. The third criterion, adequacy for the demands of life, although touched upon in this chapter, will be more fully discussed in the next.

Finally, a word about definition. From the biblical material it was shown that God freely creates a world and gets involved with its affairs. There develops a give-and-take dynamic interpersonal relationship between God and humanity in which God does not always get what he desires. God, though sometimes defeated, proved, nevertheless, victorious over the course of history in achieving his project with some people. God was resourceful and adaptable in working to fulfill his plans. Moreover, God, in some respects, made himself dependent upon humans for the achievement of his desires. Furthermore, God is not yet finished with his work for there is more "up his sleeve." In light of this what sorts of conditions must be met for an adequate definition of providence? Thomas Flint suggests that any orthodox view of providence must contain three elements: (1) foresight; (2)

²For surveys of the doctrine of providence see Benjamin Wirt Farley, The Providence of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), Horton Davies, The Vigilant God: Providence in the Thought of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Barth (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), and Langdon Gilkey, Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History (New York: Seabury, 1976), 159-238.

control "in some sense;" and (3) a plan.³²

Much depends upon how one elaborates these three conditions, but as a beginning I think Flint is correct that the doctrine of providence in the Christian tradition has affirmed these. The model of God as risk-taker in attempting to achieve his goal of creation through personal relationships affirms these conditions. God's foresight involves the ability to anticipate human responses. God intervenes in human affairs--especially the incarnation--such that he can introduce new factors into history which direct it towards ends not otherwise attainable. Moreover, God places limits on what humans can do (e. g. removes them from the garden lest they eat of the tree of life and live forever, Gen. 2:22). In these ways God exercises a degree of "control" over human affairs. Finally, regarding a plan it may be said that God has ultimate goals which he refuses to change while remaining flexible as to precisely how he seeks to accomplish them.⁴ In these respects, H. H. Farmer was on track when he defined providence as "the adequacy of God's wisdom and power to the task with which he has charged himself."⁵

5.2 Summary of a Risk View of Providence

This definition of providence focusses on God's wisdom and power to accomplish the divine project. God's project involves the creation of significant others who

³Thomas Flint, "Two Accounts of Providence," ed. Thomas V. Morris, Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 149-150. Flint believes that "foresight" must entail eternal foreknowledge of all future contingencies. However, I believe this condition arises from a Hellenistic concern for divine perfection--where God cannot change--rather than from the biblical data.

⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, vol. 1, tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 380 and 388, says that the concept of a goal implies a difference between the goal and its fulfillment. Thus, God can have no goals. He claims that if God has goals then God is finite. Hence, for Pannenberg God does not have an open future at all! This is quite contrary to what many have thought Pannenberg was saying regarding God's actual experience in history. His use of sempiternity where God experiences all time at once (following Boethius and Plotinus) and his disavowal of talk of God as an agent leads me to suspect that Pannenberg is uneasy, at best, with the notion of a personal God working with us in history towards an open future.

⁵H. H. Farmer, The World and God: A Study of Prayer, Providence and Miracle in Christian Experience, Rev. ed. (London: Nisbet, 1955), 236.

are ontologically distinct from himself and upon whom he showers his caring love in the expectation that they will respond in love. God grants humans genuine freedom to participate in this project as he does not force them to comply. Love is given freely and received freely. Prior to creation, though God did not expect any resistance -- there was no warrant for such a belief -- there existed the "implausible possibility" that resistance to the divine purpose may arise. Regardless, God enters into real give-and-take personal relationships with his creatures. God not only gives, he receives. God freely chooses to be affected by his creatures--there is contingency in God. Moreover, God sovereignly decides not to determine everything which happens in history. He does not have to because God is supremely wise, endlessly resourceful, amazingly creative, and omniscient in seeking to fulfill his project. In the God-human relationship God sometimes decides alone what will happen while at other times God modifies his plans to accommodate to the choices, actions and desires of his creatures. In grace God created and embarked on this program. In grace God invites us to participate as significant partners with him in bringing about the eschatological glory he intends for the creation. By his free sovereign will God makes us his lovers (Hosea) and friends (Jn. 15:15) towards the establishment of his kingdom.⁶ It is God's desire that we worship and enjoy him forever in a relationship of love. In the words of Hendrikus Berkhof, "The God who is free uses his freedom to establish communion. The sovereign one gives himself away. . . . Apparently he wants to be able to do nothing else than be our covenant partner."⁷

The goal of the divine project is to produce people who reflect the trinitarian love in all their relationships: with God, other humans, and the entire creation. God's intention is that all of us come to the maturity of Jesus. Because of God's

⁶On a relationship of love see Vincent Brümmer, The Model of Love (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On friendship see Sallie McFague, Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 157-180.

⁷Hendrikus Berkhof, Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith, tr. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 106, 222.

faithfulness the goal of the project has never changed but the means and specific paths God takes towards the achievement of the project can and do change depending on what the divine wisdom deems best at the time. The particular path God takes to obtain his goal depends on the interaction between God and humanity in the course of the historical outworking of the project. Hence, the goal of the project remains constant while the means remain flexible.

5.3 The Nature of the Divine Risk

The first thing that must be said about the risks that God takes is that God does not risk for risk's sake. Divine risk-taking must not be divorced from the creational project which desires a relationship of love. Furthermore, it must be affirmed that God was under no compulsion to take any risks whatsoever. God could have created a very different world from the one we have. God did not have to create a world where humans had the freedom to enter into a personal relationship of love with himself. Following Barth I affirm that God sovereignly created the conditions of all creaturely working.⁸ God alone establishes the rules of the game. And, says Barth, one of the rules which God freely makes is that God himself will be affected and conditioned by these creatures. God freely grants a degree of separateness from God so that the creature is no tool or puppet: "the activity of the creature over against that of God remains the creature's own."⁹

So it is solely God's decision whether to take any risks at all and if so, what sorts of risks God is willing to allow. But just what do we mean by risk? Paul Helm says, "We take no risk if we knowingly set in motion events which will turn out exactly as we want them to do."¹⁰ Though this remark might be understood as claiming that foreknowledge rules out risk, this is not what Helm has in mind.

⁸Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 4 vol. eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, tr. G. W. Bromiley et. al. (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956-1975), 3.3 pp. 45, 119, 285.

⁹Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.3, 149. See 92-3.

¹⁰Paul Helm, The Providence of God, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 40.

For Helm, God foreordains everything which comes to pass. It is foreordination or exhaustive divine control over everything which rules out divine risk taking, not foreknowledge. I will seek to show below that a God with complete foreknowledge still takes risks. William Hasker provides a more precise definition of risk when he writes: "Does God make decisions that depend for their outcomes on the responses of free creatures in which the decisions themselves are not informed by knowledge of the outcomes?"¹¹ Both Hasker's and Helm's definitions are formulated in terms of knowledge but for Hasker the crucial point is not foreknowledge but whether the divine knowledge of creatures is contingent upon what the creatures do and whether divine planning for the future is done on the basis of what he knows will actually happen. Accordingly, a God with either simple foreknowledge or the openness model propounded here will make decisions about what to do without basing those decisions on the certainty of the outcome. David Basinger provides a further refinement in defining risk when he says, God is a risk-taker if "God adopts certain overall strategies -- for example, the granting of significant freedom -- that create the potential for the occurrence of individual instances of evil which are, as such, pure loss and not a means to any greater good."¹² What Basinger is driving at, I believe, is that the central component of risk-taking may not be so much lack of knowledge at the time of commitment, but the decision to grant creatures the freedom to be significant others from God which entails the possibility of movement away from God's desires. For Basinger, the crucial question is not the type of knowledge God has, but the specific rules of the game for the creation which God elects to establish. If God establishes a creation where the outcome of at least some undertakings is indefinite then God takes risks.¹³ With this last definition a God with middle knowledge, simple foreknowledge or presentism takes risks. The

¹¹William Hasker, God, Time and Knowledge, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 197.

¹²David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Divine Control: Some Clarifications," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 30 (1991): 135.

¹³Richard Rice uses this definition of risk in his God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 42.

only way I know of to avoid a risk-taking God is to affirm some form of theological determinism or exhaustive sovereignty where it is impossible for humans to thwart or hinder God's plans for each and every specific event which takes place in creation. Hence, divine risk-taking means that some things occur in the creation which God does not specifically intend to occur. God does not want sin and suffering, for instance.¹⁴

Another aspect regarding the nature of risk is that the risk may be small or great in a couple of different senses: (1) there may be a small or great chance (probability) of success, (2) there may be a small or great amount ventured depending upon its importance (value) to the person investing. A couple of illustrations may help in grasping this distinction. Take Mary who has a lot of money, but few friends. Let us suppose that she does not care a great deal about her money but is quite a sensitive person, fearful of being hurt by others. Regarding the first sense of risk--the probability of success--Mary's investing capital in a particular company may seem to her a tremendous risk due to its poor past performance. In this case the chance for success is very poor. On the other hand, given her knowledge of Deborah's good character Mary may believe that she takes little risk of being hurt by opening herself and becoming vulnerable to her. In this case she believes the chance for becoming close friends is very good and so little risk is involved. Concerning the second sense of risk-taking, Mary may not care a great deal about the money she has and so decides to invest it in this risky but potentially profitable company. In this case, although she ventures a large amount of money she does not take much of a risk because it matters little to her. On the other hand, Mary, being a sensitive person, yet convinced of Deborah's trustworthiness, decides to be open with her, though only sharing a few things about her private life at first. In this case Mary risks a lot (qualitatively) even though the amount of information shared (quantity) may be small.

¹⁴At this point the concept of permission is usually introduced (see 6.1.4).

Now it should be noted that Mary is not obligated to invest in the company nor to share herself with Deborah. But if she wants to help this company or develop a friendship then it is incumbent upon her to take some risks. That is, risk-taking must be seen as an element within the broader structure of goals and relationships. Moreover, if things begin to go bad Mary can attempt to alleviate the risk by intervening in the situation. She may withdraw what is left of her capital or break off her relationship with Deborah. Yet, this decision will depend upon several factors. For instance, she may be patient and willing to suffer short term loss for long term gain. Again, she may have the strength of forgiveness and the depth of love to suffer the hurt in the hopes she win back the friendship. Whether she stays with the risk or withdraws depends upon her overarching goals as well as her character.

In my estimation God's decision to create this particular sort of world could be seen to have a great chance of success (#1) and little possibility of failure while at the ~~same~~ time having a high amount of risk (#2) in the sense that it mattered deeply to God how things went. The decision to create beings who could receive and return the divine love and enter into loving personal relationships with each other was not much of a risk given all the blessings which God provided. Although sin was possible--given this sort of world--it simply was not plausible in view of the good environment God established and the love he bestowed.¹⁵ On the other hand, because God cared so deeply about this project--investing himself in it--God took a great risk in opening himself up to being grieved if the project went awry. This is borne out by the biblical material where God, because he cares, is repeatedly hurt, angered and saddened by sinful human actions. Moreover, as was seen in the previous two chapters God neither gave up on his project nor withdrew the original rules of the game. God's overarching purpose for the project as well as his character keep him in the game

¹⁵Admittedly, it is somewhat speculative to say that prior to his decision to create God thought sin to be improbable but I think a case can be made for it in light of God's repeated expression of surprise at sin despite all the steps he takes to eradicate it in the Old Testament.

despite the risk. God freely chooses to intervene and determine some things so that not everything is at risk and God intervenes in order to redeem what was lost in the initial failure. Divine intervention occurs, however, within the rules God freely established because God remains faithful to the project. The connection this has with the character of God will now be assessed.

5.4 The Divine Character and Providence

5.4.1 Introduction

Of vital importance for understanding divine providence as risk-taking is the particular view one has of the nature of God. A complete study of all the divine attributes is neither possible nor needed here. What is required is an examination of those attributes which have a direct bearing on our view of providence. In this study, I began with the particular type of providence God chose to employ as depicted in the biblical revelation. I did not begin with "the most perfect being" imaginable and then deduce the necessary view of providence from this model of God. For two millennia the attempt has been made to bring together the neoplatonic philosophical understanding of God (which begins with a particular understanding of "perfection") with the biblical portrait of God involved in history into one grand "biblical-classical synthesis."¹⁶ Philo of Alexandria, for example, defined the divine essence as "that which is" (to on).¹⁷ This resulted in a radical displacement of the Old Testament understanding of God as a personal being involved in a relationship of "steadfast

¹⁶On this history see my "Historical Considerations." On the effect this synthesis has had on various doctrines, practices and spirituality see Donald G. Bloesch, God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love, Christian Foundations (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 205-240. Regarding the early history of the synthesis see: Joseph C. McLelland, God the Anonymous: A Study in Alexandrian Philosophical Theology, Patristic Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1976); Richard A. Norris, God and the World in Early Christian Thought: A Study in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen (New York: Seabury, 1965); Henry Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); and F. W. Bussell, "The Purpose of the World-Process and the Problem of Evil as Explained in the Clementine and Lactantian Writings in a System of Subordinate Dualism," Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica 4 (1896): 133-88.

¹⁷See McLelland, God the Anonymous, 25-44 and Samuel Sandmel, Philo of Alexandria (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

love" (hesed) with his creation. Philo dehistoricized and deeschatologized the Jewish world view.¹⁸ Following in the steps of Philo, the classical doctrine (both Jewish and Christian) of the divine essence was abstracted from the divine project and made a subject unto itself and so "God" was analyzed as a non-relational concept. That is, the nature of God was divorced from the relationship in which God created us and the attempt was made to define God in terms of utter transcendence, immutability and power apart from all relationships. Consequently, the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, aseity, and impassibility took center stage over the more biblical terms of wisdom, love, holiness and faithfulness.

This would not have been so bad had these terms been qualified in light of the divine project involving the sort of divine-human relationships displayed in scripture.¹⁹ Instead, these terms were defined utilizing Plato's understanding of perfection as that which could never change for any change would only be a change for the worse. A "perfect" God simply cannot change since this means that God was either not now perfect or was not perfect prior to changing.²⁰ This view of perfection has been a siren call which few have been able to resist and it has had a profound impact on the doctrine of providence. For instance, if a perfect being cannot change in any way then God's thoughts and will are genuinely immutable and impassible. This ultimately leads to a decretal theology which is then used to interpret the biblical text in such a way that a genuine give-and-

¹⁸N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 248, no. 15.

¹⁹Elizabeth Johnson attempts to remain faithful to the intentions classical theism while reforming it in light of a relational God. See her wonderful book: She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 1993). Although she uses the term "panentheism" I do not believe she means it in the sense of process theology for she speaks of the "asymmetrical" relation between God and the world.

²⁰John Lucas, The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 216, and Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," 132-3, point out that this argument is fallacious as it assumes a linear scale of excellence for everything. But such is not the case with our experiences in life.

take interpersonal relationship between God and humanity is denied.²¹ Such a relationship is impossible because it introduces an element of contingency in God. Aristotle clearly pointed out that if God has any relationships then God is dependent upon an other since any genuine relationship implies dependence. For instance, the master is dependent upon the slave to be master. For God to be Lord implies dependence upon the subjects. Hence, there can be no real relationship between God and others. God is self-sufficient, needs no friends and has no friends.²² The impetus in Greek philosophical thought is towards seeing the term "God" as a category referring to the universal principle of explanation characterized by immutability and non-relationality.

In contrast, the biblical writers see "God" not as a category, but as a person who has entered into relation with us in history. Whereas Aristotle's God had no friends, in the biblical traditions Yahweh and Abraham are friends (James 2:23). If we begin with the God who comes to us, especially as seen in Jesus, then it is possible to see God as interactive, parental, generous, sensitive, cooperative, wise, and mighty in the working out of his project. If the divine project and the particular paths God has sovereignly elected to pursue in history are kept in mind, then it is possible to qualify the traditional list of divine attributes in light of the scriptural revelation.²³ When this is done it becomes clear that God has all the wisdom, knowledge and power needed to work with the sort of world he freely decided to create. If God is seen as involved in a personal way with a project in which he freely enters into give-and-take

²¹See James Daane, The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 81-90.

²²Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics, 1244b in The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: Random House, 1941). For Aristotle, God cannot even be an efficient cause or be aware of the existence of others since this would imply a change as well as dependence in the being of God.

²³Helpful in this regard are Clark Pinnock's, "Systematic Theology," in The Openness of God, William Hasker's, "A Philosophical Perspective," in The Openness of God and his God, Time and Knowledge. Frank G. Kirkpatrick's Together Bound: God, History and the Religious Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) is especially helpful in tracing out the implications of God as personal agent in relation to us.

interpersonal relations then four attributes of God come to the fore: love, wisdom, faithful freedom, and almightiness.

5.4.2 Love

Despite the endless discussions about divine love Western theology has had a difficult time placing "God is love" (1 John 4:8) at center stage when discussing the divine attributes. Rather, the more abstract and impersonal attributes of omnipotence and omniscience have been emphasized. In my opinion this is due to the failure to place the discussion of the divine nature under the category of a personal God carrying out a project. That is, despite the constant claim that God is a personal being, Western thought has paid insufficient attention to the specific sort of world God decided to create where God enters into reciprocal interpersonal relationships. Instead, discussions of God's nature usually begin with the notion of the "absolute" and once this is done it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to speak of God's love as anything other than mere beneficence (rather than interpersonal relations).²⁴ Emil Brunner put it this way: "To think that it is correct first of all to deal with the metaphysical Being of God, and then with His Love, as His 'ethical attribute', means that the decisive element in the Biblical Idea of God has not been perceived."²⁵ To modify a statement by Bonhoeffer, only the personal God can help for it takes a personal being to love.²⁶ Whereas classical theism's root metaphor is the motion

²⁴Feuerbach, Freud and others are correct in many of their criticisms concerning the Christian doctrine of God since, in many respects this God is secular, constructed without careful attention to salvation history. For helpful discussions of the atheistic philosophers and their conceptions of God see Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism, tr. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983) and Hans Küng, Does God Exist?, tr. Edward Quinn, (New York: Vintage, 1981). Unfortunately, Küng ends up with the absolutistic God beyond God concept.

²⁵Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of God, tr. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 192.

²⁶On the historical debate over God as a "person" see Berkhof, Christian Faith, 130-3 and Brunner, Christian Doctrine of God, 121-1, 139-141. It is common for people to say that "religiously" we need a personal God who enters into relationships with us but then go on to reject this either infantile or not the true nature of God--back to the "God beyond God." In this vein are the works of

of physical objects--God is the pillar around which all else moves--the root metaphor for the openness of God is persons in loving relation.

A trinitarian metaphysic is illuminating in this regard. Beginning with a trinitarian God of love who enters into loving personal relations with his creatures gives some direction to the doctrine of providence. To see why this is so a few comments on the trinity are in order. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit love one another. They are involved in a tri-personal community where each member of the triune being gives and receives love from the others. God is essentially relational, the perfection of love and communion, the very antithesis of aloofness, isolation and domination. God is no solitary potentate forcing his will on others. The members of the trinity mutually share and relate to one another. In this view person not substance is the ultimate ontological category. Personhood, relationality and community become the center for understanding the nature of God rather than power, independence and control.²⁷ Whereas the main motif of the neoplatonic God concept is that of distance and unrelatedness, the Christian doctrine of the trinity asserts that to be God is to be related in love.²⁸

Hence, God did not need to create in order to love for the trinity experiences

Gordon Kaufman, God the Problem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) and In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). For a solid defense of God as personal agent see Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 54-102.

²⁷Extremely helpful here are Catherine Mowry LaCugna's God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 14-15, 243-317, and Robert W. Jenson's, The Triune Identity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). See also Ted Peters, God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). Colin E. Gunton provides an illuminating study of the disastrous impact wrought on Western culture by the lack of trinitarian relationality in Christian theology in The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Interestingly, Jonathan Edwards seems to have moved in this direction in his later writings. See Sang Hyun Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 220.

²⁸Jensen, Triune Identity, 85, observes that if the Father begets the Son then to be God is not only to give but to receive.

and manifests the fullness of love. The creation should be seen as the result of the openness of God's love to establish others who could experience this love and enter into loving relationships with God. A God who is antecedently relational and self-sufficient is free to create significant others and enter into genuine reciprocal relations with them. The triune God as both lover and beloved is free to take the gracious initiative in both creation and incarnation of opening the love of the godhead to others.²⁹ Søren Kierkegaard understood that it was divine love which brought creation into being for the purpose of relationship when he wrote:

Everyone who assumes that a God exists naturally thinks Him as the strongest. . . but such a man hardly thinks of the possibility of a reciprocal relationship. . . . But God who creates out of nothing, who almightily takes from nothing and says, "Be", lovingly adjoins, "Be something even in apposition to me.". . . [T]his omnipotence. . . which constrains itself and lovingly makes of the creature something in apposition to itself--oh, marvelous omnipotence of love!³⁰

The aim of creation was to produce significant others who could experience the divine love and reciprocate that love both to God and other creatures. God intended to create a space-time community reflective of the triune life. Love, which does not force its own way (1 Cor. 13:5), allows for the creatures to be genuine others. Space is given them to freely participate in the fellowship of love. But what precisely is meant by love?

W. H. Vanstone's The Risk of Love and Vincent Brümmer's The Model of Love both

²⁹See Gregory A. Boyd, Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

³⁰Søren Kierkegaard, Christian Discourses, tr. Walter Lowrie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 132.

provide helpful criteria for identifying love.³¹ Vanstone gives a phenomenology of love by which he claims that love must be limitless, precarious and vulnerable. By limitless he means "unlimited concern for the other." The lover desires to give all to the loved. In this respect love differs from kindness for kindness is limited in the amount it gives or forgives. There are, however, limits on the lover but they come from without not within. That is, the lover respects the loved and, though love desires to expand its activity, does not overwhelm or imprison the loved by expressions which are untimely or excessive. In developing our relationships we know that an expression of love too sudden or demonstrative may backfire on us and not achieve the desired goal. Genuine love aspires to give to the beloved but respects the personhood of the other such that the lover accepts and works within the conditions of the relationship. The ultimate goal is to enlarge those conditions so that the loved is able to experience more love. Though love desires the highest well-being of the other, it knows that "well-being" must be defined in terms of the particulars of the relationship and so the manifestations of love will vary from relationship to relationship depending upon their level of development. Applied to God, this means that God respects the rules of the game he established and so conditions his love according to the specifics of the individual or group with whom he is relating. God may want to give more to them, but they may not be ready for it. Hence, love, though limitless, is conditioned by the ability of the other to receive it.

The second criterion Vanstone establishes is that love is precarious. Love is an activity for the sake of the other which does not control the other but wants the other to grow in love. Consequently, love is precarious because the intentions of the lover may not be satisfied. Love may be received properly or may even be rejected entirely. "Love proceeds by no assured programme. In the case of children, a parent is peculiarly aware that each step of love is a step of risk;

³¹W. H. Vanstone, The Risk of Love (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

and that each step taken generates the need for another and equally precarious step.³² Teaching children how to ride a bicycle or how to swim and providing proper safety instructions are expressions of love which may confirm and enlarge the love in the relationship or may embitter and estrange. There always lies the danger that the child may misunderstand and fail to respond properly. A love which so controlled the child that the child could not fail would be a false love. Love takes risks and is willing to wait and try again if need be. In the parable of the prodigal son God is the "waiting father" who desires the return of his children who have misunderstood his love (Lk. 15). God is willing to wait if need be and to give it another try. Waiting implies a degree of passivity and dependency while trying again implies that the efforts of love have failed to achieve the desired end as yet.³³ Classical theism has resisted attributing to God the notions of waiting, trying and failing in some things.

The third criterion is that love is vulnerable. Lovers grant the beloved a power over themselves. The loved can make the lover delighted or angry, bring joy or grief, frustrated or fulfilled because the lover cares about what transpires in the relationship. People who I barely know have little power to affect me but my children are another matter. They can affect me deeply because I care about them and our relationship. If one of my children questions, "Do I matter to dad?" they have no further to look than the way I respond. If my children have the power to make a difference in my state of being then they have a signal that I care about my relationship with them. Furthermore, lovers do not remain anonymous but reveal their names, their identities, by which they make themselves available and, hence, vulnerable, to the beloved. Love reveals and communicates the person to the other. Love is vulnerable because it surrenders into other hands the final outcome of love's aspirations. Whether love shall result in a deep interpersonal relationship or be scorned by the loved and result in suffering for the lover is

³²Vanstone, The Risk of Love, 46.

³³Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 409-411 says that God is patient, giving the other space and time to develop.

not under the control of the lover. There is much the lover can do, but guarantee success is not assured. God sovereignly elected to be vulnerable in creating a world of creatures with whom God could enter into loving relationships. God did not remain anonymous (in contrast to Greek thought and classical theism) but revealed himself to us, made himself accessible for us. God is open to us and for us.³⁴ God makes it possible for us to cause him joy or grief, suffering or delight. Moreover, God elects to establish a world where the outcome of his love is not a foregone conclusion. God desires a relationship of genuine love with us and this, according to the rules of the game God established, cannot be forced or controlled and so cannot be guaranteed. In the divine-human relationship God is more vulnerable than we are since God cannot count on our faithfulness in the way we may count on his steadfast love.³⁵ Now, for much of the Christian tradition it was thought that God is impassible and thus incapable of being vulnerable in any way.³⁶ However, if God decides to be passible and vulnerable in relation to us who is to say God cannot sovereignly do this? Has God decided to do things this way? From the survey of the biblical material it certainly appears that God has forsworn immunity.³⁷ This is especially clear from the incarnation where we see the son of God as open to others, dependent, vulnerable, and experiencing joy as well as suffering.³⁸

³⁴Helpful here is Paul R. Sponheim, Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 84-98.

³⁵See Brümmer, Model of Love, 163, 172.

³⁶On the history of the discussion see J. K. Mozley, The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1926), Joseph M. Hallman, The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), Richard Bauckham, "Only the Suffering God can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," Themelios 9, no. 3 (April, 1984): 6-12, and Paul S. Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁷Hendrikus Berkhof, Christian Faith, 133-140, sees God as the "defenseless superior power."

³⁸LaCugna, God for Us, 301, is correct when she asserts that the traditional denial of any real suffering to the godhead was a defeat for trinitarian theology since it allowed the attributes of God from neoplatonism to remain intact, controlling the reading of the Bible.

In addition to Vanstone's description of love as limitless, precarious and vulnerable I would like to add some further characteristics which Brümmer expounds even though they overlap at times with Vanstone's. Brümmer surveys various ways in which Western thought has construed love and concludes that the tradition has been to understand love as attitudinal involving three aspects: intentions, evaluations and dispositions.³⁹ The attitude of love is intentional because it is something we resolve to carry out rather than something we simply experience such as an itch. Love also involves an evaluation of the object loved. Love is not blind or indifferent to the virtues and vices in the beloved. The lover is concerned to bring about the best for the beloved and this cannot happen without a realistic appraisal of the beloved. In theology this idea is usually discussed under the heading of the holiness of God. The holiness of God, it is said, cannot tolerate sin and seeks to obliterate it whereas the divine love brings forth mercy to the sinner. Emil Brunner, for instance, says that holiness creates distance where love creates communion.⁴⁰ This sounds as though there are polarities within God each struggling for supremacy. Others have removed any form of evaluation from the notion of love, reducing love to sentimentality and permissiveness. A better approach is to speak of God's holy love which cares deeply about the harm which the beloved does to herself.⁴¹ The anger, wrath and judgments of God are expressions of his caring love.⁴² God does not simply let us go our own way for God desires to redeem us and so will convict and confront us, will stand in our way. Love is neither blind to the reality of what we are as sinners nor does it dismiss us from the relationship without further ado. The

³⁹Brümmer, Model of Love, 150-6.

⁴⁰Brunner, Christian Doctrine of God, 188.

⁴¹See Bloesch, God the Almighty, 141-3. The sermons and fiction of George MacDonald bring out this idea better than anyone else I know.

⁴²See Clark M. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 67-77 and Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 376, 418-9. G. C. Berkouwer says the basic problem with Barth's theology of God is that "the love of God dominates over His righteousness, His grace over his wrath." See his The Providence of God, tr. Lewis B. Smedes, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 264.

divine caring is manifested in evaluating our situation and in his concern to open it to new possibilities. These possibilities can affect both parties. They can affect us in that the God of holy love who confronts our sin is a fearful God--a God not within our control. They also affect God since God is open to being delighted and grieved by his creatures depending upon our response to the new possibilities. Finally, says Brümmer, love is dispositional or habitual rather than occasional. There are occasions where we are happy, grateful, or afraid but love is not merely a passing state. It is more like a policy which we publicly carry out in repeated actions with the intention of achieving the goal of a mature relationship.

In addition to these three characteristics which love shares with other attitudes, Brümmer adds a fourth: the desire for reciprocation. This is important, he says, if we are to grasp the fact that love is more than a mere attitude, it creates a relationship. Love seeks the response of the other yet respects the personhood of the other. The lover desires that the beloved reciprocate the love and so bring to fruition the goal of the relationship. In this sense, love is between persons. Persons in relation for the purpose of reciprocating love (the divine project) becomes the lens through which we view the type of providential relationship God has elected to have with the world.⁴³

One may observe the nature of love, as just defined, in the life of Jesus. His love was persistent, dependent upon the ability of others to receive it, evaluative and vulnerable. Everything did not go precisely the way Jesus intended. His concern was rejected by many who did not desire the new possibilities he sought to bring forth. Nonetheless, he endured rejection, demonstrating the way of love as the way to a redemptive future. In this light it is possible to think of the Apostle Paul's description of love (1 Cor. 13:4-7) as applicable to God: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or

⁴³I would add that the "goodness" of God is not to be thought of in the abstract but, rather, defined in terms of the divine project. This will keep us from defining divine love and goodness in egocentric ways.

boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Though God has, in the Christian tradition, certainly been described as loving, patient and enduring, these traits have usually not been thought of within the framework of a divine project involving vulnerability and risk. Moreover, the fact that love does not insist on its own way has certainly been a neglected theme in discussions of providence and omnipotence. It has been common to insist, with Augustine, that "the will of the omnipotent is always undefeated."⁴⁴ Consequently, Paul's conception of love which entails vulnerability has been subjugated to absolute power. Again, I believe this is a result of talking about these in abstraction from the sort of project God has elected to set in motion. Finally, it hardly needs to be said that it has not been customary to think of God as "believing" or "hoping" in anything. But if we begin with the understanding of God as bringing into being creatures with whom he desires to enter into genuine personal and loving relationships then it is quite permissible to speak of God believing and hoping things will go a certain way.⁴⁵ For instance, the prophets proclaim that God repeatedly hoped that Israel would put away its idols and return to him, but the people seldom did. God desired the early church to be made up of Jews and Gentiles but it did not go exactly as God had planned. The divine love is persistent yet capable of being frustrated. Paul's characterization of love is appropriate for understanding the way of God with the world. God creates in love, elects in love, commands in love, judges in love, incarnates in love and redeems in love.⁴⁶ The triune God is the perfection of love and brings into being other creatures to share in that love.

⁴⁴Augustine, Enchiridion, 26, tr. Albert Outler, Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 400.

⁴⁵For a philosophical defense of this idea see William Hasker, "Yes, God Has Beliefs," Religious Studies 24, no. 3 (Sept. 1988): 385-394.

⁴⁶An introduction to the Christian faith oriented around the theme of divine love is Pinnock's Unbounded Love. The classic work on divine love is by Anders Nygren, Agape and Eros, tr. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

5.4.3 Wisdom

In establishing and carrying out the project God is resourceful, competent and innovative. God has demonstrated in history that he has all the wisdom necessary to work with the sort of world he decided to create despite the fact that things do not always go as God desires (e. g., Israel's defection, Auschwitz, etc.). The divine wisdom is not defined by our standards of success but by the way God works to bring about the fruition of his project. After explaining how God has decided to bring the Gentiles into the community of God by faith in Jesus, Paul declares his amazement that God would accomplish his purposes in this way: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33). It was the wisdom of God to judge both Jews and Gentiles under sin so that he would show mercy to all (Rom. 11:32). God did this through the reconciling ministry of Jesus who is both the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24). For Paul, the "foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:25). God's wisdom is manifested in the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God. To us, however, death, vulnerability and risk seem utter folly, inappropriate ways of acting for a deity. Yet, the way of Jesus is the way of powerful love, a love which calls us to be reconciled with God, a love which raises us in resurrection life to share in the divine love. God has not chosen immunity from the suffering involved in a relationship with sinners. Nor has God chosen to override by raw power the personhood of the creatures he made to love. Rather, it is the way of love which works to accomplish the divine project. And though in many respects history reflects a terrible mess, I believe and hope, on the basis of Jesus' resurrection, that God has made, is making and will continue to make progress towards satisfactory achievement of his goal.

Although Paul came to see the wisdom of God displayed in the foolishness of the cross, it is possible to call the divine wisdom into question. Repeatedly, biblical characters called upon God to explain himself (e. g. Habakkuk) or failed to understand the direction God was taking the project at that particular time in history (e. g. Peter in Acts 10:17). Since the Enlightenment it is common for

people to call the entire project into question and ask whether God has bitten off more than he could chew. I think it safe to say that there is nobody more hated than God. Many people are dissatisfied with what they have received in life and disappointed in God for not doing a better job of running the world. Though people are oftentimes angry at God for egocentric reasons there is room in the model of divine risk-taking to allow for questioning God's wisdom. God takes the risk that we may misunderstand his loving intentions. Whereas in the no-risk model of providence there is no room to question God since everything happens exactly as God desires. In this view there is no room for genuine lament since God is always and only to be praised.⁴⁷ After all, who are you to question God? The answer to this is that I am one of his creatures whom he created to share a relationship of love. But since love does not overpower the other there is the possibility that I may fail to grasp God's intentions. Moreover, in the risk model everything does not happen precisely the way God intends. God also experiences setbacks and even defeats. Given the sort of world God created there is opportunity to question the divine wisdom.

Even if we cannot, given the risk model of providence, blame God for evil we can still wonder whether it was worth the risk of embarking on the project. With Barth, I agree that God shoulders responsibility for creating this world and establishing the rules of the game under which God has chosen to operate.⁴⁸ We can hold God accountable to his purposes and intentions in the project he has undertaken. The issue, for God, is whether we will come to trust in the divine love and wisdom. The fundamental basis upon which God seeks to affirm his wisdom and love is the life and work of Jesus. According to Paul, it is Jesus who justifies us and intercedes on our behalf which is why he is convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:31-9). Jesus

⁴⁷The church loses a significant aspect of life if it does not permit lament. See Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 36 (1986): 57-71.

⁴⁸Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.2, 165.

is the wisdom of God. If Jesus does not persuade us who or what will? God has placed his bet that he can establish a trusting, loving relationship with us through Jesus. Will we come to faith? This is the risk the divine wisdom takes.

The wisdom of God is displayed in the way biblical history reveals God's competency and resourcefulness as he works to achieve the goal of his project.⁴⁹ Philosophers and theologians have not been prone to speak of the competence and resourcefulness of God. Instead, the traditional model has emphasized divine omniscience and omnipotence in a way where everything was fixed from the beginning. But, as Markus Barth remarks: "A God who has fixed every detail beforehand may retire or die."⁵⁰ However, if God gets involved in our lives and history in genuine give-and-take relations then the competence and resourcefulness of God become significant. In fact, we could speculate as to which model offers a more exalted view of God. Gregory Boyd remarks:

it takes far more self-confidence, far more wisdom, far more love and sensitivity to govern that which is personal and free than it does to govern that over which one has absolute control. . . . It reflects a far greater depth of character and confidence, requiring a more profound depth of wisdom, to face a future with genuine openness, genuine unknowns, genuine risks, than it does to face a future with an exhaustive blueprint in hand.⁵¹

God is wise in that he is resourceful and competent in his relationship to us. Later on more will be said about the divine wisdom in relation to: sovereignty, evil, and planning.

5.4.4 Faithful Freedom

The divine faithfulness and freedom go together. In God's relationship with us

⁴⁹If one has a penchant for "omni's" one may say God is omnicompetent.

⁵⁰Markus Barth, Ephesians: Introduction, Translation and Commentary on Chapters 1-3 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 106.

⁵¹Boyd, Trinity and Process, 336.

we see the divine freedom working out the project in ways God deems best. And we see God choosing to be faithful to the project rather than give up on it. Hendrikus Berkhof speaks of this as God's "changeable faithfulness" where God is free to change in his relationships, yet God remains faithful in them.⁵² I will first say a few things about God's freedom in relation to the creation before moving on to discuss his faithfulness to it.

To begin, in the triune relationship there was no need to create in order to experience love. There is no "problem of the lonely God" in the Christian godhead. The Godhead experienced the delight of sharing-receiving love apart from any creation. God does not need the creation in order to be God. The creation is not to be explained by some necessity in the divine nature, nor by some superabundance which needs an outlet, nor by some lack in God.⁵³ The creation is wholly contingent, out of sheer grace.⁵⁴ Not only is God free to create or not create anything at all, God is also free, once he decided to create, to make the sort of world he desired and to establish the particular rules of the game he wants. If God wants a world where he sovereignly controls every single event that happens then God is free to do so. If God wants a world where he sovereignly elects to establish genuine give-and-take relations such that God will, for some things, be conditioned by the decisions of the creatures, then God is free to do so. It is God's free decision whether or not to set up reciprocal relations between himself and his creatures. The divine nature does not dictate the sort of world God must make.⁵⁵

⁵² Berkhof, Christian Faith, 140-7.

⁵³ See Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 499.

⁵⁴ Jean-Jacques Suurmond says the creation is "useless" since it exists for no reason at all. God just takes pleasure in it for God is a "playful God." See his Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁵⁵ I do not know this de re (as if I know God in himself apart from revelation). Rather, I affirm God's freedom in creation de dicto, as part of the faith--that is, in its relation to other beliefs. The statements that God did not have to create and did not have to create this sort of world are, in some respects, speculative. But they are legitimate so long as we do not claim to know

Some understandings of the divine nature lead to the conclusion that God must create a world and must create a particular type of world. It was a proverb in Plato's day that "not even God himself can fight against necessity."⁵⁶ In the Christian tradition necessity was not placed above God, as with Plato, rather it became the backbone of the divine nature. God was thought to be a "necessary" being whose nature necessarily determined what God did.⁵⁷ God is then not captive to an arche (exterior ruler) but God is "captive" to his own nature. Despite the fact that brilliant thinkers, such as Aquinas, claimed that God was

them as part of a natural theology.

⁵⁶Plato, Laws, 818, tr. B. Jowett, The Dialogues of Plato, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937), 2.571. See also Laws, 741 and Timaeus, 30, 48.

⁵⁷Alvin Plantinga studies this most thoroughly in his Does God have a Nature? (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980) and The Nature of Necessity, Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). It seems to me that in Plantinga's conception God is not sovereign over his nature. On whether God essentially must have the properties he does see James F. Sennett, "Is God Essentially God?" Religious Studies 30, no. 3 (Sept. 1994): 295-303.

Interestingly, Plantinga, who champions the free will defense on the grounds of human libertarian freedom denies this same freedom to God. See Wesley Morrison, "Is God 'Significantly Free?'" Faith and Philosophy, 2, no. 3 (July, 1985): 257-264. That God has libertarian freedom is defended by Thomas Flint, "The Problem of Divine Freedom," American Philosophical Quarterly, 20 (1983): 255-264. If we ascribe libertarian freedom to God, which I do, does this imply that God could commit a moral evil? There are a great many qualifications which need discussion. See: Vincent Brümmer Speaking of a Personal God (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90-107; Brümmer, "Paul Helm on God and the Approval of Sin," Religious Studies, 20 (June 1994): 223-6; Stephen T. Davis, Logic and the Nature of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 86-96; Robert F. Brown, "God's Ability to Will Moral Evil," Faith and Philosophy 8, no. 1 (Jan. 1991): 3-20; Richard R. La Croix, "Omniprescience and Divine Determinism," Religious Studies 12 (Sept. 1976): 375-6; and A. Van de Beek, Why? On Suffering, Guilt and God, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 261-276. Thomas V. Morris, Our Idea of God (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 56-64 and 77-80, takes the other position, arguing that God has only compatibilistic freedom (does what his nature determines). He claims that God would be "imperfect" if he had morally significant freedom (p. 64). On the other hand Morris also says that some of God's decisions need not involve a sufficient reason (p. 128).

If God has morally significant freedom it seems to raise the question whether we are justified in trusting God. Brümmer (Speaking of a Personal God, 105-7) seeks to answer this by asserting that God, being omniscient and perfectly free from constraint, would never be "disposed" to act out of character. Following the biblical material I would suggest that God has repeatedly demonstrated his love, wisdom and faithfulness to us--despite the fact that there have been some rough spots in the divine-human relationship from our perspective. We have solid reasons to trust God because of the kind of character God has manifested towards us. God has proven himself trustworthy. It is the personal God in whom I trust, not an inviolable philosophical principle.

free not to create and free not to create this particular world, the doctrine that God must do what his nature determines leads to the conclusion that God must create and denies genuine freedom to the creatures.⁵⁸ The problem is brought on by the application of the principle of sufficient reason to the divine nature. God must then have sufficient reason for every decision God makes. Freedom and contingency are rendered out of the question. If, however, God is a personal being experiencing the fullness of love in the triune godhead then God is free to create a world which God does not need.⁵⁹ The world, as the product of divine personal freedom, is genuinely contingent and so does not have a sufficient rational explanation that natural theology can ferret out by logic. There is simply no way for us to get beyond our relationship with the creator and, reaching the God beyond God, establish what the state of God's mind was at the point of creation. Brunner observes that the "One who is Free can never be known by the way of thought--for only the Necessary can be found thus, but never the Free. . . . Never can thought of itself build up the idea of a contingent, non-necessary, freely-positing world."⁶⁰ Pannenberg makes the same point when he says, "If. . . an effect is not grounded in a necessity, then one cannot without further ado draw conclusions from the effect about the nature of the cause. . . . Therefore, the otherness of God in contrast to creatures is radically protected

⁵⁸See Norman Kretzman, "Goodness, Knowledge, and indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," The Journal of Philosophy, supp. 80, no. 10 (Oct. 1983): 631-649 and Keith Ward, Rational Theology and the Creativity of God (New York: Pilgrim, 1982), 74-80, 171. Also see Robert Merrihew Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" Philosophical Review, 81 (1972): 312-332. Paul Helm believes that creation is contingent but that God had to create this particular world since God did not select from "options." That is, God had no choices as to what sort of world to create given his nature. See his Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 186-7.

⁵⁹Unfortunately, Ward, Rational Theology, 81, 86, and 141 caricatures social trinitarians as polytheists. After properly criticizing the doctrine of divine necessity Ward falls prey to saying God is not self-sufficient and so must create other beings for relationship. He goes on to qualify the way God "needs" the world by saying God does not need anything outside himself but that God "would not be completely what he is without it; though he need not have been just what he is in every respect" (p. 144).

⁶⁰Brunner, Christian Doctrine of God, 144, 147.

on the presupposition of the contingency of the divine operation."⁶¹

What we do know is that God has created us and decided to enter into reciprocal relations with us as part of the way God is working to bring the divine project to fruition. Although God does not need the world in order to experience love, God is free to create beings with whom to share his love and with whom he shares their love. Brümmer holds that God has chosen to make a world where he wants his love reciprocated and so in this restricted sense it can be said that God has chosen to be in "need."⁶² God is free to choose to be dependent upon the free response of the creatures and to respond to them if God so desires. Barth puts it this way: "If ever there was a miserable anthropomorphism, it the hallucination of a divine immutability which rules out the possibility that God can let himself be conditioned in this or that way by his creature."⁶³ In the survey of the biblical material it was clear Israel as well as individual humans affected what God experienced as well as God's decisions. Who is to say God cannot sovereignly be this way? Once God freely decides to create and elects to make this particular sort of world, God is free to work out his project as he deems best. As was seen in the previous chapter, this is precisely Paul's point in Romans 9-11. God is sovereignly free to work out his redemptive program as he sees fit. If God wants to include Gentiles by faith in Jesus into the people of God then God is free to do so. This is the point of the often abused metaphor of the divine potter having the right over the clay to work the way he desires (Rom.

⁶¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, Basic Questions in Theology, in 2 vols., tr. George H. Kehm, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 2.171 (see also 138).

⁶²Brümmer, Model of Love, 237. Disappointingly, he goes on to reject the social trinity. He erroneously believes it negates the unity of the godhead and rules out the need of God to love us. But a social trinity could still freely choose to "need" our love in the sense Brümmer describes. There is nothing to prevent the social trinity from deciding to be conditioned by our love. In my opinion both Ward and Brümmer fail to grasp what contemporary social trinitarians are saying. See Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "The Hodgson-Welch Debate on the Social Analogy of the Trinity," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1982.

⁶³Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.4. 108-9. Fiddes, Creative Suffering of God, 67, observes that this does not rule out divine self-sufficiency regarding God's self-existence.

9:20). God has decided to get personally involved--especially in the incarnation--and to work out his project according to his loving wisdom.

Something now needs to be said about the divine faithfulness. The Christian faith does not require a risk-free God, but a faithful one. God has repeatedly demonstrated his faithfulness to his project. Though God has been remarkably flexible, innovative and adaptable in working to achieve his goals, there is a constancy in his program. With Thomas Oden one could say God is reliable in the way he exhibits his love.⁶⁴ The author of Hebrews says that God has made promises and given us his oath that he will fulfill them so that we may have confidence in God's faithfulness (6:13-20). In fact, even though we have not been faithful to God, the apostle Paul says God has remained faithful to us (2 Tim. 2:13). Hendrikus Berkhof captures this idea when he writes: "Our wavering faithfulness is upheld on all sides by God's unwavering faithfulness."⁶⁵

The faithfulness of God has customarily been discussed as a category of divine immutability. This would not be so bad had the personal aspects of God's relationship to us been kept in mind.⁶⁶ Too often, however, immutability was defined apart from what we know of God in history and was seen to imply that God is absolutely unchangeable in every respect. Plato's "argument from perfection" (any change for a perfect being is always a change for the worse) is the standard means of arriving at divine immutability. This is true even of those, such as evangelicals, who pride themselves on doing "biblical" rather than "natural"

⁶⁴Thomas C. Oden, The Living God, Systematic Theology in 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 1.110-4.

⁶⁵Berkhof, Christian Faith, 476.

⁶⁶See Isaak August Dorner, Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology, tr. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) and Rem B. Edwards, "The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God," Religious Studies 14 (1978): 305-313.

theology.⁶⁷ After mentioning Plato's dictum Herman Bavinck says, "He who predicates of God any change whatsoever, whether with respect to essence, knowledge, or will, belittles every one of his attributes. . . . He robs God of his divine nature."⁶⁸ If God's thoughts, will or emotions ever changed then God could not be considered "perfect" and God would be in some sense conditioned by the creatures.⁶⁹ This line of reasoning undermined the personal and living God who establishes a covenantal relationship and remains faithful to it. Whereas "Eternal truths are unchangeable; an eternal Person is faithful."⁷⁰ Bloesch puts it well: "God's being is indestructible, his plan and purpose are unalterable. His love is un failing and inexorable. His grace is irreversible and persevering. This is the biblical picture of God's unchangeableness."⁷¹ The essence of God does not change but God does change in experience, knowledge, emotions, and actions.⁷²

God is both faithful and free or as Hendrikus Berkhof puts it, God has a "changeable faithfulness."⁷³ By saying God has faithful freedom it is possible

⁶⁷See, for instance, Carl F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 5.304, and J. I. Packer, Knowing God, 20'th Anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 77.

⁶⁸Herman Bavinck, The Doctrine of God, tr. William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 151.

⁶⁹It was difficult not to conclude that God was perfectly immobile. But the purely immobile is death. See Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 494.

⁷⁰T. E. Pollard, "The Impassibility of God," Scottish Journal of Theology 8 (1955): 360.

⁷¹Bloesch, God the Almighty, 94.

⁷²A. Van de Beek holds that the very being of God changes and so one cannot speak of the omnipotence or the goodness of God but only of the sort of divine omnipotence or goodness manifested in a particular historical situation. It is through changes in God's goodness that he attempts to deal with the problem of evil. See his Why, 261-274. Opposed to this Bloesch, Almighty God, 262, Pinnock, Openness of God, 117-8, and H. Berkhof, Christian Faith, 141, all maintain that the being of God does not change. I tend to agree that the essence of God does not change but I think we can only affirm this as a consequence of the faith (de dicto) and not that we can demonstrate it in itself (de re).

⁷³Berkhof, Christian Faith, 140-7.

to affirm the personhood of God in relation to human persons. In his sovereign love for his creatures God experiences change yet remains faithfully committed to his project. With this understanding the biblical texts on divine repentance are read in a straightforward fashion. As Kuitert remarks: "There is nothing--outside of theological prejudice--to prevent us from taking these words seriously."⁷⁴ From this perspective the Bible does not need to read as a two layered cake with the top layer representing how God appears to us and the bottom one representing how God really is.⁷⁵ There is no need to dismiss the texts where God repents, changes in his emotional state, or is surprised at our sinful response as mere anthropomorphisms.⁷⁶ They are metaphors which reveal the kind of God who addresses us. That God is personally involved in the world and is faithful to it is best exemplified in the incarnation of Jesus. God was faithful

⁷⁴Harry M. Kuitert, Signals From the Bible, tr. Lewis B. Smedes, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 54.

⁷⁵See Lester J. Kuyper, "The Suffering and the Repentance of God," Scottish Journal of Theology 22 (1969): 257-277 and Daane, The Freedom of God, 90-1.

⁷⁶Though I believe God is everlasting and so experiences temporal duration it is not absolutely essential to my argument. In my opinion, the Bible presents God as everlasting. For example, "from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps.90:2) and Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). For a survey of the biblical evidence for this claim while paying attention to the philosophical issues see Allen G. Padgett, God, Eternity and the Nature of Time (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 23-37. On the biblical words for time see James Barr, Biblical Words for Time, 2'nd ed. (London: SCM, 1969) and Oscar Cullman, Christ and Time, rev. ed., tr. F. V. Filson, (London: SCM, 1962). For me, God is everlasting through time rather than timeless or sempiternal. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in God and the Good, ed. C. J. Orlebeke and L. B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 181-203, Hasker, God, Time and Knowledge, 144-185, and Davis, Logic and the Nature of God, 8-24. For a helpful discussion of the impact Greek philosophical notions of time and eternity had upon Christian thought see W. Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 61 (1960-1): 87-108. For a defense of the compatibility of temporalism and ex nihilo see Thomas Senor, "Divine Temporality and Creation ex Nihilo," Faith and Philosophy 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1993): 86-92.

Interestingly, William Alston, "Divine and Human Action," in Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 279, acknowledges that the religious life seems to require a divine temporal agent but says "this more concrete picture cannot literally apply to God." For defenses of timelessness and sempiternity which admit that God cannot genuinely respond, deliberate and do some of the things the Bible ascribes to God see Helm, Eternal God, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman, "Eternity," Journal of Philosophy 78 (1981): 429-458, and William Alston, "Functionalism and Theological Language," ed. Thomas Morris, The Concept of God, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 37.

in bringing the promises to fulfillment, but he was free to fulfill them in ways the people did not anticipate. The sort of messiah Jesus elected to be was unexpected. On the basis of God's faithful freedom we may trust God to continue working toward the realization of his kingdom. Yet, we must also leave God free to work things out as the divine love and wisdom deem best.

There are those who object, however, wondering whether we should place our trust in a God who is free and changeable. Will such a deity be overcome by vulnerability and stop loving us? Why should we trust a God whose prophecies are mutable? Where is our security if God's future is open? The answer to such questions is found in God's work in history, especially in Jesus for he is God's definitive word that God is not overcome by vulnerability. Even though the incarnate God was vulnerable to rejection and even death, God did not turn away from us in our sin. God stood toe to toe with our sin and did not flinch. God's unfailing commitment to his project is what should persuade us that we may wholeheartedly place our trust in God.

Some, however, prefer to base their confidence in divine impassibility or timelessness as metaphysical guarantees that God will not let us down.⁷⁷ This is wrongheaded, however, since it substitutes certainty in an unchanging concept for confidence in faithful God. The reason to trust a personal God is because God has proven to be faithful. The Christian faith is not trust in an immutable timeless principle, it is trust in the everlasting personal God who is faithful. The Christian faith is about the personal address of God in Jesus Christ. The faithful concern of God witnessed in scripture and exemplified in Jesus is the basis of our trust, not some metaphysical principle. Moreover, we do not have to fear that God will change his mind about everything. God is not fickle for God

⁷⁷Creel, Divine Impassibility, founds his trust on this principle. William Placher, Narratives of a Vulnerable God, 27-52, claims that a sempiternal God is necessary to ensure that God will continue to love his creatures. It is particularly disappointing that Placher, so sensitive to the gospel, would turn to an abstract principle instead of the personal God as the source of his confidence.

has been faithful to his project. God swears by himself, not by some metaphysical necessity, to fulfill his promises (Heb. 8:13). God's purpose in creation has been firmly maintained even while God has freely taken various routes to accomplish it. God has a solid track record and the basis of our confidence should be in what the living God has chosen to do rather than in some principle which we attribute to God in order to secure our own rational certainty. We have an accumulated tradition of God's faithful love which is our ground for trusting him. God has proven himself faithful in the past so we have confidence that God will be faithful in the future. This is part of what it means to have a personal relationship with God.

5.4.5 *Almightiness*

Omnipotence is commonly discussed in terms of abstract power rather than in connection with God's wisdom, love and faithfulness. Almightiness should, like the attributes discussed above, be understood under the category of the divine project God has undertaken rather than as a formal power. The powerful God (El shaddai) of the Bible is the one who is mighty to deliver and to care for his people. The almighty God is the God "for us" (Heb. 9:24). God's relationship with us in history is the proper basis for understanding almightiness. Language about omnipotence, no matter how exalted or superlative, must be critiqued in light of the sort of omnipotence God has actually exercised in relation to us.⁷⁸ Just as the love, wisdom and faithful freedom of God had to be viewed in light of the gospel story so must the almightiness of God. For, as van de Beek comments: "Christology is the great troublemaker in the domain of omnipotence beliefs."⁷⁹ The lordship of God is expressed in a most unexpected and, for many in Paul's day, unsatisfactory fashion. A crucified Messiah was a stumbling block for many of his fellow Jews. An incarnate and dying Son of God was foolishness to his

⁷⁸See Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 535-8.

⁷⁹van de Beek, Why?, 103. A good many theologians take the gospel into account when discussing omnipotence but philosophers of religion and conservative evangelical theologians tend to ignore it.

Greek contemporaries. The gospel story made God sound weak and foolish to those who had preconceived notions of what is fitting for God to do. Paul, however, is convinced that Jesus is "the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:24-5). Elsewhere Paul says that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). The way in which God decided to carry out his project in Jesus was, and still is, perceived by many to be impotence instead of power.

Distorted images of divine power have developed in history.⁸⁰ One is that of pure transcendence where God is totally unrelated (the ideal of the strong male). God, as necessary being, is the transcendent lord over us whose relationship of love, mercy, and faithfulness are subordinated in importance to his lordship.⁸¹ In this view divine power stands far above and apart from us. It is questionable whether it is of any benefit to us other than meeting the need for a transcendent power as part of our explanation of the universe.

Another distorted image of divine power does affirm a relationship between God and humans, but not a reciprocal one. Whereas Paul said that love does not force its will on the other (1 Cor. 13:5) Augustine said that "the will of the omnipotent is always undefeated."⁸² God is often conceived as the supreme monarch exercising the coercive power of brute force and compulsion. In classical theism the tendency has been to think of God's will in terms of a feudal king

⁸⁰See Daniel L. Migliore, The Power of God, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 34-40.

⁸¹See Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, 21, 48, 213, who says that metaphysics assigns God a place over us in absolute superiority. Death works under us so whoever dies cannot be the absolutely superior. The death of Jesus is then understood to reflect a deficient God--a God who is not necessary.

⁸²Augustine, Enchiridion, 26.102. It might be objected that Augustine sought to qualify this with a notion of "permission" where God "allows" some things to happen (24.95-6). But it is clear even in this context that Augustine affirms "specific sovereignty" such that no detail in history is other than what God specifically wills it to be.

collaboration."⁸⁸

In discussing omnipotence philosophers have not usually defined it in terms of the actual relationship God has with us. Instead, the focus has been on deriving a concept of maximal power drawn from our own experience of power. Gijsbert van den Brink's excellent study Almighty God examines the history of the discussion of the topic and systematically explores the similarities and differences between the concepts of almightiness and omnipotence.⁸⁹ Omnipotence is derived from our preconceived notions of God and power and refers to God's ability to do all things. Almightiness, on the other hand, is derived from God's revelatory actions in history and refers to God's ability to manage the affairs he undertakes in accordance with the character of God (which is also known only by his word).

In seeking to elaborate the meaning of omnipotence, philosophers usually divide into one of two camps regarding God's ability to do "all things." On the one hand are those, such as Descartes, who held that God can do absolutely anything, even the logically contradictory.⁹⁰ God can save and damn the same individual simultaneously or make two parallel mountain ranges without an intervening valley or create a waffle so big he cannot eat it.⁹¹ After all, is not God the creator

⁸⁸Kristiaan Depoortere, A Different God: A Christian View of Suffering, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 84.

⁸⁹In what follows I will freely draw upon his work, though making some important modifications. This is the best philosophical study of the subject I have read. On the theological side the discussions by Barth, Brunner and H. Berkhof most closely approximate my own. It should be noted that Peter Geach had earlier made the distinction between omnipotence and almightiness. Though helpful, I do not agree with all of Geach's points or arguments and find van den Brink a more careful guide here. See Geach's "Omnipotence," Philosophy 43 (1973): 7-20, reprinted in Providence and Evil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3-28. Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso argue against Geach that God is omnipotent and not merely almighty. See their "Maximal Power," ed. Thomas Morris, The Concept of God, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 134-167.

⁹⁰For a contemporary defense of this position see D. Goldstick, "Could God Make a Contradiction True?" Religious Studies 26 (Spring, 1990): 377-87.

⁹¹The "paradox of the stone" is not nearly so delectable as the "paradox of the waffle."

of all things including logic? Does not God's logic transcend human logic? This may sound pious but there is a serious difficulty involved. One may, following Barth and Bloesch, say that God is not bound to human logic in the sense that it stands as an independent and equal partner alongside God, limiting what God can do.⁹² We are not in position to decree (de re) what God can or cannot do. But if one asserts that God can do the logically contradictory then one has also transgressed the boundaries of what we can know.⁹³ Since God created us within certain boundaries and limits and since the principle of noncontradiction seems to be a necessary condition for coherent discourse, we cannot meaningfully speak (de dicto) of God doing the logically contradictory.⁹⁴ It simply violates the conditions of meaningful discourse which is one of the boundaries God has placed us in. We could not recognize a "square circle" if we saw one, nor could we comprehend two parallel mountain ranges without an intervening valley.

Problems with the first definition of omnipotence have led thinkers, following Aquinas, to qualify its meaning by asserting that God can do all that is

⁹²Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 532-8 and Bloesch, Almighty God, 34-5.

⁹³Regarding the status of the laws of thought and mathematics along with other "abstract objects" there are several views. One may say they are created by God and that God was free to determine their modal status at creation or that God had to create them the way they are or that they are uncreated and have eternally existed in the mind of God as necessary thoughts. For a review of the positions see van den Brink, Almighty God, 184-203. Van den Brink agrees with Philo, Augustine and Plantinga (Does God Have a Nature?) that they are uncreated necessary objects in the mind of God. Hence, God cannot (de re) do the logically contradictory or make $2 + 2 = 5$. Unfortunately, van den Brink does not discuss my position which is that all we know is that God works with us within the rules of the game he established at creation. These rules include the laws of thought and mathematics. Whether God created them or whether God could have made them otherwise or could break them we cannot (de re) say but we have to (de dicto) think this due to the conditions of the created order. Moreover, if God is going to relate to us meaningfully then God must do so within the boundaries (the rules) in which he created us. Whether God can do the logically impossible is more than I can know. But if God is going to relate to me in meaningful ways then doing the logically impossible will not be one of them. Barth's position, Church Dogmatics, 533-8, bears some similarity to mine but he also goes too far in claiming to know that the laws of thought are not eternal verities but rules established at creation.

⁹⁴Some philosophers, such as Paul Helm, Providence of God, 215, claim that God cannot do the logically contradictory. Others, however, such as Morris, Our Idea of God, 67 and Davis, Logic and the Nature of God, 78, argue only for de dicto knowledge on this point.

logically possible to do. Though God's power in this sense cannot perform that which is incoherent this has not been thought to imply any weakness on God's part. God remains able to do all things. It is just that square circles or simultaneously damning and saving a person are not "things" or meaningful states of affairs at all. God has the capacity to realize all possible states of affairs even though God does not, in fact, do so. In this regard omnipotence is virtual, not actual power. In the Christian tradition it has been customary to distinguish God's absolute power (potentia absoluta) from God's actual power (potentia ordinata).⁹⁵ God's absolute omnipotence concerns speculating on the kinds of things God could do but has not elected to do.⁹⁶

God's actual power (potentia ordinata) is God's ability to manage all that he undertakes. God has unsurpassable power as creator, sustainer and redeemer. This is the biblical understanding of God's almightiness where divine power is not abstracted from the divine project. Almightiness is defined in terms of the relationship God has established with the creation. Almightiness is connected to God's authority which is a relational and social category. It refers to the actual power of God: what God has actually done in creating and interacting with his creatures. Says Barth: "it is not power for anything and everything, but His power with a definite direction and content."⁹⁷

⁹⁵Van den Brink, Almighty God, 43-115, traces the historical shift of emphasis in the Christian tradition from the potentia ordinata to potentia absoluta. One very important purpose of this distinction is to rebut the principle of plenitude whereby God's nature is so full that it must diffuse itself (p. 73). On the havoc the principle of plenitude has wreaked in Western history see Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964). Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 539-542, says the distinction has been abused in the tradition to support a Deus absconditus behind the Deus revelatus.

⁹⁶So long as the speculation and hypothesizing is kept within the framework of what we know about the divine project I have no objection to this. But when the potentia absoluta takes precedence over the potentia ordinata then we again encounter the danger of defining God apart from what he has revealed to us which will give rise to important side effects on the doctrine of providence. Brunner, Christian Doctrine of God, 248-9, is very critical of this.

⁹⁷Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 544.

Regarding the definition of "power" there is no consensus. Van den Brink discusses four different understandings of the term.⁹⁸ There is (1) the power to do certain specific acts (e. g. creation); (2) power over others; (3) power as disposition (i. e. to be or to act in particular ways); and (4) power as authority. With the proper qualifications all of these senses of power may be attributed to almightiness but the last one, power as authority, yields an interesting point in relation to providence. Authority may be used both in a de jure and in a de facto sense. De jure authority consists of the rights to issue and carry out commands without the consent of those affected. This sort of authority may be causal or coercive in nature. De facto authority, on the other hand, consists of the right to issue commands and carry them out only with the consent of those affected. This kind of authority is not coercive for it requires the acknowledgement of the authority's power by others in order to exist at all. In discussions of providence God's authority has often been construed as de jure rather than de facto. After all, is it proper to say of the omnipotent God that he needs our acknowledgement in order to be lord?

In a sense, it is not proper since God is the lord our creator and provider whether we acknowledge it or not. Yet, as was seen in the chapters on the biblical material God is not a lord in the image of a middle Eastern potentate. Rather, God is the lord who wants to love us and establishes covenantal relations with us. In this respect the biblical notion of divine authority is closer to de facto authority. The suzerain of the covenant needs the consent of the vassal. To put it differently, the lover needs the reciprocation of love by the beloved since love cannot be forced. The kingdom of God is inaugurated but not fully realized yet. God is working to bring all things to the good (Rom. 8:28) and to bring it about that all may be loyal subjects and God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:27-8). It is clear that this is not a present reality but one toward which God is working. Moreover, God enlists our collaboration towards this end for we have

⁹⁸Van den Brink, Almighty God, 119-134. See also Morris, Our Idea of God, 69-73.

been "given the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18) and are called to bring every alien world view and evil captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).⁹⁹ The biblical understanding of almightiness does not entail that everything happens precisely as God desires for it is defined in terms of the sort of project God has decided to establish.

Van den Brink highlights five differences between philosophical definitions of omnipotence and the biblical concept of almightiness.¹⁰⁰ Firstly, in the Bible God's almightiness is not divorced from God's existential relations with the creation. Secondly, in the Bible the nature of divine power is disclosed in his actions. Take, for instance, the powerful image of the Lord Jesus becoming a servant and washing the disciples' feet (Jn. 13:4-17). In this passage Jesus expressly uses the action to highlight the nature of his lordship. Such actions are difficult to assimilate into Anselmian theology where omnipotence is derived from the most perfect understanding of power conceivable and we typically do not think lords should behave this way. Thirdly, whereas omnipotence is usually thought of as an essential attribute of God such that nothing can oppose God, in scripture God's power and authority are continuously challenged and God's purposes for some things are thwarted. Fourthly, the Bible does say there are some things which God cannot do. For example, God cannot swear by someone greater (Heb. 6:13) or lie (Heb. 6:18) or be tempted (James 1:13) or deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). These are not "logical" impossibilities and so the formal definition of omnipotence might be questioned. However, the biblical writers were not attempting to provide us with philosophically precise meanings of terms. Moreover, scripture also says that nothing is impossible for God (Gen. 18:14; Luke 1:37) and that God's power is unlimited (Num. 11:23). Although there is no

⁹⁹That Paul (in 2 Cor. 10:5) is speaking about world views (i. e. Hellenism and the Judaizers) and not the psychological control of my own inner thoughts is defended by Murray J. Harris, 2 Corinthians, Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 10, ed. Frank Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 380-1, and Philip E. Hughes, Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 352-3.

¹⁰⁰Van den Brink, Almighty God, 178-183.

attempt to reconcile the notion that God can do anything with the idea that God cannot do everything, it must be remembered that both sets of statements occur within the framework of God's relationship with the people to whom these particular statements are made. Fifthly, the Bible ascribes both power and weakness to God (1 Cor. 1:25); something Anselmian theology has difficulty accounting for.

In my view, the almighty God wins our hearts through the weakness of the cross. God has made us to love and love does not force its own way on the beloved (1 Cor. 13:5). Brunner puts it well: "God so wills to be 'almighty' over us, that He wins our hearts through the condescension in His Son, in the Cross of the Son. No other Almighty Power of God could thus conquer and win our hearts. The heart is the one sphere which cannot be forced."¹⁰¹ Berkhof speaks of God's almightiness as the "defenseless superior power" in that God creates significant others and submits himself to the rules of the game he established for his relationship with them.¹⁰² This must not be construed as sentimentality or impotency. As Migliore states: "God is Creator, Redeemer, and Transformer of life--not mere almightiness but creative power; not impassive but compassionate power; not immutable but steadfast, life-giving power that liberates and transforms the world."¹⁰³

5.5 Excursus on Omniscience

5.5.1 Introduction

My preference, throughout this thesis has been to emphasize the divine wisdom, resourcefulness and competence rather than omniscience. Nevertheless, the term omniscience, defined as knowing all that can be known, accurately describes my view of the divine knowledge. Although nearly all theists affirm that God knows

¹⁰¹Brunner, Christian Doctrine of God, 254.

¹⁰²Berkhof, Christian Faith, 133-140.

¹⁰³Migliore, The Power of God, 71.

all that can be known they disagree about exactly what can be known. That is, the disagreement is not whether God is omniscient, it is about the nature of omniscience. It is the same situation regarding omnipotence. Most theists agree that God is omnipotent but there is sharp difference of opinion regarding the nature of omnipotence. A good many theists believe that omniscience includes omniscience or foreknowledge. In this case, God not only knows all the past and present in exhaustive detail, God also knows in complete detail everything that will ever happen in the creation. There is considerable debate about attributing omniscience to God among contemporary philosophers of religion.¹⁰⁴ While some maintain omniscience others contend that God knows the past and present in exhaustive detail but does not know the future in the same way. Again, it is important to note that the debate is not about whether God is omniscient but about the nature of that omniscience.

Moreover, regarding the issue of whether or not God takes risks, the debate over foreknowledge is of no consequence. The primary question is not omniscience but divine responsiveness and conditionality. The assorted views to be discussed shortly divide into two groups: the no-risk model and various risk models. The Rubicon to be crossed concerns whether at least some of God's knowledge of what the creatures actually do is contingent upon the creatures so doing. That is, all risk models affirm the idea that some of the divine knowledge is, in some way or other, conditioned by or dependent upon the creatures. If God permits things to happen which he did not specifically intend to happen or if God enters into give-and-take dialogue with us or if God responds to our prayers because we ask God to do so then God is involved in contingent relations with us. This is true, as will be shown below, whether God has simple foreknowledge, middle knowledge or present knowledge. A God with simple foreknowledge or middle knowledge still takes risks in deciding to embark on the sort of project involving creatures with libertarian freedom. The only way of avoiding an omniscient God who takes risks

¹⁰⁴For a helpful survey of the debate see Nelson Pike, "A Latter-Day Look at the Foreknowledge Problem," International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion 33 (June 1993): 129-164.

is to uphold divine foreordination of all things. Consequently, the key issue is not the type of knowledge an omniscient deity has but the type of sovereignty an omniscient God decides to exercise. In order to substantiate these claims I will first summarize the various positions and then focus in on why a God with foreknowledge remains a risk-taking deity.

5.5.2 *The Main Alternatives*

Regarding the issue of divine risk the various understandings of omniscience may be divided into the no-risk and risk categories. In the no-risk model of sovereignty God is not dependent upon the creature in any way. Prior to creation God knew every single detail of every event that would every occur. God's knowledge of all these events was not contingent upon the creatures for omniscience is completely independent of anything external to God. God does not "need" the creature (an external being) in order to know what will happen. God does not "prevision" or "look ahead" into the future to see what the creatures will do and make his decisions on the basis of the creature's future actions since this would bring an element of contingency into the divine knowledge. None of God's knowledge is caused by the creatures as this would undermine God's absolute independence and immutability. What God knows is determined solely by what God decides to do. This was the view of Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and, I believe, the latter Augustine. For them, God does not know the future because God foresees what will happen, rather God knows the future because God determines what the future shall be. Hence, God's foreknowledge is a result of divine foreordination of all things. All that God knows is dependent solely on the divine will, not on anything the creatures may do. If God knows the future actions of humans because God foreordains precisely what they shall be then God does not take any risks.

On the other hand, if one denies exhaustive divine sovereignty such that God takes risks and allows that God's knowledge of what creatures with indeterministic freedom will do is dependent upon the creatures then a variety

of views are available including simple foreknowledge, timeless knowledge, knowledge of all possibilities, middle knowledge and presentism.¹⁰⁵ Part of the motivation behind these theories is to assist the explication of a non deterministic understanding of sovereignty.¹⁰⁶ Simple foreknowledge is a widely held view among theists. In this view God, prior to creation, had comprehensive direct vision of every single detail that would actually occur in this world. For instance, prior to creation God foresaw such things as Caesar crossing the Rubicon and the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. This view was held by a great many of the church fathers, Arminius and John Wesley. They used it to explain how God could predestine certain individuals to salvation without overriding human freedom.¹⁰⁷ God simply "looked ahead" to see which people would exercise faith in God and, on that basis, elected them. Prior to creation God learns what we will actually do for prior to God's decision to create God did not know what we would actually do. Hence, a God with simple foreknowledge was open (prior to the decision to create) to being surprised, shocked and delighted. Timeless knowledge works out in essentially the same way as simple foreknowledge but it is not "fore" knowledge at all. God atemporally sees all of history at once. There is no before or after in the divine knowledge.¹⁰⁸ Other than that,

¹⁰⁵I have not included process theology in this list since it is not a risk model of providence. The God of process theology does not create the world and so cannot be held accountable for what transpires in it. A process God was not faced either with a decision to create or a decision of what sort of sovereignty to exercise. The God of process thought is impotent to act unilaterally in human affairs. See Basinger's, Divine Power in Process Theism.

¹⁰⁶David Basinger's, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," Religious Studies 22, no. 3 (Sept. 1986): 407-422, explores the elements of divine control and risk in middle knowledge, simple foreknowledge and presentism.

¹⁰⁷On the fathers see James Jorgenson, "Predestination According to Divine Foreknowledge in Patristic Tradition," eds. John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, Salvation in Christ: a Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 159-169.

¹⁰⁸A timeless deity knows the future but does not "think" or "plan" about it since drawing inferences or deliberating imply moving from premisses to conclusion--from ignorance to knowledge. Nevertheless, proponents of this theory attempt to explain how a timeless deity may relate and even respond to us. See, for example, William Alston, "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 1 (Jan. 1985): 5-20. The Jesuit writer, John H. Wright, attempts to reconcile a strongly immutable God with divine conditionality, adaptability, and even frustration. See his "The Eternal Plan of Divine

the divine-human relationship is explained pretty much the same way in timeless knowledge as it is in simple foreknowledge. That God takes risks in this view will be made clear below.

The knowledge of all possibilities view does not have an official name of which I am aware. According to this theory God, prior to creation, knows all possible events and their outcomes and may decide what responses, if any, God will make to every event. God may eternally decide to do X if A occurs, or Z if B arises. The possibilities which God eternally knows do not come into being or pass away for they are eternally in the divine mind.¹⁰⁹ Since God has exhaustive knowledge of all possibilities God may eternally decide to "prerespond" to each and every situation which might arise. Richard Creel says that God eternally resolved how he would deal with each possible situation. In this way there is no genuine change in God, including feelings.¹¹⁰ But other proponents of this view allow for God to be temporally involved in the creation and allow for some significant change to occur in God.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, God is said to never be caught off

Providence," Theological Studies 27 (March 1966): 27-57 and "Divine Knowledge and Human Freedom: The God Who Dialogues," Theological Studies 38 (1977): 450-477.

Objections may be raised against this theory. (1) It seems to exclude divine deliberation and planning. See Thomis Kapitan, "Can God Make Up His Mind?" International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion 15 (1984): 37-47; "Deliberation and the Presumption of Open Alternatives," Philosophical Quarterly 36, no. 143 (April 1986): 230-251; "Providence, Foreknowledge, and Decision Procedures," Faith and Philosophy 10, no. 3 (July 1993): 415-420. (2) If God cannot deliberate then questions arise about the divine freedom: Does God freely choose which creative option to actualize? Does God freely choose to become incarnate? See Richard La Croix, "Omniprescience and Divine Determinism," and David Basinger, "Omniscience and Deliberation: A Response to Reichenbach," International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion 20 (1986): 169-172. See also note 125 below.

¹⁰⁹See Ward, Rational Theology, 153.

¹¹⁰Richard Creel, Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 17-34. Though Creel does an admirable job of defending classical theism, I do not believe this resonates well with the biblical picture of God. Moreover, it seriously alters the understanding of the personal relationship between God and humanity. How can God be said to be in a relationship of love with us? See Fiddes, Creative Suffering of God, 58-9.

¹¹¹See Thomas V. Morris, "Properties, Modalities, and God," The Philosophical Review 93, no. 1 (Jan. 1984): 35-55 and Richard Rice, God's Foreknowledge, 56-9.

guard, surprised by any event, or forced to make any ad hoc decisions. Yet, it is true that God's knowledge of what will actually (not just possibly) occur is dependent upon what the creatures freely decide to do. Hence, according to the view that God knows all possibilities, though God does not learn what can possibly happen, God learns what does, in fact, happen. God learns what does occur in the actual world either prior to creation (as in simple foreknowledge or timeless knowledge) or as history unfolds (as in presentism). Thus, God may or may not have foreknowledge. Regardless, God still takes risks in creating a world where he does not exercise exhaustive sovereignty since even if God knows how he will react to any possible circumstance, God does not know, prior to his decision to create, which of the possibilities will come about. Furthermore, there may still be room for an element of divine shock or joy in this theory if one distinguishes between possibility and probability. In this case though God knows it is possible, for example, that Israel could defect from his love, God may not consider it likely and so may be shocked at Israel's unfaithfulness.¹¹²

A theory that shares some affinities with the foregoing view is called middle knowledge or Molinism. Luis de Molina, a sixteenth-century Jesuit theologian, developed this theory in an attempt to reconcile divine sovereignty and human indeterministic freedom.¹¹³ According to middle knowledge God knows not only

¹¹²There are several issues which this model of divine omniscience must resolve. Is it actually possible for God to eternally know all possibilities in an indeterministic creation--both on the physical and human levels? Do we want to say that God cannot generate new ideas and possibilities? (If I am correct, John Duns Scotus believed that the divine will could establish new orders and was not bound by the eternal archetypes in the divine mind.) Ward, Rational Theology, 154, 165 and Fiddes, Creative Suffering, 97 both affirm that God knows the general outlines of all possible events but that there is no fixed sum of eternal ideas, rather there is a changing supply of imaginatively created possibilities as God works with us in history. Also, Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 238-9 questions whether a God who "preresponds" to everything renders the divine-human relationship impersonal.

¹¹³See Luis de Molina, On Divine Foreknowledge, tr. and introduced by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). For a popular introduction to middle knowledge see William Lane Craig, The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987). Thomas Flint, "Two Accounts of Providence," compares Molinism with Thomism.

what could possibly happen but also what would happen if something were different in any given situation. That is, God knows all the "counterfactuals of freedom" such as what would be different in the world had Moses refused to return to Egypt. God knows, for instance, exactly how I would freely respond if someone offered me a million dollars not to write this book. Prior to creation God knew all the feasible worlds he could create and what would freely happen in each of these worlds. In deciding to create this world God knows which creatures will come into being and all the circumstances these creatures will find themselves in and precisely which choices the creatures will freely make in each situation. Thus, God has comprehensive knowledge of the future prior to creation.

This does not, however, rule out contingency and risk for God since God's knowledge of the counterfactuals (what the creatures would do in any given situation) is independent of the divine will.¹¹⁴ Prior to creation God may examine all the feasible worlds but what the creatures would do in each of these worlds is not controlled by God! God exercises control over which of the feasible worlds he wants to create but there may not be any feasible world in which indeterministic freedom is present where absolutely everything goes exactly the way God would like. God may have to select from options which provide only a seventy percent divine satisfaction rating. For example, God may desire a world where every single person comes into a loving relationship with God but there may not be any such feasible world. If there is such a world, it will not be a result of God's knowledge since divine knowledge does not cause these worlds to be. It will be because God was fortunate enough that there was such a feasible world available to create. It was possible that no feasible worlds existed in which even some people came to love God. As it turns out there was at least one such world--this one--where some people love God but God is dependent upon the

¹¹⁴Regarding divine risk in middle knowledge see David Basinger, "Divine Control and Human Freedom: Is Middle Knowledge the Answer? Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 36, no. 1 (March, 1993): 55-64, his "Middle Knowledge and Divine Control," and W. S. Anglin, Free Will and the Christian Faith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), chapter 4.

creatures for this to be.¹¹⁵ If God does not control the free choices of individuals then God cannot bring about in feasible world A that Alex, whom God knows will not come to love God in world A, actually come to love God in world A. Hence, a God with middle knowledge is open to serious disappointment and even surprise in "learning" what obtains in the various feasible worlds. Such a God might be very lucky or unlucky as to whether there are any feasible worlds he could create where most of the divine desires are met. It is correct, though, that a God with middle knowledge takes no risks once he selects a particular feasible world to create since he knows how everything will turn out in that particular world.

The final view to be summarized is called present knowledge or presentism.¹¹⁶ It, like all the other risk models affirms omniscience but it denies omniprescience. God knows all that can be known but it is denied that is possible to know the future actions of free creatures.¹¹⁷ The future is not fixed but

¹¹⁵Strong Calvinists reject middle knowledge because it makes some of God's knowledge contingent. See, for example, Richard A. Muller, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius's Gambit and the Reformed Response," 265-9 and J. A. Crabtree, "Does Middle Knowledge Solve the Problem of Divine Sovereignty?", 429-258, both in eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995). It should be noted that some proponents of middle knowledge are determinists, however, and thus affirm foreordination of all things.

¹¹⁶Among those who affirm this view are Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger, The Openness of God; J. R. Lucas, The Future; Richard Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Keith Ward, Rational Theology. Even some defenders of classical theism hold that perfect being theology is quite compatible with presentism. See H. P. Owen, Concepts of Deity (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 32-3 and Thomas Morris, Our Idea of God, 102. Presentism was defended by several nineteenth-century American Methodists. To mention but a few: Billy Hibbard, Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, 2'nd ed. (New York: self-published, 1843); Lorenzo McCabe, The Foreknowledge of God (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1887), and his Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1862). See the debates this sparked in the Methodist Review in 1899. I would like to thank Randy Maddox for calling my attention to Hibbard and the debate in the journal. For further bibliography on those who are open to presentism see my "Historical Considerations," 97-8, 189-190 notes 160-8.

¹¹⁷Hasker, God, Time and Knowledge, 64-74 and "A Philosophical Perspective," 147-8, provides a carefully constructed argument that omniprescience entails determinism. It should be noted that I have not made use of this argument. Instead, I have argued that omniprescience is ruled out by the construal of the

open both to what God and humans decide to do. God's knowledge of what creatures do is dependent upon the creatures and God may genuinely dialogue with us, respond to our prayers and resourcefully adapt his plans to our actions. This model of omniscience was defended in the two chapters on the biblical material in this thesis (see especially 3.12 and 4.16). Presentism holds that the divine knowledge is unsurpassable in that no creature can even approximate God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present.¹¹⁸ Due to the knowledge of all past and present as well as God's superior abilities of analysis and inference God is able to predict with amazing accuracy what he believes will occur. Some proponents of presentism affirm that God knows all possibilities that could ever happen while other adherents affirm that God knows the general outlines of all possible futures.¹¹⁹ Either way God is still open to being surprised, shocked and delighted as God works with us in history.¹²⁰

5.5.3 *The Useless of Simple Foreknowledge for Providence*

5.5.3.1 Introduction

divine-human relationship in the biblical record. In my opinion, this theory best handles the give-and-take relationship with God though I admit more work needs to be done to fully develop this understanding of omniscience. Though God's openness to life far transcends ours it could be argued that God is our model for openness and learning. On this see John M. Hull, What Prevents Christian Adults From Learning? (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 219-38.

¹¹⁸Despite this Helm, Eternal God, 125, 195, claims that presentism is an "attenuated" understanding of omniscience. But if omnipotence, defined as the ability to do all that is logically possible, is not an attenuated understanding of divine power then why should omniscience, defined as the knowing of all that is possible to know, be an attenuated view of divine knowledge? If some things are unknowable (de dicto) just as contradictions are undoable (de dicto) then it is no deficiency in God.

¹¹⁹See note 112 above.

¹²⁰The degree of surprise a God with present knowledge experiences is often exaggerated by critics. See, for instance, Craig, Only Wise God, 134-5 and Hasker's reply, God, Time and Knowledge, 197, n. 13. Some critics charge that such a deity is a bumbling, unfulfilled God who makes mistakes and cannot accomplish all he desires. It is true that God does not get everything he wants but this is not due to the type of knowledge God has! Rather, it is due to the type of sovereignty God elects to practice. Indeed, proponents of exhaustive divine sovereignty argue that all the risk views of omniscience share this problem. David Basinger's, "Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?," Christian Scholar's Review 25, no. 2 (Dec. 1995): 133-145, handles many of these criticisms.

Before concluding this excursus it may be helpful to explore more fully the sort of divine control a God with simple foreknowledge is able to exercise since simple foreknowledge is probably the most widely held position and its value for divine providence is often overestimated.¹²¹ Does a God with simple foreknowledge (SF hereafter) possess greater providential control than a God with present knowledge (PK hereafter)? Proponents of SF claim the answer is yes because SF allows God to predict the future through his prophets and that it allows God to guarantee the end from the beginning.

David Hunt claims that "divine control will be hamstrung and God's purposes jeopardized if events can ever catch Him by surprise, or find Him unprepared, or force Him to react after the fact to patch things up....the kind of providential control expected of a theistic God is possible only on the assumption of foreknowledge."¹²² Jack Cottrell maintains that SF is a key element in God's providential control over the world. He says

Because it is by this means that God can allow man to be truly free in his choices, even free to resist his own special influences, and at the same time work out his own purposes infallibly. For if God foreknows all the choices that every person will make, he can make his own plans accordingly, fitting his purposes around these foreknown decisions and actions....Acts 2:23 is a perfect illustration of the way God works through his foreknowledge....On the one hand, God had predetermined that Jesus would die as a propitiation for the sins of the world; this was his own unconditional plan for saving the world. On the other hand, the details of how this would be accomplished were planned in relation to God's foreknowledge of the historical situation and of the

¹²¹Much of the material in this section is from my more complete discussion: "Why Simply Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God," Faith and Philosophy (forthcoming 1996).

¹²²David P. Hunt, "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," Faith and Philosophy 10, 3 (July, 1993): 394-5.

character and choices of men such as Judas.¹²³

Before examining the validity of these claims, I think it important to distinguish two different versions of how God's foreknowledge is accessed. SF is commonly explained as God "seeing the whole at once" and thus, knowing all that will happen. For example, God previsioned before the creation of the world my birth, sibling rivalries, marriage, adoption of children, etc. What God previsioned, moreover, included all the details leading up to and surrounding all these events--right down to the number of hairs on my head at any given moment. This vision of God happens all at once and even though he knows things will occur in sequence God does not acquire the knowledge in sequence. I shall coin the term "Complete Simple Foreknowledge" (CSF) for this version of SF.

Unfortunately, CSF has a difficult time explaining how God can intervene in what he foresees will happen. The problem arises because of the fact that what God previsions is what will actually occur. Divine foreknowledge, by definition, is always correct. If what will actually happen is, for example, the holocaust, then God knows it is going to happen and cannot prevent it from happening since his foreknowledge is never mistaken. Furthermore, if what God has foreseen is the entire human history at once, then the difficulty is to somehow allow for God's intervention into that history. This raises a serious problem. Does simple foreknowledge imply that God previsions his own decisions and actions? If a God with CSF possesses foreknowledge of his own actions, then the problem is to explain how the foreknowledge can be the basis for the actions when it already includes the actions. Hasker explains: "it is impossible that God should use a foreknowledge derived from the actual occurrence of future events to determine his own prior actions in the providential governance of the world."¹²⁴ Such a

¹²³Jack Cottrell, What the Bible Says About God the Ruler (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 1984), 208-9. It seems that what Cottrell is actually describing is closer to Middle Knowledge than SF.

¹²⁴Hasker, God, Time, and Knowledge, 63. See also note 125 below.

deity would then know what he is going to do before deciding what to do. A God with CSF would be unable to plan, anticipate, or decide--he would simply know. This seems to call the divine freedom into question, making God a prisoner of his own omniprescience.¹²⁵ Furthermore, if God sees Abraham's birth, life and death all at once then how does God interject the test of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) into Abraham's life? How does God see God's own actions in Abraham's life which would alter Abraham's life and consequently change God's foreknowledge? Hunt is correct that a God "with total foreknowledge...is equipped to make maximally informed decisions--but there is nothing left to be decided."¹²⁶ The divine freedom is seriously curtailed.

Perhaps, however, we can propose a different explanation of God's direct apprehension of the future. One where God timelessly accesses the future in sequence or incrementally.¹²⁷ That is, not in a temporal sequence, but in what might be called an explanatory order. Using temporal language one may say God atemporally rolls the tape of the future up to a certain point and then stops it in order to interject his own actions into the tape and then rolls the tape further to see what his creatures will do in response to his actions. Then God again decides what he will do and then rolls the tape further. Hence, there is a logical sequence or order of dependence in the way God comes to access his foreknowledge. In this version God still learns the future, atemporally of course, but he learns it in sequence. As a result God can weave his own actions into the flow of human history. I shall coin the term "Incremental Simple Foreknowledge" (ISF) to designate this view. I now propose to examine several

¹²⁵This problem holds unless, of course, one wishes to say that God sees his own actions in his foreknowledge (which, it seems, SF needs to affirm). Unfortunately, this seriously challenges the divine freedom. See J. R. Lucas, "Foreknowledge and the Vulnerability of God," in Godfrey Vesey ed., The Philosophy in Christianity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 126 and Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," 416. (See also note 108 above).

¹²⁶Hunt, "Divine Providence," 408.

¹²⁷See Hasker, God, Time, and Knowledge, 57-9.

different, but related, areas of providence to see what benefits, if any, SF has.

5.5.3.2 Sin and Divine Risk

Could a God with SF have refrained from creating creatures with indeterministic freedom and so have prevented them from committing evil? John Hick thinks so. He says it is "hard to clear God from ultimate responsibility for the existence of sin, in view of the fact that He chose to create a being whom He foresaw would, if He created him, freely sin."¹²⁸ Lorenzo McCabe, agrees saying "a being who the Creator foreknew would be disobedient should not be created....How easy for omnipotence to prevent the existence of those who, as his omniscience foresaw, would choose to be disobedient."¹²⁹ Cottrell explains how God could exercise such control: "It is foreknowledge that enables God to maintain complete control of his world despite the freedom of his creatures. God knows the future; it is not open or indefinite for him. This gives God the genuine option of either permitting or preventing men's planned choices, and prevention is the ultimate control."¹³⁰

But can a God with SF prevent sinners from being born or prevent certain evil choices? No, for the simple reason that if what God foreknows is the actual world then God foreknows the births, lives and deaths of actual sinners. Once God has foreknowledge he cannot change what will happen for that would make his foreknowledge incorrect. God cannot make actual events "deoccur." If God foreknows, has knowledge of the actual occurrence that Adam will freely choose to mistrust God, then God cannot intervene to prevent Adam from this mistrust. Hence, God can see the evil coming before he creates the world but is powerless to prevent it. Hasker correctly observes that:

¹²⁸John Hick, Evil and the God of Love, revised ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 69.

¹²⁹McCabe, The Foreknowledge of God, 364.

¹³⁰Cottrell, God the Ruler, 214. I do not understand how Cottrell can consistently maintain both that the future is closed for God and that God is able to alter that same future.

[I]t is clear that God's foreknowledge cannot be used either to bring about the occurrence of a foreknown event or to prevent such an event from occurring. For what God foreknows is not certain antecedents which, unless interfered with in some way, will lead to the occurrence of the event; rather, it is the event itself that is foreknown as occurring, and it is contradictory to suppose that an event is known to occur but then also is prevented from occurring. In the logical order of dependence of events, one might say, by the "time" God knows something will happen, it is "too late" either to bring about its happening or to prevent it from happening.¹³¹

The proponent of SF may appeal to Incremental Simple Foreknowledge (ISF) in an attempt to rescue providential control. Thus, God roles the tape forward and learns (prior to creation) that Adam is succumbing to temptation--but does not role the tape far enough to see whether he actually sins or not. At this point God may press the pause button on his remote and decide to intervene in order to buttress Adam's flagging trust. Will God's efforts be successful? To find out God roles the tape forward to see how Adam will respond.¹³² If Adam chooses to continue to trust God then the temptation is overcome. If he fails to trust God then sin enters the world. Regardless, once God sees the actual future choice of the creature he is powerless to prevent it. Prior to the actual choice being made God can seek to persuade Adam to trust God, but once God knows that Adam will fail to trust God then it is too late for God to prevent the sin.

It must be remembered that a God with SF (either CFS or ISF) does not have middle knowledge and so cannot "try out" alternative scenarios in order to ascertain which one will achieve his objective in preventing Adam from sinning. A God with

¹³¹Hasker, God, Time, and Knowledge, 57-8. This same point was made in 1843 by Hibbard, Memoirs, 387, and is also discussed by Ward Rational Theology, 152.

¹³²The tape metaphor may, itself, be deceiving since it assumes the future is available to be known. Is the rest of the actual future already on the tape? If so, then ISF may be incoherent.

SF does not know before he decides to create this particular world what sorts of decisions and actions will arise in the world. Consequently, a God with SF is no less a risk taker than a God with PK. God might "luck out" in that his free creatures never, in fact, decide to sin. Even so it will not be because of any advantage afforded by SF. On the other hand, a God with SF cannot (contra Hick) be blamed for not preventing sin from coming about since this was not possible.

5.5.3.3 Damnation and Divine Risk

What of all those God foreknew would never exercise saving faith in him and thus are not part of the elect of salvation? Can God decide not to create them? James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill thought so. "Think of a being," he says, "who would make a hell, who would create the race with the infallible foreknowledge that the majority of them were to be consigned to horrible and everlasting torment."¹³³ Although this objection is appropriate to divine foreordination of all things it is irrelevant to SF because it misunderstands the nature of foreknowledge. Though God may use foreknowledge to see which individuals will freely come to faith in Christ and so decide to elect them, he cannot guarantee that only those who exercise faith in God come into existence. For SF God's election is dependent on, and logically subsequent to, the choice of the creatures even though God's election of them is temporally prior to creation. God atemporally responds to the free choices of his creatures. A God with SF takes risks in creating a world where God does not foreordain all things. But this means that God cannot be held responsible for ensuring that only those people who will love God will be born. Once he decided to create, God could have learned through his foreknowledge that no humans would ever freely come into a loving relationship with him. That there are those who love God is not due, however, to the providential use of foreknowledge.

5.5.3.4 Divine Guidance and Protection

It is often assumed that a God with SF would be in a maximally informed position

¹³³Quoted in McCabe, Foreknowledge of God, 25.

to offer guidance and protection to those who petition him in prayer. For instance, say Mandie asks God whether she should marry Matthew or Jim, believing that God knows what is best for her and will advise her accordingly. In fact, Mandie may believe, with C. S. Lewis, that a God with CSF knew of her prayer beforehand and so has prearranged things (perhaps even prior to her birth) in such a way that her request will be providentially answered.¹³⁴ Mandie believes, for instance, that God knows whether Jim will be loving or abusive towards her and would advise her appropriately. The problem is that if God knows that she will actually marry Jim and be quite unhappy, then it is useless for God to give her the guidance to marry Matthew. It would be incoherent to claim that God, knowing the actual future and on the basis of this knowledge, changes it so that it will not be the actual future. Of course, God might foreknow that Jim will be a wonderful husband for Mandie. Even so, it is not because God brought it about. A God who already knows the future cannot answer such prayers.

Appealing to ISF provides no help. If God only accesses his foreknowledge up to the point where Mandie invokes God for guidance as to whom she should marry--but does not yet know whom she will actually marry nor knows for sure whether Jim or Matthew will be good husbands, then God's advice to her will not guarantee a good choice. God is able to advise her on the basis of his knowledge and wisdom at that point--which is no different from the knowledge and wisdom a God with PK would have.

The same is true concerning prayers for protection. If God knows that I will actually be seriously injured in an auto accident on a particular trip, then no prayer for "travelling mercies" can alter this situation. Consequently, prayers for protection would be useless and any divine interventions prohibited. Only if God does not yet know the outcome of my journey can a prayer for safe traveling be coherent within the model of SF. If God decides to act in response to my

¹³⁴C. S. Lewis, "On Special Providences" in Miracles (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 180-7.

prayer it cannot be based on his foreknowledge. Hence, this situation is no different from asking a God with PK for protection.

5.5.3.5 Mistakes and Divine Predictions

Can God be mistaken about anything? If God can be mistaken about what will happen in the future then divine predictions may be in doubt. In chapter three the narrative of Moses' dialogue in Exodus 3-4 was examined. God explicitly says to Moses that the leaders of Israel will believe Moses. But Moses thought it was possible for God to be mistaken in this (4:1). In response God affirms that Moses could be correct and so gives him signs to perform so that if they do not believe him they may believe the signs (4:5-7). Is it possible for God to have mistaken beliefs about the future? Yes, if God does not know for a fact, at the time he is speaking with Moses, whether or not the elders will actually believe Moses. God may have a very good idea of their predisposition to believe but the possibility remains that God could be mistaken.

It is commonly thought that one of the strongest values of a God with SF is that he can know the actual future and so is able to inform his prophets beforehand what precisely will happen. As has already been shown CSF cannot be used as the means by which God predicts the future for the simple reason that, if God sees history "all at once" and, presumably, his actions were not foreseen (see 5.5.3.1), then God never foresees any prophets making predictions given by God. Moreover, it is probably clear by now why ISF cannot be used to predict the future with absolute certainty. A God with ISF does not know precisely what is going to happen after the event he is foreseeing. If God learns as he previsions the future then it becomes impossible for God to interject something based on his knowledge of the future into the chemistry of past events which would alter his knowledge of what actually occurred in the past. For instance, if God foresees the whole of Jesus' life, he has not yet (logically speaking) foreseen the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D. Once God previsions the events of 70 A.D. it is "too late" for God to go back and reveal through Jesus a prediction

about this event during the life of Jesus for when God previsioned Jesus' life he did never foresaw Jesus uttering such a prediction. The only way to argue for this would be to claim that God can change the past in such a way that what God knew was going to come to pass did not come about. But then SF will have been rejected.

Consequently, a God with SF takes risks in creating the world. The God of SF is not able to prevent sin from arising or ensure that only those who will love God will be created or to guide us with absolute certainty or use the knowledge of the future to predict the future. A God with SF is not able to guarantee, from before creation, that God's plans would be successful in every detail. Hence, a God with SF has no more ability to guarantee the success of his plans than does a God with PK. SF is simply useless for providential control.

If one denies exhaustive divine sovereignty and asserts indeterministic freedom for humans then it does not matter whether one affirms simple foreknowledge, timeless knowledge, knowledge of all possibilities or presentism, God remains a risk-taker and the outcome of the world was not guaranteed prior to God's decision to create this world. The same is true for middle knowledge except that the risk God takes is whether or not there is a feasible world which satisfies God's intentions.

5.6 Conclusion to Chapter Five

In the model proposed here God has the love, wisdom, perseverance and power to deal with any situation that arises in the working out of his project. When the divine nature is defined in light of the project God established and the actions God has done in history then we have a very concrete understanding of God. God is a personal being who freely enters into loving relationships with his creatures. The nature of God is not defined in terms of the infinity of being or absolute power, but rather in terms of his wise, free, faithful and powerful love manifested towards his creatures. In his relationships God is interactive,

generous, sensitive, and responsive. There are genuinely reciprocal relations between the God and the creatures. In establishing such relations God, indeed, takes risks but this must be understood within the framework of the project God has undertaken. It is not risk for risk's sake but the quest for loving relationships with the creatures. Moreover, two senses of risk were distinguished. In the first sense God had every reason to believe his project would work out exactly as intended (the probability of success was great). Yet, God took a large risk of being hurt since God cared so deeply about the project.

Some object, however, that this model of God is too costly, it is reduction or "shrinking" of God from the full majesty of what is properly divine. Several things may be said in response to this objection. To begin, what is a cost from one perspective may be a strength from another viewpoint. All evaluations arise from within particular frameworks. This objection stems from the model of the immutable, timeless God who exhaustively controls everything. Furthermore, though some aspects might have been eliminated from the no-risk model of God other elements have been added. God's exhaustive control of everything may have been forfeited but God's genuine responsiveness has been added. God's radical impassibility has been deleted but the rich emotional life which the Bible attributes to God has been included. Thus, in some senses the risk model of God is a reduction of the no-risk model of God but other elements are added so that, in another sense, it may be argued that it presents a fuller, richer account of God. Some may believe that it is a revision of the nature of God as conceived by classical theism. In a sense this is true but so what? Aquinas revised classical theism's understanding of omnipotence. Today, however, because we tend to take his view for granted we have forgotten that this was a revision. The doing of theology is not merely a handing on of tradition. At times the tradition needs revision--especially when, in my opinion, it has misread or ignored some of the crucial elements of the biblical portrait of God. Clearly, my contention is debatable. Yet, my point is that those who wish to caricature the fellowship model as presenting a bumbling, ignorant, dependent deity will do so from a

perspective that is itself open to serious questions. In the relational model God is wise, competent, resourceful, loving and responsive even though God does not get everything he desires. This, in my view, is the God our creator and redeemer. If this is a shrinking of God, it is so only in terms of a very specific model of God. From what I see as a well sustained biblical model, it is in fact an enriching view of God. Such a perspective of God's nature and the risk involved in his project has profound ramifications when applied to the subjects of sovereignty, eschatology, suffering, prayer and guidance. To these subjects I now turn.

Chapter 6: Applications of the Risk Model of Providence

6.1 Divine Sovereignty

6.1.1 Introduction

It is now time to apply the discussions of risk and the divine nature to various aspects of the Christian life. I will begin with the topic of sovereignty and develop it in some detail since most of the other topics follow from this one. On several occasions I have said that God has sovereignly decided to enter into a project where he desires reciprocal loving relationships and so does not control everything that happens.¹ Some theologians, however, react strongly to this idea, claiming that it is not sovereignty at all! They attempt to claim the term "sovereignty" for themselves, saying it can have only one meaning--theirs (one may as well say that theological terms such as salvation or the millennium can have only one meaning). R. C. Sproul, for instance, says "If God is not sovereign, then God is not God."² Sproul defines sovereignty as exhaustive control over every detail that happens and then says that God, by definition, must be this way. A major reason decretal theologians argue this way is due to the fact that they believe the divine nature, which allows for no conditionality, determines all of God's decisions and actions.³ Hence, God necessarily must determine (even if by secondary causes) all that happens in the creation. Taking a different road, I have suggested that we begin with the actual project and the

¹For similar views of sovereignty see Pinnock et. al. The Openness of God, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Pinnock, "God's Sovereignty in Today's World," Theology Today 53, no. 1 (April 96): 15-21, the chapters by Pinnock "God Limits His Knowledge," and Bruce Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power," in eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger, Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), Jack Cottrell, What the Bible Says About God the Ruler (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984), Michael J. Langford, Providence (London: SCM, 1981), Shirley C. Guthrie, "Human Suffering, Human Liberation, and the Sovereignty of God," Theology Today 53, no. 1 (April 1996): 22-34, and Cynthia L. Rigby, "Free to be Human: Limits, Possibilities, and the Sovereignty of God," Theology Today 53, no. 1 (April 1996): 47-62.

²R. C. Sproul, Chosen by God (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986), 26.

³See James Daane, The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 81-90.

types of relations God has freely chosen to establish rather than begin via dignum Deo with what sort of world God must create. Emil Brunner notes correctly that the God of the Bible is not the Deus absolutus but the "Lord our God," the God who enters into genuine covenantal and personal relationships with us.⁴

6.1.2 Types of Relationships

In his Speaking of a Personal God, Vincent Brümmer distinguishes between two types of "games" God could establish with human beings.⁵ In Game 1 God, a personal agent, creates human personal agents and establishes rules whereby both parties in the game may say Yes or No to each other. In this game God makes the initial move by saying Yes to us, loving us and desiring a relationship of mutual love. It is now our turn to respond to God's move and we may either respond with a Yes or a No. At this point a significant qualification needs to be added to Brümmer's explanation. As was said in the discussion of Genesis 1-3 in chapter three, God did not say to us that we may choose however we please--as though all that mattered to God was that we choose one way or the other. Rather, God's initial instructions were to eat of any tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Though God did not give his permission to eat of that tree, obviously it was a possibility since it was, in fact, done. With this qualification in mind it can be said that humans have the ability, as personal beings, to say Yes or No to God's love. Love cannot be forced. Consequently, even though God wants us to respond with a Yes so that we enter into a relationship of mutual love, such a response cannot be coerced.⁶ If we respond to God's Yes

⁴Emil Brunner, The Divine-Human Encounter, tr. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943), 55-9, 66, 123-8. In his various writings Brunner is very critical of the tendency in the Reformed tradition to speak of the divine-human relationship in causal/mechanistic rather than covenantal/personal terms.

⁵Vincent Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 61-5.

⁶This is how we have to think (de dicto) about love. I do not say de re that God could not force love but I have no understanding what that would mean. Those theologians who appeal to "mystery" or "paradox" at this point to claim that God forces our love are simply speaking incoherently.

with a Yes of our own then God achieves part of what he desired for his project. If, on the other hand, we respond with a No then God may either withdraw his love, saying No to us, or God may continue saying Yes to us working to redeem the situation.

The other Game God could have established is one where God is a personal agent but humans are not. In Game 2 humans do exactly what God decrees they will do. In this scenario God determines, directly or mediately, all that happens. In Game 2 if God says Yes to humanity then humans still have to say Yes or No to God, but our "response" is caused by God. Hence, God may prevent us from saying No and cause everyone to say Yes (universalism) or God may predestinate some to say Yes while predestinating others to say No.

It is God's sovereign choice which game to establish: Game 1 with its person to person relations or Game 2 with its causal relations. It depends upon the outcome God desires. If he wants mutual fellowship then God will opt for Game 1, but in so doing God takes the risk of our rejecting his love (the possibility of evil). If God does not want to take any risks then he will opt for Game 2. Of course, I believe God has established Game 1 with its personal relations.

In his The Model of Love Brümmer clarifies and enlarges his typology of relationships.⁷ He classifies them as: (1) manipulative relations; (2) agreements of rights and duties; and (3) mutual fellowship. Manipulative relations are those of Game 2 above where party A is able to gain complete control over party B. Of course, the control may be for beneficent purposes but it still means that B is treated as an object or, in Buber's terms, an I-it relation. Such relations are asymmetrical in the sense that only A is a personal agent. A's manipulative power means that "B loses the ability either to bring about or to prevent the relationship being established, changed or terminated.

⁷Vincent Brümmer, The Model of Love, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 149-205.

The relationship therefore becomes impersonal. . . ."⁸

In relations involving agreements of rights and duties parties enter into contractual agreements entailing obligations. I may, for example, contract with B to supply baseball uniforms for my team. Such agreements are not strictly coercive but they do establish obligations. If B wants my business then she is obliged to provide the uniforms I desire. A couple of additional points should be noted. It is of no small consequence that B can earn or merit my payment by doing good work. In terms of salvation one could say that we can merit salvation by doing good works. Moreover, the relationships involved in such agreements are not the same as those in mutual fellowship. When looking for a supplier of uniforms for my baseball team I am looking for someone who is useful to me. John Lucas explains:

If I do business with you. . . my good will towards you is conditional and limited. I will keep my side of the bargain provided you keep yours. Your value in my eyes is contingent on your doing certain things whereby you are of use to me; and the good I am prepared to do you is proportional to your value to me. . . . Your good is not eo ipso my good, and your value in my eyes is simply as a person who can bring good things to me, as a furtherer of my own cause. Anybody else who could do the same would do equally well.⁹

⁸Brümmer, The Model of Love, 158. George Mavrodes reviews various philosophical models of divine causation in reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. All of them, he says, are beset with serious problems. See his "Is There Anything Which God Does Not Do?" Christian Scholars Review 16, no. 4 (July 1987): 384-391. Paul Helm rejects Brümmer's definition of personal relations. See his The Providence of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 149-153, and "Prayer and Providence," ed. Gijsbert van den Brink et. al. Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 103-9. Helm conflates influence with coercion and then claims that all personal relations involve coercion. He provides two criteria, stated in compatibilist terms, for defining personal relations. Though Helm is correct that even personal relations involve influence he fails to answer how God can practice the sort of exhaustive control required of specific sovereignty without this dissolving the personal relationship into manipulation. In my opinion, Helm's understanding of personhood is deficient.

⁹J. R. Lucas, Freedom and Grace, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 57.

In contrast to these first two types of relations, mutual fellowship involves reciprocal relations between personal agents.¹⁰ In this type of relation the free assent of both parties is necessary for the relationship to be established and maintained. Although one party may be the initiator and do much more to establish the relationship it still requires the free participation of an other in order to have a personal relationship. Both parties express their wish for the relationship and it comes about through their mutual consent. Regarding the divine-human relation it may be said that God has been the initiator in both creation and redemption and does much more than we do in establishing and maintaining the relationship. God, however, does not want to dance alone or with a mannequin or hire someone who is obligated to dance with him. God wants to dance with us as persons in fellowship, not with puppets or contracted performers and for this, our consent is necessary. Mutual fellowship requires reciprocity between two parties. Says Lucas, "The man who is wooing a woman can neither manipulate her into loving him, nor claim that she is, or would be if he performed certain feats, under an obligation to love him: but there are many things he can still do; things which are pleasing to her, things which will show her his ardent devotion."¹¹ Moreover, in contrast to the two other types of relations, relations of fellowship mean that I identify with you and treat your interests as my own rather than merely for what I can get out of it. It is you I want to fellowship with and not someone else who can do similar things. An additional difference between fellowship and the other sorts of relations is that fellowship involves a kind of risk which the others do not. In reciprocal relations the two parties are dependent upon the other to uphold the value of the relationship. If one party backs out and rejects the other, the one rejected bears the pain involved in the loss of love--which is distinct from the loss of

¹⁰Regarding personal relations the Gifford Lectures of John MacMurray are outstanding: Persons in Relation (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) and The Self as Agent (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969). Also of benefit is Peter A. Bertocci's The Person God Is (New York: Humanities Press, 1970). I also find the personalist theology of Emil Brunner rewarding.

¹¹Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 19.

a business transaction. Personal relations entail the risk of failure in that the relationship may be broken and love may not materialize.

In terms of Brümmer's typology I suggest that God has sovereignly established the rules of the game for personal relations of fellowship rather than manipulative or contractual relations. This was, of course, the conclusion reached by tracing the establishment and outworking of the divine project in scripture. This view has immediate implications regarding providence, human freedom and God's success. To these topics I now turn.

6.1.3 *Specific Versus General Sovereignty*

6.1.3.1 *Specific Sovereignty*

There are two main views regarding the nature of sovereignty in theological and philosophical discussions: specific and general. Specific sovereignty or, as it is sometimes called, meticulous providence maintains that there are absolutely no limitations, hindrances, or insurmountable obstacles for God to achieve his will in every specific circumstance of the created order. God has exhaustive control over each situation such that only what God wants to happen in that particular time and place to that specific creature will happen. Hence, this is a no-risk view of providence. The popularity of this position is attested by the fact that decretal theology, universalism and certain atheological arguments (used by atheists) all affirm it. While theists and atheists generally agree that in debating the existence of "God" they have this particular conception of God in mind, they disagree whether there is actually a deity external to the concept. It is commonly asserted that the divine nature is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good which ensures that whatever happens to us was specifically chosen by God to happen and that even if we do not understand how certain events are compatible with God's goodness, we can rest assured that God has a good reason for them. If we experience something as "evil" we should view it as God's necessary means to a greater good. This is not to say that there are "possible" or "general" greater goods that "may" be achieved. Rather, God's preordained plan

guarantees that greater goods are achieved for each and every act including inherently morally evil acts. Hence, if Susan has a job with excellent benefits it is because God specifically wanted that to happen and it serves a specific good purpose--even if Susan does not know it--in God's plan. Or, if Susan is raped and dismembered it is because God specifically wanted that to happen and it serves a specific good purpose--even if Susan does not know it--in God's plan.

John Calvin defended this position when he argued there is no such thing as fortune or chance. In life one person escapes shipwreck while another drowns, one is rich and another poor, one mother has abundant breast milk while another has hardly any. All these says Calvin are expressly arranged by God for some reason.¹² According to meticulous providence nothing can stymie God's will in anything that occurs since God is in total control of everything. Does such divine control rule out human responsibility? Proponents of specific sovereignty claim that it does not. To support this they typically appeal to compatibilistic freedom, antinomy or God's timeless foreknowledge in order to affirm meticulous providence and human responsibility. I do not find these replies successful, but since I discuss them elsewhere in this thesis I will say no more about them here.¹³ My principle argument against exhaustive sovereignty is that it rules out certain experiences, decisions and actions that the Bible and many theists attribute to God. For instance, the biblical portrait depicts God as being grieved (Gen. 6:6), changing his mind (Ex. 32:14), resorting to alternative plans (Ex. 4:14), being open and responsive to what the creatures do (Jer. 18:6-10), being surprised at what people have done (Jer. 3:7, 32:35), and that God sometimes makes himself dependent upon our prayers (James 4:2). However, these sorts of things make no sense within the framework of specific sovereignty. If

¹²John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.16. 2-3.

¹³Regarding the appeal to antinomy see 2.5.2; on compatibilism see 6.1.5; and on foreknowledge see 5.5.

God always gets precisely what he desires in each and every situation then it is incoherent to speak of God being grieved about or responding to the human situation. How can God be grieved if precisely what God wanted to happen did happen? If specific sovereignty is true then it is incorrect to speak of God getting upset with human sin since it is specifically what God wanted to come about. It is inconsistent to affirm exhaustive sovereignty and also claim that God wants to give us something but does not give it because we fail to ask him in prayer. This is so because, according to specific sovereignty, if God wants to give us something then God can insure that someone will ask for it. God's will is never thwarted in any respect according to specific sovereignty and this does not comport with my reading of scripture nor my understanding of prayer.

Finally, exhaustive divine sovereignty appears to pit Jesus against the Father. Jesus washed the disciple's feet and instructed them that Christian leaders were to emulate this style of leadership. In my opinion, the church leadership has not done a good job of fulfilling Jesus' intention. But if the Father gets exactly what he wants then what has transpired in the history of the church is precisely what the Father intended. If Jesus desires that Christians love and forgive one another instead of seeking to dominate over one another but the Father desires that we lord our power over each other (as witnessed by what actually happens) then the desires of the Son and the Father are at odds, resulting in a schizophrenic godhead. Unless, of course, one posits a hidden will of God the Father behind the revealed will of God the Son. But if one goes this way it results in the unfortunate consequence of undermining the "revelation" of God in Jesus.

6.1.3.2 General Sovereignty

The other main view is called general sovereignty and maintains that God has sovereignly established a type of world where God sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out. God desires a relationship of love with his

creation and so elects to grant it the freedom to enter into a give-and-take relationship with himself. This is a risk model of providence. In contrast to specific sovereignty, this model does not claim that God has a specific purpose for each and every event which happens. Instead, God has general purposes in connection with the achievement of the divine project. Within these general structures God permits things to happen, both good and bad, which he does not specifically intend. Yet, God may act to bring about a specific event in order to bring the divine project to fruition. The incarnation and the exodus are examples of God's electing to bring about particular events. It is within God's ability to bring about blessing and punishment in human affairs. But general sovereignty denies that each and every event has a specific divine intention. God may intensify his ongoing activity to bring about some particular event but God's normal way of operating is to allow the creatures significant freedom and, consequently, not to control everything. Even when God wants humans to perform some particular task God works to persuade free creatures to love God and serve him rather than force them to do so. Take Moses for example. He was chosen by God for a specific purpose--liberation of the Hebrews--yet God did not force him. If Moses had stubbornly refused God would have had to have been resourceful in finding another path towards the achievement of his goal. But most of the Israelites (and most of us) are not chosen for specific roles. Take the case of Susan. That Susan has a job with excellent benefits is part of the general structure of the world where God gives humans the freedom to create and staff jobs. Whether her work helps fulfill God's project depends upon her and her relationship with God. If she is raped and dismembered it is not the case that God specifically chose her to experience that horror. In general sovereignty there are things which happen which are not part of God's plan for our lives; there is pointless evil.

Although these two views of sovereignty are clearly distinct there is a tendency

for people to switch back and forth between them depending on the situation.¹⁴ For instance, many people would thank God for Susan's job but shy away from praising God for her rape. The leadership of an organization may thank God for providing the funding for the previous year but fire the development director and embark on a new fund raising strategy the next year if funds are lacking. Many Christians vacillate from meticulous to general sovereignty. On the one hand they wish to affirm God's total control over everything that happens while also wanting to affirm that God has established the rules of the game whereby humans can bring things about which God does not intend. Some claim both that God is omnidetermining and that God genuinely responds to us. But, as William Alston observes, this is incoherent for an omnidetermining deity never responds to any external reality.¹⁵ He says that if God has decided every detail of his creation (pace Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin) then genuine divine-human dialogue is ruled out since dialogue requires two independent participants. The "conversation" an omnidetermining deity has with humans is more like that between a ventriloquist and the dummy or a computer programmer and the program or a hypnotist and the subject. Such "dialogue" is a charade since it is merely a sophisticated form of talking to oneself. In terms of Brümmer's models meticulous providence goes with a manipulative view of the divine-human relationship while general sovereignty connects to relations of personal fellowship. One simply cannot have it both ways, either God controls everything and the divine-human relationship is impersonal or God does not control everything and so it is possible for the divine-human relationship to be personal. I have argued that God is wise, competent, and resourceful in dealing with us rather than manipulating all that happens. This may seem like a diminution of sovereignty but "the sovereignty that

¹⁴See David Basinger and Randall Basinger, "In the Image of Man Create They God: A Challenge," Scottish Journal of Theology 34 (1981): 97-107 and Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 9-10.

¹⁵William P. Alston, "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 1 (Jan. 1985): 5-20.

reigns unchallenged is not as absolute as the sovereignty that accepts risks.¹⁶ It requires tremendous wisdom, patience, love, faithfulness, and resourcefulness to work with a world of independent beings. A God of sheer omnipotence can run a world of exhaustively controlled beings but what is magnificent about that?

In the risk model of providence God does not control everything that happens but God is in control in some respects. The word "control" has a wide range of meaning from coercion to accountability. A ventriloquist is in control of the dummy in a different way than a teacher is in control of her students since the ventriloquist guarantees what the dummy says while the teacher does not. If the dummy says something indecent and we ask who is in control here the correct answer is the ventriloquist. If the students begin throwing things around the room someone may legitimately ask, "Who is in control here?" And the appropriate response will be the teacher. But obviously the word control in this case means something like accountability or being in charge of the situation. In most of our human relationships such as government, family, and church, we use the word control in the sense of accountability rather than manipulation. In our impersonal relations we use the control in a coercive sense. According to general sovereignty God is in control in the sense that God is accountable for creating this sort of world and carrying out the project in the way God has. As was seen in the review of the biblical "pancausality" texts God is not controlling everything that happens. God is, however, in control in the sense that God and God alone is responsible for initiating the divine project and for establishing the rules of the game under which it operates.

Within the rules of the game God makes room for indeterminacy or chance.¹⁷

¹⁶Albert C. Outler, Who Trusts in God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 96.

¹⁷Some Christians are quite put off by this as they think it leaves too much to chance. But chance never causes anything to happen. The concept of chance must not be reified or personified into the goddess Fortuna or Lady Luck. Rather, chance is merely the name we use to describe the indeterminate or unplanned relation between things. A very helpful study of how chance functioned in the

Though God sustains everything in existence he does not determine the results of all actions or events even at the subatomic level. Peter van Inwagen defines chance as: "The event or state of affairs is without purpose or significance; it is not a part of anyone's plan; it serves no one's end; and it might very well not have been."¹⁸ In this sense chance corresponds to general sovereignty. Whatever was not specifically determined by God may not have been. For instance, when God brought the animals to Adam God did not determine what the names would be but left it up to humans to decide. That God decides to grant humans significant freedom is determined by God but what humans do with that freedom is not specifically part of his plan. For general sovereignty much of what happens to us in life, even much of what seems important to us, is not specifically part of God's plan. If one of my children was climbing a tree when a branch broke and my child fell to her death many people would ask why it happened. By this they do not mean to inquire about her motives for climbing the tree or an explanation for the weak branch which broke. What they want is a divine explanation for why God allowed or brought about this particular death. For proponents of specific sovereignty there are no such things as accidents or genuine tragedy. Alexander Pope states something along these lines when he writes:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
 All Chance, Direction which thou canst not see;
 All Discord, Harmony not understood;
 All partial Evil, universal Good:
 And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, "WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT."¹⁹

Bible, how God makes use of chance, and how we utilize it so often in our lives to make things fair or predict patterns is D. J. Bartholomew's God of Chance (London: SCM, 1984).

¹⁸Peter van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," ed. Thomas Morris, Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 220.

¹⁹Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man, Epistle 1, lines 289-94, ed. Martin Price, The Selected Poetry of Pope (New York: Meridian, 1980), 132-3. When Pope says, "Whatever is, is right," I take him to mean that every single event is the right one but he could mean only that the system as a whole is the best.

Now, though I do not wish to deny that God may sometimes bring about a particular misfortune or sometimes deliver from a misfortune, I do want to deny that there is a divine reason for each and every misfortune. Genuine accidents or unintended events, both good and bad, do happen for that is the sort of world God established.

Does this mean that the world is out of God's control? Again, it depends on what is meant by control. God is not in control in the sense that absolutely nothing happens which God did not specifically want to happen. After all, God is fundamentally opposed to sin yet, there is sin. But God is in control in the sense that he shoulders the responsibility for creating this type of world. God is the potter seeking to shape the clay into the sort of vessel he intended. However, the relation between God and humanity is not merely that of a potter and clay. If it were there would be good grounds for saying that God is an incompetent potter since the vessel has not turned out the way he intended. Perhaps some other analogies will help. In the book of Hosea God is pictured as Israel's husband. In Israelite society the husband held complete authority over the wife. Yet, despite such power Gomer left Hosea and prostituted herself. Yahweh's authority over Israel was absolute but this did not prevent the people from committing apostasy.²⁰ Yahweh simply did not "control" his wife in a manipulative sense. Recent writings on providence develop various analogies for getting at the diversity of God's roles in a relational understanding of sovereignty.

Langford puts forth the analogy of a leader of a climbing party.²¹ The leader is responsible for the initial planning of routes and supplies. As the party climbs there will be occasional ad hoc decisions due to the specifics of the

²⁰See Nelly Stienstra, YHWH is the Husband of His People: An Analysis of a Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993), 116-7.

²¹Langford, Providence, 5. I will modify his discussion slightly.

terrain and the condition of the climbers. If someone has injured a hand it may mean the route has to be modified since the preselected path will no longer be possible. Some of these decisions may be made solely by the leader while others may be made in consultation with the party. This analogy highlights the competency and resourcefulness of the leader and the need for ad hoc decisions on the journey. T. J. Gorringer develops the analogy of God as a theater director.²² The director is responsible for the overall play and a good director does not manipulate the actors but seeks to bring out their own creativity. The actors play a significant part in determining how the play goes.

To think of God in terms of the theatre director, then, is to think of one whose job it is to evoke talents, skills and capabilities the creature (who remains the "actor") did not know it had. It gives God a supremely active and creative role, leading and being alongside as Orthodoxy conceived it (praecurrit et concurrit), but does not destroy the autonomy of the creature. It is creative without being manipulative.²³

These types of analogies highlight God's creativity (God as potter) and ongoing involvement in the project compatible with the model of general sovereignty.²⁴

6.1.4 Divine Permission

These analogies suggest that God is not omnidetermining but permits the actors or climbers to be significant others in the outworking of the play or the adventure of the climb. That God permits or allows states of affairs to come about that he does not desire has a long history of debate.²⁵ Going back to

²²T. J. Gorringer, God's Theatre: A Theology of Providence (London: SCM, 1991).

²³Gorringer, God's Theatre, 82.

²⁴For other analogies of divine action in connection to theological and scientific theories see Langford, Providence, 56-95, Gorringer, God's Theatre, 68-87, and Bartholomew, God of Chance.

²⁵See John Gill, The Cause of God and Truth (London: W. H. Collingridge, 1855).

Augustine one finds: "in a strange and ineffable fashion even that which is done against his will is not done without his will."²⁶ "Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen. He either allows it to happen or he actually causes it to happen."²⁷ These remarks may sound as though Augustine affirmed general sovereignty where God grants permission for the creatures to do that which God specifically does not want done. However, in the same context Augustine also makes remarks which sound as though he affirmed specific sovereignty. He claims that no one resists God's will (Rom. 9:19) and that neither angels nor humans, whether they do good or evil, can thwart the will of the omnipotent.²⁸ Calvin understood Augustine to affirm specific sovereignty and, more clearly than Augustine, realized that this excluded any concept of permission. Calvin ridicules "those who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission -- as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgment thus depended upon human will."²⁹ Calvin simply could not accept that God would establish genuine give-and-take relations with creatures as this would imply passivity or conditionality in God.

Some in the Reformed tradition have sought to say that the Calvinists and the Arminians both affirm a notion of divine permission or two wills in God. Jonathan Edwards said that "All must own that God sometimes wills not to hinder the breach of his own commands. . . . But you [Arminians] will say, God wills to permit sin, as he wills the creature should be left to his own freedom. . . I answer, this

²⁶Augustine, Enchiridion, 26.100, tr. Albert C. Culter, Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 399.

²⁷Augustine, Enchiridion, 24.95.

²⁸Augustine, Enchiridion, 25.99, 26.102.

²⁹Calvin, Institutes, 1.18.1. Calvin's analogy of God in the watchtower does bring out the aspect of God's conditionedness but it fails to see that for the model of general sovereignty God is not always or only in the watchtower. After all, God is seeking out the lost: Hosea actively sought out Gomer and the woman in Jesus' parable diligently looked for her lost coin (Lk. 15:8). G. C. Berkouwer, The Providence of God, tr. Lewis B. Smedes, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 137-141 follows Calvin in rejecting "permission" since it makes God a balcony observer, a mere reactor. For Berkouwer, any explanation or logical synthesis is impossible.

comes nevertheless to the very same thing that I say. . . . So that the scheme of the Arminians does not help the matter."¹⁰ Reformed philosopher Paul Helm argues that even the risk view of providence entails two wills in God: "God wills (in the sense of permits) the occurrence of certain morally evil actions, which are (by definition) contrary to the command of God."¹¹ John Piper makes the same claim and applies it to the doctrine of election: "What are we to say of the fact that God wills something that in fact does not happen?" One could say that God wants to save everyone but cannot because other beings are more powerful than God or one could say "that God wills not to save all, even though he is willing to save all, because there is something else that he wills more, which would be lost if he exerted his sovereign power to save all. This is the solution that I as a Calvinist affirm along with Arminians."¹²

What should be made of these assertions? On the one hand, these writers are correct in calling attention to a similarity between the two views in that Arminians and those who affirm the free will defense are committed to making some sort of distinction regarding God's desires. I will say more on this shortly. Moreover, it is also correct to claim that the concept of permission implies that God had the power to prevent sin and evil from coming about. On the other hand, there are some significant problems with the claim that the type of Calvinism represented by these three authors and various forms of free will theism agree on the notion of two wills in God. To begin, Piper identifies a crucial one:

The difference between Calvinists and Arminians lies not in whether there are two wills in God, but in what they say this higher commitment is. What does God will more than saving all? The answer

¹⁰Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the Decrees in General, and Election in Particular," The Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 2.528.

¹¹Helm, The Providence of God, 132.

¹²John Piper, "Are There Two Wills In God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to be Saved," eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 1.123-4.

given by Arminians is that human self-determination and the possible resulting love relationship with God are more valuable than saving all people by sovereign, efficacious grace. The answer given by Calvinists is that the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Rom. 9:22-23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all the credit to God for his salvation.³³

One side locates the concept of permission within the framework of the divine project while the other locates it as a manifestation of the divine nature. This ties into the discussion in the previous chapter regarding whether the divine nature is free to create the sort of project involving loving relations with creatures or whether the divine nature necessarily must create a world where God is omnidetermining. In this case, it may be asked, what has become of the concept of permission? It has disappeared from the scene for there can be no question of God's will being thwarted. If the divine nature requires the divine glory to be expressed in the unconditional salvation and damnation of people then there is only one will in God.

Secondly, it does not seem to me that the divine glory has to be conceived of as coercive power totally unconditioned by the creature. The debate between the Calvinists and the Arminians is, at the heart, about whether God is in any sense conditioned by the creatures. If God is absolutely unconditioned in every respect then there is no room left for the concept of permission or two wills. In this, Calvin was entirely consistent. If, as Calvin and Edwards argued, God's foreknowledge is determined by his foreordination and not in any way conditioned by the creature then language about two wills in God or permission is suspect.³⁴

³³Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 124.

³⁴Edwards, "Concerning the Decrees," 532. He goes on to say (p. 535) that God cannot be dependent upon human choices since God is timeless and humans are in time. A temporal being cannot be the cause of something eternal! Hence, all of God's decisions are timeless and unconditioned. If so, then the Arminians cannot, as Edwards claimed, be saying the same thing he is.

A third difference between the two sides of the debate surfaces if we return to the distinction between specific and general sovereignty. Proponents of specific sovereignty rule out talk of chance or accident and, if consistent, they cannot justifiably speak of divine permission. After all, if God's specific will for each and every instance always happens then the notion of permission is nonsense as is any talk of there being two wills in God. True, a Calvinist may not understand how scriptural statements about God desiring all to be saved are to be reconciled with God not saving all. But, in the final analysis, for the proponent of exhaustive sovereignty there is only one will of God (the secret will) which is always efficacious. The integrity of the "revealed" will of God is made suspect by the "hidden" will is never thwarted in the least detail. Consequently, I do not believe there is agreement on this issue between Calvinism and Arminianism as the above authors claim.

How exactly should the concept of divine permission be understood? First of all, God permits something to be which is not God. God and the creation are distinct others in relation to each other. God did not have to create but once God creates he grants the world to be that which is other than God. Second, God decided that this relationship would involve dialogue, not merely monologue. As a professor I can determine whether my class shall be comprised only of my lectures or whether I shall permit discussion. If I choose to lecture and not allow any discussion or questions from my students I can ensure that only that which I want said will be said. However, I am also free to permit discussion and if I do then certain types of relationships between the students and myself may develop not possible if I merely lecture. But concomitant with this possibility I also run the risk that students may say things harmful to others in the class. However, I may be confident in my abilities as a professor to bring healing and redemption to this situation. As professor I am still ultimately responsible for establishing the conditions of the course and for doing my best to accomplish the course objectives. Though I can be held accountable for permitting discussion in

the first place I cannot be held responsible for the speech of my students since I do not manipulate what they say or intend them to use discussion irresponsibly. Brümmer explains: "although the agent does not want these in the strict sense of intending them, he does want them in a minimal sense of consenting to their occurrence."³⁵ In light of God's first and second order desires it may be said that God, in permitting significant others who have, in fact, done evil, takes responsibility for creating a world where such evil could obtain but God cannot be blamed for the actual evil of the creatures since God did not intend it. We can, if we like, hold God responsible for establishing genuine dialogue as one of the conditions of the course, but we cannot blame God for the actual dialogue which transpires. God may be said to give his "consenting ontological support" to actions which he does not give his moral support.³⁶ Moreover, God elects not to renege on the conditions he established, but chooses instead to work towards redemption of the project gone awry. That is, God could simply put an end to his project and halt all sin now. However, God has decided to continue working with his project, still seeking to accomplish his goals for it (more on this in 6.4). Finally, it should be noted that God is not in all respects like a professor since God is uniquely responsible for upholding the conditions of the creational project. Consequently, though a human professor would be expected to intervene in the classroom when things get out of hand, the same cannot be expected of God, or at least not in the same way, since God is uniquely responsible for preserving the conditions by which things can get out of hand (see 6.4.3). The type of human freedom required by this understanding must now be examined.

6.1.5 Human Freedom

Various understandings of human freedom have been propounded in the history of philosophy and theology. The arguments for and against these views are complex

³⁵Vincent Brümmer, "On Thanking God Whatever Happens," Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 48 (Sept. 1984): 9.

³⁶See Stephen T. Davis, Logic and the Nature of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 70.

and I have no illusions about the possibility of settling the matter here. Instead, I will briefly discuss the two main options, give the reasons why I prefer the view I do, and respond to two objections to my position.

The compatibilist account of human freedom is very popular among those who affirm meticulous providence since it provides a way of understanding how God can be in complete control of every situation and yet still hold humans responsible for their actions. Compatibilism maintains that freedom and determinism are compatible: "an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is true that the agent can perform the action if she decides to perform and she can refrain from the action if she decides not to perform it."³⁷ According to this view a person is free to perform an action if she chooses. That is, a person is free so long as she desires to do it. However, her desires are determined by such things as genetics, upbringing, sinful nature or God so that she is not free to change her desires. In this schema a person is free so long as she acts on her desires even if her desires are determined. If, for example, Susan's desires are controlled by a sinful nature then she will want to sin and she is free to do so. So long as her desire is to sin she is not free not to sin. Her Adamic or sinful nature functions as the remote cause producing her desires while her desires function as the proximate cause for her willing. In Susan's case, only God can give her a new set of desires so that she freely chooses not to sin.

All sorts of objections have been raised against a compatibilistic conception of freedom but there is no ironclad refutation. Nevertheless, if compatibilism is true then God can guarantee everything that happens by determining what the remote cause will be. At this point the charge is usually made that this would make God the author of sin. Compatibilists typically deny that this is the case. I shall return to this later. Regardless, scripture speaks of God grieving over

³⁷William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," Clark Pinnock, et. al. The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God (Downers Grove, IL: 1994), 137.

sin, changing his mind, responding to what humans do and entering into genuine dialogue and reciprocal relations. If compatibilism is true then such language is nullified for, again, it makes no sense to speak of God grieving over sin if God so controls things that he determines what the human desires shall be.

If this language of scripture is to be taken seriously then another view of human freedom must be affirmed. The libertarian or incompatibilist defines freedom as "an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action."³⁸ In this sense a person does not have to act on her strongest desire. It is within the agents self-determining ability to change her desires. Libertarians do not ignore genetics or environmental factors that influence decisions but they maintain that a person could have done otherwise than she did in any given situation.

Various arguments are put forward in support of this view of freedom. The most common line of reasoning claims that libertarian freedom must be assumed if: (1) we are to have genuine loving relationships; (2) our thought is to be rational; (3) we are to be held morally responsible for good and evil in a way that really makes a difference.³⁹ To these more philosophical arguments I would add two theological ones. Firstly, if God did not intend sin but has always stood in fundamental opposition to it then something like libertarian freedom must be affirmed. According to compatibilism God could have changed Adam's desire so that he never wanted to sin and so he would have freely never sinned. But God did not do this so God must have wanted him to sin. The libertarian, on the other hand, can maintain that God did not want Adam to sin but would not control his decision

³⁸Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," 136-7.

³⁹On these and more arguments see W. S. Anglin, Free Will and the Christian Faith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1-26. C. Stephen Evans, Preserving the Person: A Look at the Human Sciences (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), explores the loss of the personal in the natural and behavioral sciences if significant freedom is not assumed.

due to his faithfulness to the rules of the game God sovereignly established. Secondly, libertarian freedom must be presupposed in order to make sense of God's grieving over sin and entering into genuine dialogue with us. If we can truly affect the divine life then we must be capable of doing other than what God specifically intends. Moreover, if humans have libertarian freedom then it makes sense for the apostle James to say that we do not have because we do not ask in prayer (4:2). For these reasons I affirm libertarian freedom.

When discussing providence two theological objections are often raised against this view of freedom. The first objection comes from Calvinistic compatibilists. Don Carson asks, "Must God be reduced to accommodate the freedom of human choice?"⁴⁰ For Carson, we reduce the magnificence of God if we affirm that God is contingent in relation to us. Paul Helm, after citing philosophers William Hasker, John Lucas, Robert Adams, and Richard Swinburne, says, "It will be noted from this selection of views on providence that the chief (if not the only) reason why a 'risk' view of providence is taken is a concern to preserve human freedom."⁴¹ What may be said about the claim of Carson and Helm that proponents of the risk model of providence seriously revise the doctrine of God because of their commitment to libertarian freedom?

To begin, they are correct that some proponents of the risk view begin with libertarian freedom as a control belief, using it to reshape the doctrine of God. However, that was not the method used here. I began with an examination of scripture to see what was said about God and the nature of God's relationship with us. When one arrives at the model of God as a personal being who enters into genuinely reciprocal relations with us then human libertarian freedom fits in nicely with the biblical story. It is not that God is being reduced--unless one has in mind some particular model of deity which cannot in any way be contingent

⁴⁰D. A. Carson, Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 1.

⁴¹Helm, The Providence of God, 42.

upon the actions of creatures. If God actually does respond, change his mind and dialogue with his creatures then the model here explained is not a reduction of God but an affirmation of how God really operates in relation to us. If the views defended in this thesis on omniscience, prayer, and God's love are correct then libertarian freedom should be assumed.⁴²

The second theological objection to libertarian freedom is that the Bible does not speak about freedom in this way. Adrio König,⁴³ raises a number of questions about this approach. Why, he asks, does God then get so upset in the Genesis 3 story with Adam and Eve if they were simply exercising the "freedom of choice" God had given them? Furthermore, he argues that the biblical view of freedom is not this "formal" or libertarian freedom, but "material" freedom whereby they are free from sin and free only to obey God. After all, God does not say in Genesis 2 that they may obey or not obey as they wish. According to König, if one affirms formal freedom then in eating the forbidden fruit they only enacted their freedom and did not lose their freedom. However, according to material freedom, they did not enact their freedom, but lost it. They were not free to disobey, and in doing so they lost the only freedom they had. Proponents of libertarian freedom, says König, seek to explain the inexplicable by offering an easy solution to the problem of sin. He claims that the free will defense explains sin as the exercise of the freedom of choice God gave humans.⁴⁴

⁴²Moreover, it could be argued that Calvinists usually affirm compatibilism due to their control belief of exhaustive divine sovereignty while Wesleyans affirm libertarian freedom due to their control belief of God's goodness to all. See Jerry L. Walls, "The Free Will Defense, Calvinism, Wesley, and the Goodness of God," Christian Scholar's Review 13, no. 1 (1983): 19-33.

⁴³Adrio König, "Providence, Sin and Human Freedom: On Different Concepts of Human Freedom," (unpublished paper).

⁴⁴König also asks why God would grant humans libertarian freedom when God himself does not have such freedom. After all, God's freedom does not include the possibility to sin. Two responses are in order. To begin, König argues that God cannot sin and that this is the sort of material freedom God gave humanity. Thus human sin is totally inexplicable. But, if humans were not given the possibility to sin and they did sin, then what is to prevent one from saying the same about God? God does not have the possibility of sinning, but may, inexplicably, sin. How can König be so sure that God cannot sin given the total mystery of sin? The second response is to point out that Christians are divided on the question of

Though I am sympathetic to König's concerns I do have a number of responses. First of all, I admit that some accounts of free will sound as though God gave humans the option of trusting or mistrusting and so God has no reason to be upset with them should they sin. Richard Creel, for instance, says that God does not get upset at our lack of trust since what God wants is not that we choose to trust God, but only that we choose one way or the other.⁴⁵ But my account of Genesis 1-3 is different! In my view God gets upset with them for misusing their freedom because they do not choose what God wants for them. Although they exercise their freedom of choice they choose against the express will of God, which is sin. Second, regarding the distinction between formal and material freedom I would concede that the Bible does not speak in the precise philosophical terms such as compatibilism or libertarianism and that it does tend to speak of human freedom in relation to God. Apart from a loving relationship with God there is only bondage. "The Hebrew Bible," says Levenson, never regards the choice to decline covenant as legitimate."⁴⁶ However, the distinction between formal and material freedom is a common one in the history of theology and the idea may be found expressed in various ways in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Bible itself presents formal

divine impeccability. Throughout history numerous theologians have held that the divine nature is such that it is impossible for God to commit a moral evil. What prevents it is God's goodness, omnipotence, omniscience and the fact that God lacks morally significant freedom. See Thomas V. Morris, Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 56-64, 77-80. Why did God not create us with the same sort of nature? Because those attributes are "incommunicable" (not possible to share them). The other alternative is to hold that it is possible for God to commit a moral evil since God does have morally significant freedom. God does not, in fact, do evil, but remains faithful in his love towards his creation. (See Davis, Logic and the Nature of God, 86-96 and Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 90-107.)

⁴⁵Richard Creel, Divine Impassibility (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 141-6.

⁴⁶Jon D. Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 141.

⁴⁷See the discussion in G. C. Berkouwer, Man: The Image of God, tr. Dirk Jellema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 37-66, 310-348.

freedom as the structure in which material freedom is enacted.⁴⁸ That is, formal or libertarian freedom is understood as the infrastructure of love. It is a necessary condition for a loving relationship since love cannot be forced: material freedom presupposes libertarian freedom. Human trust and love of God cannot be forced, which implies the possibility (as a formal structure) of mistrust and rejection of God. In sin we lose our material freedom (to be in right standing with God) yet we retain our formal freedom because we still stand, even in sin, before God.⁴⁹ Furthermore, "even the sinner is a personal being" whom God addresses.⁵⁰ When God addresses sinful persons he addresses a who not a what. It is the address of a holy and loving God to sinful human persons and so it never becomes impersonal or manipulative. Finally, this version of the free will defense does not explain the inexplicable. There is no good reason for sin, it is highly implausible given all that God has done. True, my account claims that God gave enough space that God's word could be questioned which creates the possibility (however remote) of mistrust. But this does not explain sin, it simply accounts for the structures of created reality. Within the structures God establishes the possibility of a loving relationship and expects this to materialize. When the divine provision is rejected there is no explanation as to why humans choose to seek their well-being outside God's good intentions for them. In this way the structure whereby sin comes about is explained, but not the actual breaking of the relationship. Sin, as a broken relationship remains a mystery. Perhaps, as Gorringer suggests, we should not call this the "free will defense" but, rather, the "logic of love defense" since it is connected to the purpose of God in creation rather than simply human autonomy.⁵¹ In the model

⁴⁸See Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, tr. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 55-61.

⁴⁹See C. Stephen Evans, "Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard," ed. Clark Pinnock, The Grace of God, the Will of Man (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 181-9.

⁵⁰Brunner, Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, 123. This is the thesis of the Reformed theologian Harry Boer's, An Ember Still Glowing (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

⁵¹Gorringer, God's Theatre, 45-6.

proposed here it is not freedom qua freedom that God values but the potential for reciprocal love. What God values is the loving relationship and libertarian freedom is simply a means to that end.

6.1.6 *The Concept of Divine Self-Limitation*

Do the concepts of divine permission and human freedom imply that God has chosen to limit himself? The concept of divine self-limitation has, despite belief in the incarnation, only become popular among theologians and philosophers in the twentieth century.⁵² Nevertheless, the idea that God experiences certain "limits" is not new since, at least from the time of Aquinas, it has been commonplace to say that God cannot do the logically impossible. All sorts of things have been suggested which God cannot do and these fall into two categories: things God cannot do in relation to himself and things God cannot do in relation to creation. Regarding the first category some claim that God cannot cease to exist, change his nature, commit a moral evil or break a promise as these would contradict the divine nature.⁵³ Given certain propositions about the God's goodness, necessary existence, immutability, etc., it makes no sense to speak of God doing these things.

Concerning things God cannot do in relation to creation several ideas are put forward. To begin, creation of something different from God implies a limitation on God since God is no longer the only being which exists. Says Brunner, "God limits Himself by creating something which is not Himself."⁵⁴ One may recall Aristotle's assertions that to have friends is to be in relation and to be in

⁵²See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 4 vol. eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, tr. G. W. Bromiley et. al. (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956-1975), 2.1.518 and 2.2.50; Jürgen Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, tr. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 108-111; Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power;" Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge;" and Helm, The Providence of God, 103.

⁵³I discussed this in 5.4.4.

⁵⁴Brunner, Christian Doctrine of God, tr. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 251. See also his Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, 175.

relation implies dependency upon the other for the relationship. If so, then God by creating others distinct from God imposes a sort of limitation for God needs the others in order to be in relation. Again, given the trinity God did not need to create in order to be in relation but if God makes creatures then God is dependent upon them in order to be the creator. Another strictly logical limitation is that any decision God makes rules out other options for God cannot do everything: selection is limitation. For instance, it is impossible for God to create and not create a world simultaneously. Moreover, if God decides to make only certain kinds of creatures (set A instead of set B) then God limits himself to them. Furthermore, "The one kind of control God cannot logically have over free human agents is self-control."⁵⁵ A final kind of divine limitation in relation to creatures is that God cannot exercise meticulous providence and grant human beings libertarian freedom. Either God practices specific sovereignty so that his will is always and everywhere obeyed or God does not practice it. Keith Ward says, "Creation is thus in one sense a self-limitation of God. His power is limited by the existence of beings, however limited, with power to oppose him. His knowledge is limited by the freedom of creatures to actualize genuinely new states of affairs, unknown by him until they happen. His beatitude is limited by the suffering involved in creaturely existence."⁵⁶

Some object, however, to placing any limitations on God. They want to gain the high ground in the discussion by claiming that all talk of divine limitation defaces the divine glory. But a moments reflection will show that nearly everyone admits of some sort of divine limitation.⁵⁷ If one asserts that it is impossible for God to create beings over which he does not exercise specific sovereignty then God is limited. If God must control every detail of human life

⁵⁵Axel D. Steuer, "The Freedom of God and Human Freedom," Scottish Journal of Theology 36, no. 2, (1983): 173.

⁵⁶Keith Ward, Rational Theology and the Creativity of God (New York: Pilgrim, 1982), 84.

⁵⁷I say nearly everyone for there are those who appeal to absolute paradox or mystery. I showed why this approach fails in 2.5.

in order to achieve his goals then God is limited. If it is claimed that God cannot create personal agents who may act independently of the divine will then God is limited. If it is not possible for God to create beings who can surprise and possibly disappoint him then God is limited. If an omnipotent God cannot create a world in which the future actions of free creatures is unknown then God is limited.⁵⁸ If it is impossible for God to make himself contingent upon the decisions of creatures then God is limited.

There is debate, however, whether saying that God cannot do something means that God has limits. Most of those who define omnipotence as God's ability to do that which is logically possible or omniscience as that which is knowable would deny that this is a limitation on God. John Lucas, for instance, says, "We do not regard it as any limitation of God's omniscience that he cannot know that two and two make five; neither should we think it all strange that he cannot know what I am going to do in advance of my deciding what to do, since in that case there is nothing for God to know, and so no possible criticism of him for not knowing it."⁵⁹ Though Keith Ward agrees with Lucas's views of omnipotence and omniscience he takes precisely the opposite stance regarding divine limitations when he says, "The laws of logic are restrictions on the Divine being, but not avoidable ones; they are absolutely necessary."⁶⁰ Barth objects to this line of thought arguing that God created the laws of logic and thus God is not bound by them. Rather, God creates them and remains faithful (limits himself) to them in relating to us.⁶¹ Barth also speaks of God's self-limitation in connection with the incarnation where the Son emptied himself (Phil. 2:7) in love and service to the Father on our behalf. "God has limited himself to be this God and no

⁵⁸See J. R. Lucas, The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 227.

⁵⁹Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 36.

⁶⁰Ward, Rational Theology, 122.

⁶¹Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1.537-8.

other."⁶² According to Barth, God really is the sort of God revealed in Jesus and this is a limitation since it means that God is not some other kind of God.

I am very sympathetic to Barth's position here but I do believe several qualifications are needed on this whole discussion of divine self-limitation. To begin, in the previous chapter I argued for a conceptual limitation which renders it illegitimate for us to claim either that God is or is not bound by the laws of logic or that we can know that God created them.⁶³ Barth is correct that God limits himself to being the sort of God revealed by Jesus but he goes too far when he claims to know that God created the laws of logic just as others go too far in claiming to know that the laws of thought are eternal verities in the divine mind. We do not know either way. What we do know is that we have to operate within the laws of thought when speaking of the divine-human relationship. There are certain conceptual limitations if we are to communicate coherently. Whether God is bound by them we cannot know. But if God is going to speak coherently to us then he will do so within the boundaries in which he created us. The person who claims that God is the absolutely unlimited, as did the ancient Greek Anaximander, is not referring to any definite concept for when we think of something we think of it as something or in relation to something else. We think within the boundaries God created us to be in and it is useless to attempt to think the unlimited or unrelated.⁶⁴

Another distinction which must be made is that between a self-restricting (or self-limiting) God and a finite God. Some critics of the risk model of providence say it results in a finite God. In response two points will be made. First of all, anyone who says that God cannot do the logically impossible or that God

⁶²Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1.518.

⁶³See 5.4.5, especially note 93.

⁶⁴This is the thesis of the fine book by Frank G. Kirkpatrick, Together Bound: God, History and the Religious Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

limits himself to deciding one course of action or another is applying the category of limits to God and so may be open to the charge of believing in a "finite" God. But no one takes seriously the charge that Aquinas believed in a finite deity simply because he said God cannot do the logically impossible. Secondly, the accusation of finite godism fails to understand the nature of a finite God. Finite godism was defended in the school known as Boston Personalism represented by the thought of Edger S. Brightman and Peter A. Bertocci.⁶⁵ Georgia Harkness and Nels Ferré, students of Brightman, both call attention to the important distinction between a self-limited and finite God.⁶⁶ They point out that a finite God is limited by some force outside of God's power, by some rival deity or by an irrational "Given" in God's own nature. In Boston Personalism God cannot control this force even though he desires to do so. Consequently, those who speak of divine self-limitation are not advocating a finite God.

A third qualification regarding talk of divine limitation of power questions whether it is better to speak of God limiting or restraining himself. Marcel Sarot argues that divine self-limitation implies that God resigns power and cannot get it back and this means that God is no longer omnipotent.⁶⁷ According to divine self-restraint, however, God does not limit his power or abilities but does restrain the exercise of his power or the scope of his activities. Hence, God gives up none of his abilities. Take the case of God's wrestling with Jacob (Gen. 32:24-30). It seems better to say that God restrained his power to make it

⁶⁵Brightman, The Problem of God (New York: Abingdon, 1930) and Bertocci, The Person God Is.

⁶⁶ Georgia Harkness, The Providence of God (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 105 and Nels Ferré, The Christian Understanding of God (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 104-6.

⁶⁷Marcel Sarot, "Omnipotence and Self-Limitation," eds. Gijsbert van den Brink et. al. Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Vincent Brümmer (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 172-185. In my opinion there is an unstated assumption in the debate over whether God is essentially omnipotent: meticulous providence. That is, it is often assumed that omnipotence must mean exhaustive divine control over everything.

a "fair fight" rather than God actually gave up his power. In fact, God restrained it sufficiently that Jacob "prevailed" over God in this matter. In my view it is preferable to speak of divine restraint instead of self-limitation but I do believe that a good many people who use the expression self-limitation actually mean what Sarot means by self-restraint. The language of self-restraint fits better with the biblical portrait of God with the divine wisdom deciding when to act and when not to. Nonetheless, even if we do not speak of self-limitation it is still permissible (and necessary) for us to speak of God working within the limits of rational discourse.

A final qualification for discussion of limits and divine power is that our talk should be placed within the framework of God's self-giving love.⁶⁸ In light of the divine project we may speak of the limits or boundaries which God established and elects to work within. The desire to bring about a loving relationship with humans means that God does not force himself on us. He gives freely and restricts himself. It may be compared to a marriage relationship. To the outsider it may seem that self-limitation is normative whereas, in reality, it is self-giving love. The language of divine self-limitation should be qualified in this direction. Hence, the divine self-restraint should be understood as the restraint of love in concern for his creatures.

6.1.7 Can God's Will be Thwarted?

Does talk of divine permission, libertarian freedom and divine restraint imply that God's will can remain unfulfilled? The Psalmist writes: "Whatever the LORD pleases he does; in heaven and on earth" (135:6). Daniel says of God, "he does what he wills with the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can stay his hand or say to him, 'What are you doing?'" (4:35). Such statements are often interpreted to mean that absolutely nothing--not the

⁶⁸E. Frank Tupper provides an excellent discussion on the limits of God in relation to the gospel story of Jesus and the life of prayer in his A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 326-335.

smallest detail--ever goes contrary to what God wants and that humans have no ability to stymie the will of God. Augustine, for example, says, "he is called Almighty for no other reason than that he can do whatsoever he willeth and because the efficacy of his omnipotent will is not impeded by the will of any creature."⁶⁹ This understanding of providence does not, however, fit with the biblical story as traced in this thesis. This is especially so in light of the life of Jesus who, for instance, was prevented from doing more miracles in Nazareth due to the unbelief of the people (Mark 6:5-6). Hence, it seems some qualifications are in order.

To begin, in terms of the boundaries, structures and goals of the project which God has sovereignly established there is no question whatsoever that God gets what he wants. God can create the world, provide for it and grant it his love without anyone or anything being able to thwart his first order desires. If God decides to create a world with persons capable of reciprocating the divine love and if God establishes genuine give-and-take relations with them then it is proper to say that nothing can stymie God's intentions. However, if God does not force the creatures to reciprocate his love then the possibility is introduced that at least some of them may fail to enter into the divine love. In this case it could come about that God's second order desires might be thwarted. If God wants a world in which the possibility exists that God may not get everything he wants then, in an ultimate sense, the divine will is not thwarted but, in a limited sense, the divine will can be thwarted. It is important to note that if, in some cases, God does not get what he wants it is ultimately because of the decision God made to create the sort of world where God does not get everything he wants. In this sense, the responsibility falls directly on God for nothing forced him to create such a world. Utilizing the distinction between intentions and permissions Ward says, "Whatever God intends inevitably comes about. But even God cannot intend on behalf of another rational creature; he can hope, wish or desire. And those hopes not only can be, but are constantly thwarted; that is

⁶⁹Augustine, Enchiridion, 24.96.

precisely the import of moral evil and sin."⁷⁰ Returning to my analogy of the professor one may say that God intends to establish opportunity for discussion in the classroom and so permits things to be said which, on a secondary level, he never approved of. Not all free will theists, however, like this conclusion.

Peter Geach, for instance, who affirms libertarian freedom and rejects meticulous providence along with exhaustive foreknowledge, nevertheless claims that God's will is never thwarted. To lend some plausibility to this claim he proposes an analogy: God as a chess master.

God is the supreme Grand Master who has everything under his control. Some of the players are consciously helping his plan, others are trying to hinder it; whatever the finite players do, God's plan will be executed; though various lines of God's play will answer to various moves of the finite players. God cannot be surprised or thwarted or cheated or disappointed. God, like some grand master of chess, can carry out his plan even if he has announced it beforehand. "On that square," says the Grand Master, "I will promote my pawn to Queen and deliver checkmate to my adversary": and it is even so. No line of play that finite players may thing can force God to improvise: his knowledge of the game already embraces all the possible variant lines of play, theirs does not.⁷¹

Geach, like William James before him, uses the Grand Master analogy to assure us that despite libertarian freedom and an indefinite future God remains in complete control.⁷² The analogy serves to highlight God's knowing in advance all

⁷⁰Ward, Rational Theology, 83.

⁷¹Peter Geach, Providence and Evil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 58.

⁷²William James, The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York: Dover, 1956), 181-2.

possibilities and deciding beforehand how he will respond to them. But the analogy lacks the genuinely relational qualities of the other analogies suggested above: theater director, professor, and leader of a climbing expedition. In fact, it is doubtful that the chess master analogy adequately handles the nature of the personal relationship between God and humans: are things as closed as Geach suggests?⁷³ How can God be in total control if human beings are significantly free?⁷⁴ Does Geach mean that the Grand Master can guarantee victory on every move or only that he will win the game? It would seem Geach cannot say God wins every move on account of human sin and evil. If Geach says God wins the match with every human then it would seem he is committed to universalism. Furthermore, just because God knows all possibilities does not mean that God can do whatever he will.⁷⁵ If God grants humans libertarian freedom then they may do things which God does not want. If God is so controlling as Geach suggests then it is difficult to see why there is sin at all.

Finally, Geach claims that God is never disappointed. The Bible, however, repeatedly says that God is disappointed with sin and human rejection of the divine love (e. g. Gen. 6:6). Creation is not presently the way God wanted it to be: it has miscarried. Sin and evil do thwart God's will and disappoint him. God did not and never has wanted sin for he stands fundamentally opposed to it and this is seen most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God redeems from sin but this was not his original plan. God is working within the rules of the game he established to overturn the results of sin and so it is

⁷³Brümmer, What are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry (London: SCM, 1984), 44-5, 68 uses Geach's analogy but fails to see its inadequacies in light of the fellowship model of the divine-human relationship.

⁷⁴David Basinger criticizes Geach for this in his "Human Freedom and Divine Providence: Some New Thoughts on an Old Problem," Religious Studies 15 (1979): 491-510.

⁷⁵Paul Helm makes this point against Geach. However, since Helm affirms compatibilism and specific sovereignty he only criticizes Geach for affirming an indefinite future which is incompatible with exhaustive divine control. See his Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 122-5.

quite possible that God may not get everything he wants. Does this mean that God could fail? Again, God's first order intentions cannot fail in that God establishes the boundaries in which the world will operate, but God's second order desires can fail in that God may not achieve all he wants for every individual. Hell, after all, implies the failure of humans to reciprocate the divine love and the failure of God to reclaim everyone. If some people ultimately refuse to love God and God will not force their love then what else is God to do? Unless one affirms either universalism or double predestination, it must be concluded that God's project ends in failure for some.⁷⁶

6.2 Divine Purpose With Open Routes

In bringing about the divine project God established a covenant with the creation. In covenanting with creation God makes a fundamental commitment to its well being and to seeing the project through to completion. The commitment to love his creatures and bring them into a reciprocal relationship of love is fundamental to God. Once sin enters the scene God does not give up on his covenantal commitment but, instead, responds to this development with a plan to redeem the situation.⁷⁷ This adaptation of God's plan does not imply a change in the fundamental commitment but it does mean that God reacts to contingencies, taking them into account in order to fulfill the goal of his project.⁷⁸ God remains faithful to his original purpose even while adjusting plans to take into

⁷⁶Universalists, however, claim that God never forecloses on anyone. For an explanation and evaluation of the arguments for universalism see my No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 81-128. Concerning the issue of whether hell is justifiable see Jerry L. Walls, Hell: The Logic of Damnation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) and Johnathan Kvanvig, The Problem of Hell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). On whether hell should be understood as eternal conscious punishment or as annihilation of the finally impenitent see William Crockett ed., Four Views on Hell (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

⁷⁷Even those who affirm timeless knowledge or simple foreknowledge have to say that God atemporally either planned ahead for this contingency or responded to it in this way once God in foreknowledge "saw" sin would obtain.

⁷⁸For a helpful discussion of this notion see Eugene TeSelle, Christ in context: Divine Purpose and Human Responsibility (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 148-155.

account the decisions of his free creatures. God establishes general commitments and is free to decide some specific future actions that he will undertake. Hence, the future is only partly open. It is not the case that anything may happen for God has acted in history to bring about events in order to achieve his unchanging purpose.

Furthermore, the covenant or general commitment God makes is not a detailed script but a broad intention which allows for a variety of options regarding precisely how it may be reached. "The divine plan," says Jacques Maritain, "is not a scenario prepared in advance, in which free subjects would play parts and act as performers. We must purge our thought of any idea of a play written in advance."⁷⁹ Some things are fixed while others are contingent. At creation God establishes a general purpose that, as history progresses, becomes more specific. God decides on certain routes in connection with human choices such that the specifics of the final destiny as well as the path to it take on greater definitiveness as the relationship unfolds. In the biblical tradition it is not "what will be will be" but, rather, what will be may not be and what was may not have been. What God and people do in history matters. Had Jacob's family returned to Canaan after the famine was over there would have been no bondage in Egypt and no need for an exodus. God would have continued working with them but history would have been very different. If the midwives had feared Pharaoh rather than God and killed all the baby boys it would be a different story than the one we have. That God resorts to plan B in allowing Aaron to do the public speaking of Moses altered what God had in mind. Had king Josiah not been killed while attempting to prevent the Egyptian army from passing through Israel perhaps the religious reforms he initiated would have made a significant difference for Israel's future. If the Jewish leaders had come to accept Jesus as God's way in the world we would have had a very different book of Acts and subsequent history

⁷⁹Jacques Maritain, Existence and the Existent, tr. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald Phelan (New York: Random House, 1966), 116. Unfortunately, Maritain inconsistently attempts to reconcile this idea with God's timeless knowledge being totally unconditioned by the creature. He believes *sempiternity* rescues him from this contradiction.

than we do. What people do and whether they come to trust God makes a difference concerning what God does.⁸⁰ This does not mean that God is helpless in the face of human sin. "God is not," says Brian Hebblethwaite, "stumped by men's failure to co-operate. There are things that God can do to bring good out of evil--the paradigm being the incarnation and the cross of Christ. But at every point, we realize that God does not fake the story of human action and human history."⁸¹

Proponents of specific sovereignty, however, object to this open-ended view of history. According to Paul Helm: "God does not, then, exercise providential control in a way that leaves two or more possible ways of achieving some goal. Nor does he will the end but leave the means to others. . . . Rather, the providence of God is fine-grained; it extends to the occurrence of individual actions and to each aspect of each action."⁸² Helm is articulating a position quite popular among Christians: that God has an exhaustive blueprint for everything. God has, it is said, an eternal plan which contains all the details which ever occur.⁸³ After all, is there not only one best way to achieve any goal? If so, then any change in God's plans would be a change for the worse. In response to this objection it should be noted that the old Platonic assumption that any change is a change for the worse is fallacious. Behind this sentiment lies the assumption that perfection must be conceived as static. There are some kinds of change which are neither better or worse (e. g. the changes a clock makes as it keeps time). If God wants to create a world where he takes our actions into account in formulating his own plans then this does not imply that God's plans go from best to worse since this sort adaptation is what God desired

⁸⁰Proponents of specific sovereignty can say that what people do matters in the sense that God is using people as a secondary causes. But they cannot say that it makes a difference for God since every single detail God wants to happen does happen according to specific sovereignty.

⁸¹Brian Hebblethwaite, "Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge," Religious Studies 15, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 437.

⁸²Helm, The Providence of God, 104.

⁸³It seems to me that this reifies all historical action into ideas resembling some sort of Platonic archetype.

in the first place. Lucas suggests that God be seen as a Persian rugmaker who lets his children help in production.

The children fail to carry out their father's instructions exactly, but so great is their father's skill, that he adapts his design at his end to take in each error at children's end, and work it into a new, constantly adapted, pattern. So too, God. He does not, cannot, have one single plan for the world, from which we, by our errors, ignorances, and sins, are even further departing."⁸⁴

Because of the sort of rules of the game God decided to establish there is not just one great masterplan or blueprint but any number of plans.

It is not possible to deduce from God's initial covenant purpose exactly how God will seek to accomplish his project. It was not possible for anyone to predict that God would elect the people of Israel for a special task. Nor was it knowable just how the people would respond and how God would react to them in the course of the covenant relationship. The studies in chapters three and four of this thesis disclosed the surprising ways in which God has worked. Nobody expected the particular kind of messiah Jesus chose to be. Who would have thought that God would "overrule" sin by the redemptive grace of the cross? Who could have known that God was going to bring the Gentiles into the people of faith as he did? The route God takes to achieve his purpose is not a direct route to a pre-planned destination but, as seen in the biblical story, is an unpredictable zigzag course. Van de Beek puts it well: "the way of God to Christ was not an established road. It is a way which can only be read in retrospect in the light of Christ, not guaranteed in advance. It is a way on which God went past many dead ends."⁸⁵ Just as there is no way to deduce what God must do in carrying out his purpose so there is no infallible way of predicting what God will do in the

⁸⁴Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 39-40. One difficulty with the analogy is that it is difficult to accept the notion that all of our sins (e. g. the holocaust) are weaved into the divine pattern.

⁸⁵A. van de Beek, Why? On Suffering, Guilt, and God, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 300.

future. But God does provide us some clues about his ultimate direction based on the way God has chosen to work in history. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are especially important in this regard. If Jesus is the image of God (Col. 1:15) then we should look to him for the definitive statement on what God is like and for the direction in which God is working to bring his project to fruition. Wherever the Holy Spirit blows he seeks to take people in the trajectory of Jesus. Jesus points us toward the future which the Father wants to establish. Christology informs eschatology.⁸⁶

All things are not presently the way God wants them for God has not yet reached his ultimate goal (1 Cor. 15:25). Everything is not yet subject to God. At present God experiences both tragedy and triumph. The time until the eschaton is a time of the Holy Spirit; a time where the Spirit tries different things in history to accomplish the divine purpose. There are signs of the Spirit's work in history (e. g. Israel and the church) but the signs are ambiguous since neither Israel nor the church has lived as the redeemed communities God wanted. There are people who are being reclaimed and transformed by God's grace and this gives us hope. Despite such signs it remains painfully clear that all is not right in the world.

Nevertheless, God is lord of history even though not everything happens which God wants for God has not given up on his creation. God continues to work towards the ultimate victory over sin and evil when everything will be subject to him (1 Cor. 15:28). The resurrection of Jesus points to a new order beyond death and destruction. God is still bringing about new and greater things and we look forward in hope to a time when God's love is experienced and reciprocated in such a way that we live life in a different way than we do now. The book of Revelation speaks of this time as having no darkness (21:25), curse (22:3), sea (21:1), death (21:4) or temple (21:22). These images express the hope that there will be

⁸⁶A point badly neglected in many discussions of eschatology. See Adrio König, The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ Centered Approach (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

amazing differences between our present and our eschatological experiences. There will be continuity for it will still be God and us in relationship but some things will be changed. The author of Revelation is attempting to communicate a reality which in some respects will be radically dissimilar from the one we now experience.⁸⁷ Christ has brought about our redemption, changing lives and societies, and we wait in longing expectation to when we shall experience divine salvation in its fullness.

Yet, it may be asked: Where is our security if God cannot guarantee everything? What guarantee is there that God will prevail given conditions of freedom he has bestowed? Can God's purpose be ultimately thwarted? Though this issue was discussed above (6.1.7) a few additional comments will be helpful. The first thing to remember is that God has not given everything over to us. God is the one who established the conditions and so his overarching (first order) purposes cannot be thwarted. Whatever ability we have to thwart God's second order purposes is given us by God. Moreover, there are some things which the almighty God retains the right to enact unilaterally in the future. If the divine wisdom decides it is best to intervene then God can do so. Prior to creation it may have been possible that no single human would ever come to reciprocate the divine love. But that has not happened. God has achieved his desire with a good number of people. To inquire whether God will have anyone in the future who will believe is a moot point since God already has achieved a fair degree of victory.

Yet some proponents of the no-risk model remain troubled by this. Sproul, for instance, says, "If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled. . . . Maybe that one molecule will be the thing that prevents Christ from returning."⁸⁸ Will God win in the end? Is it

⁸⁷Precisely what the eschaton will be like I do not know. Regarding the issue of free will and the afterlife see note 177.

⁸⁸Sproul, Chosen by God, 26-7.

simply unwarranted posturing for proponents of the risk model to claim that God will achieve victory? In response let me say that it is clear that the vision of the prophets was of a time when God would reign victorious over all and shalom (peace and well being) would be pervasive. The most significant step in achieving this vision was taken when God, through Jesus, achieved victory over the opposing powers (Col. 2:15). Yet God is still working to bring the effects of this victory to greater realization. Jesus has inaugurated the reign of the God of powerful love, but it clearly is not yet climaxed for God is still working to make his de jure rule a de facto one.

We should not underestimate God's ability nor overestimate our own in this enterprise. God is omniscient, resourceful and wise enough to take our moves into account, mighty enough to act, and faithful enough to persist. If one of God's plans fails he has others ready at hand and finds other ways of accomplishing his objectives.⁸⁹ Does this imply that it is guaranteed that God will achieve the sort of future, in all details, that God desires? Here proponents of the risk model disagree. For Lucas the answer is yes: "We may thwart God's purposes for a season, but in the long run the pervasive pressures of rationality and love will circumvent our petty resistances. . . ."⁹⁰ In my opinion this betrays a rationalism which overlooks the irrationality of sin: the mystery of iniquity. Paul Fiddes is on track when he says

Decisions and experiences in this life matter: they are building what we are. Since God's aim is the making of persons, he has the certain hope that we will be 'glorified,' but the content of that end depends upon human responses, for the content of the end is persons. . . . Thus the risk upon which God is embarked is real and serious, though not a total one. He has a certain hope of the fact of the end, but there is a genuine openness about the route and

⁸⁹See Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 29-30.

⁹⁰Lucas, The Future, 231.

therefore the content of the end.⁹¹

It is our privilege to hope in the living God (1 Tim. 4:10). We, who have a taste of the victory of God, look forward to our own salvation as well as the redemption of the cosmos (1 Thes. 5:8; Rom. 8:18-23). We hope in the revelation of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2) but it is not something we have in the bag for we must wait eagerly for it (Rom. 8:24-5). God makes promises and we may have confidence that God will keep them even though the exact way and form God elects to bring them about may surprise us. Though we do not know precisely what the prophets meant by the new heavens and new earth this should not prevent us from longing expectation of the new and greater things which he who creates ex nihilo will bring forth. Regarding our confidence in God, just as we must not substitute belief in an immutable principle for trust in a personal God so we must not substitute a demand for guarantees in place of hope in the living God.

6.3 Salvation and Grace

6.3.1 Introduction

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). These words of Paul are traditionally used as a boundary marker for what may legitimately be said regarding who gets the credit for our salvation. Any view which suggests that humans, not God, should receive praise for our redemption is rendered out of bounds. According to the doctrine of sin we are in bondage and cannot free ourselves from it (Eph. 2:1-3). God, in grace, liberates us from this bondage, reclaiming us as his own. In Christ Jesus God has elected a people for himself. Hardly anyone will object to these remarks. However, as soon as someone delves more deeply into the bondage to sin, how grace changes the situation and the nature of election it becomes apparent that Christians have developed quite divergent views on these matters. In what follows, only two

⁹¹Paul S. Fiddes, The Creative Suffering of God (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 105.

models, the no-risk and risk views of providence, will be examined on grace and salvation.

6.3.2 *The No-Risk Model of Salvation*

In the no-risk position sin is understood as a condition which must be changed rather than a broken relationship. Sin is a state of corruption in which humans find themselves and this condition manifests itself in sinful behavior. Typically this is explained as a result of inheriting a sinful nature. In compatibilistic terms this sinful (Adamic) nature is the remote cause which produces sinful desires. So long as we do what we desire we are free. Hence, we are only free to sin. Given this condition we can never desire God since our sinful nature excludes such "good" desires. In order to confess Jesus as lord the remote cause of our desires must be replaced with a new entity or condition which produces the desire to confess Jesus. Obviously, we are in no position to bring this about. God is the sole and complete cause which replaces our sinful nature with a regenerate nature. There is nothing we do to initiate this change or aid in bringing it about for, so to speak, there is no one home for God to address.

This is so not only because of our own inability but also because of the nature of God. If God is totally unconditioned by the creature in such a way that God's will is never affected by or dependent upon the creature then God must be the one to bring about salvation in the life of an individual. The decision God makes to release a person from the bondage of sin is never in response to anything the person in question may do. The election of God must be totally unconditioned by anything external to God. Calvin, for instance, is very clear that God ordained some for eternal salvation and others for eternal damnation not because God had foreknowledge of their faith or wickedness but simply because God decreed it.⁹² God's knowledge of the future is not dependent upon the creature. Rather, God knows the future because he decrees or foreordains the future. The divine decree of election is atemporal, unconditional, and ahistorical. But if God is totally

⁹²See his Institutes, 3.23.6.

unconditioned by the creature such that God never responds to us then what about sin? Did God decree that humans should sin? Calvin, as is well known, admitted that this was the case and took the supralapsarian position. According to this view God decreed salvation and damnation prior to decreeing the fall into sin. It is interesting that, as Louis Berkhof points out, the early supporters of infralapsarianism maintained that God only foreknew the fall rather than that God decreed it.⁹³ The problem was that this introduced conditionality in God for it meant that something happened which God did not want to happen; it was something to which God had to atemporally respond. This would make God dependent upon the creatures, forcing God to react to them. For this reason, says Berkhof, later infralapsarians all affirm that the fall was included in the decree.

When the notion of sin as a condition is conjoined with the rejection of any conditionality in God then the grace God gives to sinners must be understood as irresistible grace. Moreover, if one affirms specific sovereignty then God gets precisely what he wants in every single situation. If God wants Bob converted then Bob will be converted. There is no way Bob can thwart God's specific decision to convert him. It is like a game of billiards. God pushes the cue stick of power which strikes the cue ball of irresistible grace which in turn implants faith in the eight ball (the sinner) which rolls into the specific pocket that God had eternally decreed it should go. God, who never misses a shot, puts all the balls into the pockets of salvation and damnation as he pleases.⁹⁴ The balls cannot resist his shooting expertise. God never takes any sort of risks that those he elects will fail to inherit salvation. Everything works out with absolute precision, guaranteeing exactly what God desires for every single individual.

⁹³Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: 1946), 118-125. He claims that if infralapsarians affirm conditionality in God then they are Arminians and no longer Calvinists.

⁹⁴Some would deny that God shoots balls into the pocket of damnation. Instead, they would say that all the balls are rolling towards the pocket of damnation but God shoots some of them into the pocket of salvation.

This model has several problems. To begin, even with talk of secondary causes every sin is specifically intended by God. Secondly, in this view there can be no reciprocity or conditionality regarding salvation for it is necessarily monergistic: faith is solely a divine work in us. In terms of Brümmer's three models of relationships this view is the manipulative model where God is fully personal but human beings are not.⁹⁵ It is an I-It relation. Salvation is not the restoration of a broken relationship but consists in being freed from the condition of corruption. In view of compatibilism it can be said that when Bob confesses Jesus it is Bob's confession. But it cannot be said that the desire to confess came from Bob for he cannot determine his own desires. The desire for faith must be implanted in the sinner. Once it is, the result is guaranteed for Bob must act on this desire. On the positive side irresistible grace may be seen as divine liberation from a prison in which escape was impossible. On the negative side it may be seen by some as divine rape since it involves non consensual control over the person in such a way that the will of one is forced upon the will of the other. Of course, the desire God forces on the elect is a beneficent one--for their own good--but it is rape none the less. Love, not even the desire for love, can be forced since it involves the consent of persons.

Another interesting issue emerges if we go beyond conversion to sanctification. According to specific sovereignty nothing happens--including what humans do--that God does not want to happen. Every state of affairs, including my personal holiness, is precisely the way God desires. Consequently, if I do not desire a greater degree of holiness my lack of desire and degree of holiness is precisely what God wants for me at that moment. It cannot be said that God's first order desire is for me to be more sanctified at this point in my life but I am frustrating God's desires. If God wants me to exhibit greater personal holiness

⁹⁵A problem in the Reformed tradition is that it has used both the language of personal relationships and also the causal language of impersonal relationships. See Brümmer's comments on the Synod of Dordt in Speaking of a Personal God, 83-9. Ben Carter, The Depersonalization of God (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), discusses how decretal theology ends up with an impersonal divine-human relationship.

then I will--guaranteed--manifest it. Compatibilism affords no escape from this problem. According to compatibilism I can be held responsible for my actions but not my desires. Hence, I cannot be blamed for not desiring a greater degree of holiness since such a desire is not within my control. But without the desire for greater holiness I will never act in a more holy manner. Unless the Holy Spirit gives me the desire it shall not come about. For example, Ananias may be blamed for lying to the Holy Spirit but his lying was specifically intended by God. Thus, in this model the degree of sanctification in Christians at any one time is exactly what God wants for if God wanted them more holy, they would be. Hence, it does not make sense for proponents of exhaustive sovereignty to affirm that the Holy Spirit may be grieved (Eph. 4:30).

Thirdly, a typical complaint raised against this view is: why then does God not save everyone for it is within his power to do so. The answer is that God, for inscrutable reasons, is not willing to save all. What about scripture which asserts that God "desires everyone to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) and that God "does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9)? Proponents of the manipulative model interpret them to mean that God wants all the elect saved and does not want any of them to perish. That is, the "any" and "all" refer to those God has chosen for salvation, not to absolutely every single human being. The logic behind this interpretation is simple. God gets precisely what he wants for each individual human life. Scripture says that not all humans will be saved. Thus, the "all" cannot mean all people generally but only all the elect.⁹⁶ After all, if God actually did want absolutely everyone saved then God could guarantee universal salvation for God's will is never thwarted in any respect. Hence, this reading of scripture is done through the theological lens of specific sovereignty. If one does not agree with specific sovereignty one will not likely buy into this handling of scripture.

⁹⁶This is an example of sachkritik or theological criticism: the use of ideas drawn from scripture to control the reading of certain scriptural texts.

Another answer to the complaint that God should save all was first put forth by Augustine. He answers that God cannot save or damn all people as this would be inappropriate to the divine nature. If God damns everyone then the divine mercy would fail to be manifested. If God saves everyone then the divine justice would remain unexpressed.⁹⁷ Either way the universe would not reflect the complete harmony of God. John Piper is in line with Augustine when he claims that the essential nature of God is to dispense mercy and wrath on whomever he pleases apart from anything originating outside his own will.⁹⁸ This response operates from a consideration of the divine nature abstracted from Jesus Christ. In fact, I do wonder whether the ancient principle of plenitude has influenced this strand of theology. That is, since plenitude necessarily diffuses itself into the full range of being, the divine nature must create those who are saved and damned in order to manifest the full range of plenitude (God's nature of mercy and wrath) and thus produce the best of all possible worlds. The divine glory requires God to create beings intended for damnation since, without them, the glory of God would be deficient. There are several distasteful implications of this teaching. God cannot save all and cannot even desire to save all because the divine nature forbids it. God is not free to even want such a result. Moreover, if God must express his justice in the damnation of certain people then God is dependent upon the damned (as well as the saved) for the fulfillment of his nature. That is, God needs them in order to be who God wants to be. However, this is not the God of Jesus Christ but the God of neoplatonic imagination. Yet, even if one concedes that God must manifest his justice, it need not be expressed in this way for God could manifest his justice in accounting for sin in the work of Jesus rather than in some necessity requiring a massa damnata.

A final argument which seeks to justify why the God of specific sovereignty does

⁹⁷Augustine, City of God, tr. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), 21.12.

⁹⁸John Piper, The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 100.

not save everyone is that divine grace is freely bestowed or withheld at will. "The very inequality [distribution] of his grace," says Calvin, "proves that it is free."⁹⁹ But to say that God gives his love freely does not require that God withhold it from some. If God loves all people it does not mean his love is any less free. Moreover, as Walls observes, the "idea that grace is freely bestowed is easily run together with the idea that it is undeserved. That is to say, it is easy to think that because none of us deserves grace, God can give it to whomever he will, overlooking the rest."¹⁰⁰ Walls suggests an analogy to help grasp this point. Suppose a father has two sons who, against his wishes, live recklessly and eventually become drug addicts. After a time they request help from their father. Neither of them deserve the father's aid but the father gladly helps them anyway and pays for their rehabilitation. Later, however, they both relapse into drugs and the father rehabilitates them again. This happens several times. Suppose that the father knows that if he rehabilitates them one more time it will result in a permanent transformation for both of them. But suppose the father decides to rehabilitate only one of the sons and leave the other in lifelong addiction. The father does not owe it to either son. Yet, if he knows that both sons would go right from one last rehabilitation, then we have reason to doubt that the father loves both sons. The issue is not whether God owes sinners anything but whether he loves sinners and even all sinners (see chapter 4). According to the model of specific sovereignty God does not love all sinners. Sproul says that God does not owe love to anyone since it is of grace. Hence, people who hate God get what they deserve.¹⁰¹ True, God does not owe us his love but Sproul overlooks an important point. Strange as it may seem, according to exhaustive sovereignty God wants some people to hate him for if God did not specifically want anyone hating him then God would ensure that no one did. But if God desires that some people hate him, what has become of the divine love we

⁹⁹Calvin, Institutes, 3.21.6.

¹⁰⁰Walls, Hell: The Logic of Damnation, 99.

¹⁰¹Sproul, Chosen by God, 32-3.

read about in the gospels? In the parables of the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16) and talents (Mt. 25:14-30) divine generosity is given to all. There is judgment but only after all had been shown divine favor and given an opportunity to respond. Such parables bring out the distributive justice of God whereas proponents of specific sovereignty typically emphasize only the retributive justice of God.¹⁰² Things are quite different, however, in the model of general sovereignty.

6.3.3 *The Relational Model of Salvation*

6.3.3.1 Sin

According to general sovereignty God does not control every single detail that occurs. There are some things which happen that God did not want to happen but permitted to occur. God takes a risk in creating this sort of world where he desires a relationship of love and where love cannot be forced. This relational or fellowship model understands sin, election, grace and salvation in a quite different fashion than the manipulative model.

According to the relational model sin is a broken relationship with God rather than a condition or entity. When we fail to trust in God's good provision for us and reject the boundaries in which he placed us we are refusing to respond in love to the divine love. As was discussed in chapter 3 this is irrational for there is no good reason not to trust God.¹⁰³ In this sense sin does not have a cause. If it did then it would not be blameworthy and it could be readily prevented or corrected. God took a risk in creating the type of world where it was possible though not plausible that humans would fail to reciprocate the divine love. God grants enough space that sin may come about but does a great deal to insure it will not. Sin did occur, however, and God is genuinely grieved

¹⁰²See Bruce Reichenbach, "Freedom, Justice, and Moral Responsibility," ed. Clark Pinnock, The Grace of God, the Will of Man (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 277-303.

¹⁰³John Hick, Evil and the God of Love, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 66, 174, thinks this idea self-contradictory. Hick simply cannot accept the notion of gratuitous sin. He believes there must be a cause somewhere and he places he squarely on the shoulders of the creator.

over this for it is not what he wanted. Once sin came on the scene it has not departed but has become a universal human experience. Each of us grows up in relation to other sinners and sinful institutions and organizations. Socially, we are born into sin.¹⁰⁴ Individually, we follow our forbearers in sin. All of us are in bondage to sin, each of us becomes a slave to sin (Rom. 6:17). We serve a master other than God. Returning to the discussion of libertarian freedom (6.1.5) it was said that we are formally free and materially unfree. Yet, we remain persons even in sin. The address of a holy God to sinners is still personal address.¹⁰⁵ There is no need to resort to the impersonal language of causes or the manipulative model. Barth puts it thus: "Though Adam is fallen and disgraced, he is not too low for God to make Himself his Brother, and to be for him a God who must strangely contend for his status, honour and right."¹⁰⁶

6.3.3.2 Contingency in God

Barth's remark that God must contend for our love raises the most important issue in the discussion: is God in any way dependent upon us for the relationship of love? Does God make himself at all contingent upon our response? Does God ever respond to us? How one answers these questions will shape the way one understands election, grace and salvation. The debate surrounding Arminius, Wesley and their Calvinistic counterparts was not primarily about salvation but about the nature

¹⁰⁴The concept of hereditary sin has many problems but there is a core element of truth in it. For views of sin in general see David L. Smith, With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint, 1994) and Ted Peters, Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). On hereditary sin see van de Beek, Why?, 143-8, Evans, "Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard," and Gregory R. Beabout, "Does Anxiety Explain Hereditary Sin?" Faith and Philosophy 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1994): 117-126, Hendrikus Berkhof, Christian Faith, tr. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 187-210, and Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow, Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 57-66.

¹⁰⁵The Eastern Orthodox are able to speak of a personal address between sinful persons and God. They have never affirmed the Augustinian understanding of sin. See John Meyendorff, "Humanity: 'Old' and 'New'--Anthropological Considerations," eds. Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992#), 59-66.

¹⁰⁶Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.3.357.

of God!¹⁰⁷ Whether God ever responds to us and does things because of us (not merely through us) is the crux of the debate. Obviously, I am defending the view that God does make certain of his decisions and actions contingent upon what we do. If we had done otherwise then God may have done otherwise also. Interestingly, a fair number of Reformed theologians reject Louis Berkhof's claim that Reformed theology denies any conditionality in God. James Daane says, "Classical, creedal Reformed theology is not an unconditional theology. . . . Election in Reformed thought is God's gracious response to a sinful world."¹⁰⁸ Vincent Brümmer and David Fergusson argue that the Reformed confessions were attempting to be both theocentric and personal (in the sense of the fellowship model) but at times fell into the language of the manipulative model.¹⁰⁹ These writers claim that the Reformed tradition wants to affirm that salvation is God's unmerited gift which excludes human boasting but that this does not rule out all conditionality in God. Other traditions also allow for divine conditionality in election. The early fathers used simple foreknowledge to explain how God is responsive to the human act of faith. God "previsions" human faith and responds by electing them to salvation.¹¹⁰ Eastern Orthodoxy, Arminius and Wesley follow this move in allowing for conditional election.¹¹¹ God is responsive to his

¹⁰⁷See Richard A. Muller, God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 143-207, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius's Gambit," eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 2. 251-78. On Wesley see Randy L. Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 55-6.

¹⁰⁸James Daane, "Can a Man Bless God?" eds. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes, God and the Good (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 166.

¹⁰⁹Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 68-89 and David A. S. Fergusson, "Predestination: A Scottish Perspective," Scottish Journal of Theology 46 (1993): 457-478.

¹¹⁰See James Jorgenson, "Predestination According to Divine Foreknowledge in Patristic Tradition," eds. John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 159-169.

¹¹¹Divine election may be conditional whether one affirms that God predestines individuals on the basis of foreknown faith or whether one holds that election is of a corporate nature: we are elect in the Son. On these two views see Jack Cottrell, "Conditional Election," ed. Clark Pinnock, Grace Unlimited (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 51-73 and William W. Klein, The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

creatures in bringing about salvation. In all these traditions God does not coerce the act of faith for salvation involves a relationship between persons. When one affirms that God allows himself to be conditioned by his creatures one has crossed the Rubicon on this issue.

6.3.3.3 Grace for Fellowship

In the previous chapter (5.4.2) divine personal love was described as limitless but conditioned by the ability of the other to receive it; as precarious since it does not control the other; as vulnerable since it may not get its way; and as desiring reciprocation. If salvation is seen as a personal relationship of mutual love then, says Brümmer, there are three conditions for salvation.¹¹² First of all, God must be personal and we must be persons. Secondly, we cannot compel or make God obligated to love us. We are solely dependent upon his grace to initiate and enter into relation with us. God does not have to enter into this relationship with us, it is done so in divine freedom. Thirdly, we have to choose to enter it and our choice cannot be manipulated if it is to remain a personal relationship. God may enable us to enter the relationship and provide reasons and examples of his love for us but God cannot make us choose without it ceasing to be our choice. If the relationship is unavoidable for the human partner then it has ceased to be a personal relationship. But if humans are in bondage to sin how can they respond to God and enter into a personal relationship of mutual love? As sinners we do not trust or love God, we have turned away from God's love for us and are not inclined to accept his love. In order to fulfill the third condition two more elements must be added. To begin, a distinction can be made between libertarian freedom (liberum arbitrium) and the ability to respond favorably to God (liberum consilium).¹¹³ We are formally free while being materially unfree. Materially we are unable to be reconciled to God unless the Holy Spirit enables us. God can provide enabling or prevenient grace by which we

¹¹²Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 87-8, 75-6.

¹¹³See Brümmer, Model of Love, 202-3.

are enabled but not coerced to give our consent to God. This grace is the revelation of God's mercy and love which opens up new options in the lives of sinners (1 Peter 1:3). The gospel story enlightens, convicts and enlivens us to a future that was closed to us before. The foolishness of the cross is God's wisdom and power to save (Rom. 1:16). In hearing the gospel we come to a realization of God's stance towards us that provides a way out of our darkness. The love of Jesus elicits our loving response and motivates our imitation of his love. Enabling grace is invincible but it is not factually irresistible.¹¹⁴ God wants a relationship with persons so his grace cannot then be factually unavoidable for humans. A person who is enabled has the option of accepting or rejecting the divine love. A person who is made willing has no such option. God can enable all and give everyone an opportunity to experience salvation.¹¹⁵ Yet, there are those who reject his grace and God cannot save them without destroying the rules of the game he has established for his project of having a reciprocal relationship of love with us.

Even with enabling grace God takes risks since people are not forced to believe. God does not believe in himself through us. The love of Christ and the prompting of the Spirit create the context in which we may respond in penitence and faith to God's gracious gift.¹¹⁶ God is the initiator and provider of salvation yet he does not want a relationship without our consent. Our penitence and faith are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for divine forgiveness. God is

¹¹⁴Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 68-89 and Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 22-6, discuss the various understandings of "irresistibility." Brümmer says that the love of God is rationally irresistible since it is irrational to reject it.

¹¹⁵Regarding various theories as to how God makes salvation universally accessible see my No Other Name, part three.

¹¹⁶This understanding of faith and salvation may be found in Eastern Orthodoxy and John Wesley. For the Orthodox position see Bishop Maximos Aghiorgoussis, "Orthodox Soteriology," and John Breck, "Divine Initiative: Salvation in Orthodox Theology," both in eds. John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992). For the Orthodox "synergy" does not mean there is some latent power in humans which co-operates in conversion. Rather, it is an attitude of openness in faith to God's saving grace. On Wesley see Maddox, Responsible Grace, 141-156.

willing to forgive and he has suffered the breach in our relationship for it, yet our acknowledgement of the harm we have caused God and our willingness to desire restoration is necessary if reconciliation is to be personal in nature.¹¹⁷ All of these conditions are required for the break in the personal relationship to be sufficiently healed. Faith is coming into a trusting relationship with God. God provides the light by which we are enabled to see his love and this light does not break our will or force our desires in a certain direction. Faith, then, is altogether the work of God and altogether the work of human persons.¹¹⁸ This statement makes sense in the fellowship model but not in the manipulative model for in the latter faith is solely of God. Paul says we are saved by grace (Eph. 2:8-9) which comes from God and we enter into a relationship of love with God by faith. The relationship is a dance of personal partners, not a person with a mannequin. In salvation humans are receptive of grace but not merely passive for grace is not overpowering. It is truly an I-Thou relationship where God desires to be the Lord our God, the Lord "of" (de facto) and not merely "over" (de jure) humanity. The process of salvation in the divine-human encounter is personal in nature. Because of this, it should be noted, divine risk is not eliminated since, despite being unreasonable, it is possible for us to refuse the gift. Even those enabled by God's grace may refuse salvific love: there are no guarantees here.¹¹⁹ The divine love is patient, enduring, bears with our sinful obduracy, hopes for our return but does not force itself on us (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

6.3.3.4 Some Objections

Several objections are raised against the fellowship model of salvation. Paul Helm inquires whether this model opens the door to human pride to take credit for our salvation. "Given that there is more than one contributory causal factor how

¹¹⁷See Brümmer, What Are We Doing When We Pray?, 79-80.

¹¹⁸See Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.3.247.

¹¹⁹See Jerry L. Walls, "Can God Save Anyone He Will?" Scottish Journal of Theology 38 (1985): 155-172. Walls discusses different views of sovereignty in relation to universalism and predestination.

does one ascribe to one of them more importance than the others? . . . [N]o arithmetical measure of the size of the various causal factors is available."¹²⁰ He then claims that if a person's relation to God is based on an act of free will then the person might take pride in this since every result brought about by the person's free will allows for pride. Several things may be said in response to these charges.¹²¹ Helm is correct to call our attention to a sinful tendency--taking credit away from God. But if a person responds to God's gracious love with thanksgiving and love then pride will be excluded. Moreover, if one wants to use the language of causes then one could, with Lucas, distinguish between the complete cause and the most significant cause. For instance, if an arsonist sets fire to a building using gasoline then we would say that gasoline and combustible material were certainly causal factors for the fire. In the moral realm, however, we would look for the most significant cause and that would be the arsonist. God is clearly the most significant cause but not the complete or sole cause of the personal relationship.¹²² Take the case of an alcoholic. The alcoholic cannot cure himself. True, he must admit his need and then undergo a thorough program in order to be released from its bondage but does this allow for the alcoholic to claim pride for his cure? Hardly. The figure of the beggar has often been employed in the history of theology to elucidate this view of salvation.¹²³ Imagine a beggar who lives in terrible misery and who is offered a gift by a wealthy person sufficient to allow the beggar to live a life without poverty. Suppose that the beggar accepts the gift. In accepting the gift the beggar is actively involved--the act of acceptance is his not the benefactor's. Yet, boasting on the part of the beggar is ruled out by the fact that we do not

¹²⁰Paul Helm, "Grace and Causation," Scottish Journal of Theology 32 (1979): 102-3.

¹²¹The following discussion is indebted to William Abraham, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985), 149-151.

¹²²See his insightful discussion in Freedom and Grace, 2-5.

¹²³See the discussion by Gijsbert van den Brink, Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993), 237-9.

consider acceptance of a gift a meritorious act. It would be ludicrous for the beggar to take credit for his new found wealth. The credit goes to the benefactor. There remains an asymmetrical aspect to the relationship between the benefactor and the beggar. Although there must be an other for the benefactor to show grace to, the benefactor does not have to give and if he does then he is the initiator and sole source of the gift. In such cases we readily acknowledge the benefactor as the most significant cause. No precise arithmetical measurement is possible here but so what? Arithmetical measurements are appropriate to impersonal relations but not to personal ones (unless one is a hard rationalist). Divine grace functions in ways appropriate to personhood rather than billiard balls.¹²⁴

Yet, asks A. A. Hodge, should not humans then get the glory since they are the ultimate cause of their own salvation? Should we not then pray for humans to convert themselves?¹²⁵ Such questions betray a serious lack of understanding regarding the Eastern Orthodox, Wesleyan and even Dutch Reformed views of salvation which are in general agreement with the view articulated here. These questions arise from the manipulative model which uses the language of causal forces rather than interpersonal relations. Humans are not the initiators nor the givers of salvation so what sense does it make to say they achieve their own salvation? We love God because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). We cannot compel God to love us nor can we oblige God to save us. One simply cannot speak of love or fellowship in such terms and if salvation is understood in a relational sense then we cannot earn eternal life. Our response of trust to God's enabling grace is not meritorious. Neither does it bring about salvation for God must first do so. If God does not initiate the process of reconciliation and seek to heal the

¹²⁴Moreover, according to quantum physics even billiard balls do not operate by strict determinism.

¹²⁵This is the position of A. A. Hodge and C. Samuel Storms. See Storms' "Prayer and Evangelism Under God's Sovereignty," eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 230-1.

break in our relationship then it will not happen. The beggar can only respond in trust or hatred to the divine gift, not initiate it.

Why then do some not exercise faith in God after receiving the gospel? As mentioned above, the proponent of specific sovereignty will claim they do not believe because God has chosen not to make them believers. Thus, the answer lies with God. If one presses the issue asking why God decides this way the answer is that it is a mystery belonging to the unsearchable counsel of God's will. Hence, the proponent of specific sovereignty arrives at a point where further explanations are impossible. The proponent of the fellowship model also arrives at a point where further explanations are impossible, but for a different reason.¹²⁶ Lucas comments: "Two people may have the gospel preached to them in the same way, and have the same opportunities of hearing God's call for each, and one may harken and the other harden his heart. We ask 'Why?' No answer can be given except that the one decided to, and the other not to."¹²⁷ The model of personal relations simply comes to a point where there is mystery, but it is the mystery of iniquity rather than the mystery of God. God's stance towards sinners is not mysterious for the cross of Christ demonstrates his love towards us.

The same answer applies to the issue of personal holiness. According to specific sovereignty the holiness of an individual at any point in time is exactly what God desires it to be, no more and no less. If I ask why God does not want me more sanctified at this time the answer is that God, for some secret reason, has not willed it so. Things are different, however, in the relational model. God has given everything necessary for a life of holiness but we need to make use of God's gifts (2 Peter 1:3-11). In the fellowship model God may want us to exhibit a greater degree of holiness and may be frustrated with us because we do not follow the leading of the Spirit. It is possible for us to thwart God's will for

¹²⁶See Walls, "The Free Will Defense, Calvinism, Wesley, and the Goodness of God," 25.

¹²⁷Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 14.

our sanctification. It is possible for us to lie to the Holy Spirit and bring the Spirit to grief (Eph. 4:30) even though God does not intend such to happen. We cannot achieve personal holiness without the Holy Spirit but the Holy Spirit will not do it without us. God has supplied all we need for holiness but the complete set of sufficient conditions requires my consent and active participation.

What about assurance of salvation and what of final perseverance? Does the relational model imply that God takes the risk that those who respond in faith to his salvific love may later on reject it and apostatize? Jesus tells the parable of the sower (Lk. 8:9-15) in which some people initially believe but are later overcome with the cares of the world. Paul says that Christians will be presented holy and blameless before God if they continue in faith, not moving away from the hope of the gospel (Col. 1:22-3). The book of Hebrews warns its audience not to fall away from the living God (3:12, 6:4-6). Of course, all of these texts receive different interpretations depending to a large extent upon one's views of sovereignty. The proponent of specific sovereignty will say that God does not take any risk that those he has eternally elected to salvation will apostatize. If God wants them to persevere in faith then they will. The biblical texts warning of apostasy are then usually understood as either hypothetical warnings (since it cannot actually occur) or as warnings which apply only to those who "look like" genuine Christians but, in fact, are not.¹²⁸ This is thought to give Christians security that they are saved since there is no risk that they will fail to persevere.

Proponents of general sovereignty usually affirm that God does take the risk that believers may apostatize. God may want them to persevere in faith and seek to uplift them when they are tempted to apostatize, thus making falling away

¹²⁸Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 206-222, helpfully discusses many of the church fathers on Hebrews 6:4-6. Unfortunately, he concludes that the author of Hebrews is only worried that some of those reading the letter might not be genuine believers in the first place and thus, do not belong to God's people. Actually, one would hope that false believers in Christian congregations would be shown to be what they actually are so that genuine believers might not be harmed!

extremely difficult, but in the final analysis, will not render apostasy impossible.¹²⁹ Proponents of specific sovereignty commonly claim that this view produces insecurity in the believer since there is the risk that they will not persevere. At this juncture some clarifications are needed. To begin, it is correct that the God of specific sovereignty takes no risk that genuine believers will apostatize if God decides that this will be the case. If, however, God decides that some genuine believers will apostatize then they will do so but even this entails no risk on God's part since it is precisely what he wants to happen. Furthermore, it is correct that the God of general sovereignty does take the risk of genuine believers committing apostasy unless God takes steps to ensure that this will not happen.¹³⁰ Hence, God may or may not take risks concerning human apostasy depending on what he has decided to do.

The other clarification that needs to be made is that whether or not God takes the risk of genuine believers committing apostasy has no bearing on our assurance or security unless we are able to know that, in fact, we are genuine believers. Even if God always prevents Christians from committing apostasy that does not imply that there is no risk for us. The no-risk model of sovereignty does not imply assurance for the believer since the "believer" may be deceived that she is genuinely regenerated. After all, God may have sovereignly decided to have certain individuals erroneously believe they are Christians. In this case they would be convinced of their salvation when in fact they are damned. It is commonly agreed that there are those (even Clergy says Calvin) who look like

¹²⁹For an exegetical study of this position see I. Howard Marshall, Kept By the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away (Minneapolis, Bethany Fellowship, 1969) and "The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology," Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 306-324.

¹³⁰Robert R. Cook suggests that even those who affirm libertarian freedom may claim that apostasy for Christians is impossible because God performs "radical soul-surgery" on the believer such that he settles their dispositions. After all, most believers claim God will do this in heaven so why not now? See his "Apostasy: Some Logical Reflections," Evangelical Quarterly 65, no. 2 (1993): 148-9. I believe Cook has a point but I do not believe our dispositions are settled, even by God, in an instantaneous fashion.

Christians but are not. If so, then how does one know one is a genuine believer? Wesley and Edwards held that this was the important question and they endeavored to explain how people could know they are regenerate by the fruit of the Spirit in their lives and, for Wesley, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.¹³¹ The confirmation of past conversion is present convertedness not some religious ceremony performed in the past.¹³² Whether one affirms general or specific sovereignty the same problem remains: there is no absolute security that one is a believer. This leaves some people feeling insecure in their relationship with God. But, as Jüngel points out, the desire for security is an attempt to gain control over the other, a lack of trust.¹³³ Trust in the relationship renders the need for control superfluous. When the divine-human relationship is understood in the model of mutual fellowship the basic issue becomes: are the two partners faithful to each other? The relationship may ebb and flow on our part but we can be assured that God will be faithful. Because of the divine faithfulness we do not take any risks. We may count on God's faithfulness in a way which he cannot count on ours. Hendrikus Berkhof says, "Our wavering faithfulness is upheld on all sides by God's unwavering faithfulness. That faithfulness is not dependent on our faith."¹³⁴ The seminal question in the apostasy issue is what it means to be a Christian. In the fellowship model it means being in a relationship of reciprocal love with God for this is genuine life.

¹³¹These two thinkers are compared on this issue by William J. Abraham, "Predestination and Assurance," ed. Clark Pinnock, The Grace of God, the Will of Man (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 231-242.

¹³²This is in opposition to the popular evangelical teaching that one knows one is a genuine believer by saying a liturgical formula ("I accept Jesus as my savior") or a religious ceremony (coming forward at an altar call). Such religious rites may be the start of fellowship with Christ but not necessarily. A basic problem in this approach is that it tends to make salvation a thing or object which one possesses instead of seeing salvation as a relationship between persons.

¹³³Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, tr. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 170, 196-7.

¹³⁴H. Berkhof, Christian Faith, 476.

6.3.3.5 Conclusion to Salvation

By way of conclusion it may be said that in the fellowship model sin is understood as the breaking of a relationship rather than some sort of entity or condition. God takes it upon himself to overcome this breach and restore the relationship through the cross and resurrection of Christ and by giving us the grace by which we are enabled to see the injury we have done and make reconciliation possible. Because God does not manipulate our love but makes himself contingent upon our response, it is God who takes the risks that we shall respond to enabling grace with trust and love and continue to mature in the relationship. This does not mean that we merit God's love for we are the recipients of grace. Grace opens up possibilities for us which would not otherwise be open. We can only thank God for such opportunities. Yet, grace does not fix the outcome. God neither forces our response to his love nor does he guarantee that we shall develop the degree of personal holiness he desires. In all these God takes the risk that we may not enter and grow in the divine love.

6.4 Evil

6.4.1 Introduction

The question of God's relationship to evil has, on several occasions, been touched on already in this thesis. Yet, a direct discussion of the issue will be helpful. In order to understand how the risk model of providence should be applied to this topic it will be beneficial to first see how the no-risk model of providence handles the subject. Before doing so, however, a few more introductory comments are needed.

In the first place, there is no single problem of evil. Rather there are various problems of evil depending on the particular view one has regarding the nature of God, God's relationship to the world and human freedom. Different models of God and different views of providence generate different problems of evil.¹³⁵

¹³⁵See David Basinger and Randall Basinger, "The Problem With The 'Problem of Evil,'" Religious Studies 1 (March, 1994): 89-97.

One may ask: Can God create a world where free creatures never commit a moral evil? Surprisingly the answer does not depend on whether one affirms compatibilistic or libertarian freedom. The compatibilist could answer yes if God always provided creatures with desires that produce righteousness and never allowed sinful desires to arise. Of course, this raises the question why God has not done so. The libertarian can also say yes if the creatures never, in fact, decide to sin for then it will be true that God created free beings who never committed a moral evil. One may ask: Can God create a world where God can guarantee (no-risk) that free creatures will never sin? In this case only the compatibilist can claim that God is able to make such guarantees and take no risks. The libertarian is committed to saying that God takes a risk in creating beings with morally significant freedom. Thus, these two views of human freedom engender different sets of questions or problems regarding evil.

Turning to the nature of God it may be asked: Can an omnipotent God ensure that creatures with libertarian freedom never sin? If one holds that God can do the logically contradictory then God can give such assurances. But if one believes that we (de dicto) cannot meaningfully speak of God doing the logically contradictory then the answer is no. Finally, different views of sovereignty give rise to different answers to this question. If one affirms specific sovereignty then it may be claimed that God could guarantee a sinless world. If one affirms general sovereignty this cannot be claimed. It may come about that sin never occurs but this is not because God can guarantee it. Again, these two models produce different sets of questions regarding evil so it is incorrect to speak of "the" problem of evil.

The different understandings of the nature of God, human freedom and providence have given rise to quite a number of standard responses to suffering and evil.

These may be summarized as follows.¹³⁶ (1) Evil is a punishment for sin. Though there are biblical references supporting the idea that some suffering is divine punishment for sin this is not the whole picture for the Bible rejects the notion that all suffering is due to divine punishment (see chapter 4, section 11). (2) It is sometimes claimed that evil is necessary since it is only by the contrast of evil that we are able to understand the good. This hardly explains the degree and amount of evil in the world. (3) Perhaps God is the great educator who brings about evil so that our souls may mature and develop as persons.¹³⁷ Yet, many people do not experience growth. Rather, they become embittered or overwhelmed which casts doubt on God's ability to teach. Also, in order for me to grow must my children suffer from debilitating illnesses? Furthermore, the inequitable distribution of suffering is disproportionate to the needs of the learners. It is doubtful that it can be shown that no one suffers more than is necessary for his spiritual benefit.¹³⁸ (4) Some have claimed that this is the best of all possible worlds. Personally, I doubt that this claim is coherent. Moreover, it is hard to reconcile this claim with the depth and amount of evil actually present in the world. (5) Others hold that if we could only see things from God's perspective we would see that all is well with the world. Furthermore, God's morality is not our morality and who are we to blame God? One problem with this approach is that it leads to a vacuous understanding of morality since we no longer know what divine morality actually is. God becomes inscrutable which leads to a denial of evil and resignation.¹³⁹ Also, the Bible clearly says that things are a mess--even from God's perspective! (Gen. 6:6). (6) Finally, some claim that

¹³⁶For a helpful summary and evaluation of some of these views see Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger, Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103-112.

¹³⁷The most celebrated proponent of this view is Hick, Evil and the God of Love.

¹³⁸Again, see Schilling, God and Human Anguish, 169-173.

¹³⁹See Kristiaan Depoortere, A Different God: A Christian View of Suffering, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 47-8, and S. Paul Schilling, God and Human Anguish (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 59-72.

all evils will result in higher goods in the future, either in this life or the next. It is a serious question whether each and every evil or experience of suffering will produce some greater good and it is not clear that future goods justify the present evil.

Some of these standard answers are mutually incompatible with each other. Moreover, some of them are also incompatible with certain views of God and sovereignty. To this I now turn.

6.4.2 Evil and the No-Risk Model

According to the no-risk model of providence there is a specific divine reason for ordaining each and every particular occurrence of evil and suffering.¹⁴⁰ If Jones is afflicted with a debilitating mental illness in which he loses touch with reality or if a three-year-old child contracts an incurable and painful bone cancer, suffering terribly until death, or if a number of kindergartners are murdered in a school gymnasium in Scotland, or if Christian woman and children are raped and sold into slavery in Sudan, such experiences were specifically selected by God to happen to these individuals. In the no-risk view all the poverty, genocide, ethnic conflicts, debilitating illnesses, rapes, birth defects, blindness, destructive government policies, etc., are all specifically ordained by God and applied to the particular individuals involved. We may not know the divine reasons, but, we are told, we can be sure they are good ones since God is good. Jerry Bridges writes: "God's sovereignty over people. . . . means that God is in control of our pain and suffering, and that he has in mind a beneficial purpose for it. There is no such thing as pain without a purpose."¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰This shows affinity to the strong version of the principle of sufficient reason.

¹⁴¹Jerry Bridges, "Does Divine Sovereignty Make a Difference in Everyday Life?" eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 209.

For instance, God may desire to teach someone a lesson. God as educator selects and sends these painful lessons into our lives and since God is perfect he never fails (according to specific sovereignty) to get the pupil to learn precisely what God intended. In this model it cannot be claimed that God wanted Jones to learn a particular lesson (e. g. humility) but that Jones failed to learn it. If those who suffer become embittered towards God then that is precisely what God intended to come about since the divine educator perfectly achieves the result he wants from each and every lesson. Saying that God wanted Jones to learn humility but failed to do so would mean that God's will was thwarted in this case--which is impossible given the no-risk model. Moreover, whatever view we take towards social responsibility in these matters is also ordained by God. If we take the stand that these are wrong and work to overcome them then that is what God intended for us to do. On the other hand, if we do not work to overcome them then this also is what God intended for us to do. If we choose to feed those starving in Ethiopia or Somalia and God wants them fed then this will happen. If, on the other hand, we choose to feed them but God wants them to starve (for some good reason) then God will ensure that the food we send them never reaches the people who need it. Those working for and those working against apartheid are doing exactly what God intends them to do at that particular time for God's perfect plan is never thwarted in any detail.

Does this make God the author of sin and moral evil? Proponents of the no-risk model put forward several lines of thought in order to deflect this charge. Calvin, for instance, says that God is the "remote cause" and we are the "proximate cause" so God is not the author of sin.¹⁴² Since God accomplishes his purposes through his chosen instruments it is the fault of the instruments! Though Calvin admits that God wanted the Adamic fall into sin and so it had to happen since God's will is never thwarted, yet, God is not blameworthy so long as God does not directly determine such events but only establishes the causes

¹⁴²John Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God, tr. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961), 179-181.

by which they will come about. Calvin, moreover, says that God is perfectly good so whatever God does is right and we have no justification to question God concerning this.¹⁴³

Why then did God not ensure that humans would have a nature incapable of sin? Calvin admits that this was possible for God to accomplish and that "Such a nature would, indeed, have been more excellent."¹⁴⁴ The reason, he says, lies hidden in the divine plan that "from man's Fall he might gather occasion for his own glory." The glory of God will be more manifest if sin occurs than if it does not. Paul Helm, articulating the no-risk view of evil, follows Calvin by suggesting that the fall was not actually bad since good came from it. He takes the O felix culpa! (oh happy fault) approach to theodicy. The fall of Adam

is happy because it, and it alone, makes possible the divine redemption from which the blessings of pardon and renewal follow. .

. .the states of forgiveness and of renewal and all that these imply are of greater overall good than a state of primitive innocence. .

. .Finally, without the permission of moral evil, and the atonement of Christ, God's own character would not be fully manifest.¹⁴⁵

God could have guaranteed a world without evil but did not want this since it would have meant that part of the divine nature--God's mercy--would not have been displayed. The revelation of the full divine nature is the "greater good" which makes the divine desire for sin and evil justifiable. On this account evil is necessary for God to accomplish his own self-manifestation.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³In his theodicy Calvin finally gives up on rational argument. After using circular reasoning, equivocation and name-calling he appeals to mystery. See Anna Case-Winters, God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 73-80.

¹⁴⁴Calvin, Institutes, 1.15.8.

¹⁴⁵Helm, Providence of God, 214-5.

¹⁴⁶With this in mind Hegel is quite correct to think God has an identity crisis!

There are several problems with this approach. To begin, as was shown above (6.1.4), the use of the term "permission" is problematic in the no-risk model. According to specific sovereignty everything that occurs is precisely what God intended to occur. We do not use the term permit to mean intend. At best, the term permission could be used in the following sense. Suppose God had a rat that he wanted to run through a maze. Suppose further that everytime the rat began to go down a path which God did not intend him to go, God placed a gate in its way so as not to permit him to go that way. Eventually, the rat goes in the direction which God "permits" since other paths are closed. This is a tendentious use of the word permission.

Secondly, as was argued above (6.3.2), it seems that the philosophical background for saying that evil is necessary for the divine nature to be fully manifested is the principle of plenitude. Does God really need sinners in order to display his justice and mercy?¹⁴⁷ Does God have a deficiency which would be left unfilled without the occurrence of evil? If so, then what has happened to God's absolute independence which the no-risk model affirms? Saying that the fall was necessary so that some might experience Christ's redemption sounds as though Jesus was cleaning up the mess the Father caused. In my view, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit stand fundamentally opposed to sin and evil. One may claim that God is only the remote cause of moral evil yet, for the no-risk model, every specific act of moral evil arises from God's first order intentions. Hence, it cannot be claimed that God is fundamentally opposed to sin. Van de Beek comments on this: "Sin does not proceed from his divine will. The predominant classic Reformed idea was that all things came from the hand of God. This view is not based on the knowledge of Jesus Christ, however, but on the idea that God is the cause of all things. It is based on our idea of God, not on God as he really is."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷On these and other problems see Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Evil and a Reformed View of God," Philosophy of Religion 26 (1988): 67-85.

¹⁴⁸Van de Beek, Why?, 230.

The proponent of specific sovereignty may object that God is only the remote cause of sin, thus getting God off the hook. But does it? If a child is raped and dismembered there will be a human agent who is the proximate cause but God is the remote cause. The rapist is doing specifically what God ordained him to do. Hence, the human agent is the immediate rapist while God is the mediate rapist. George Mavrodes wonders who is ultimately responsible in such cases. He gives the following illustration:

If a woman pushes a child down a stairway, and the child is thereby injured, we may be inclined to blame the woman, to hold her morally responsible. But if we bring in a more remote cause of the incident—if, for example, we come to believe that the woman herself was pushed so that she fell. . . then the moral responsibility of the woman seems to disappear. The child's injury remains, but the woman is not to blame for it, although she is the proximate cause of it.¹⁴⁹

David Hume, raised in the midst of proponents of the no-risk model, said that it was impossible in such a system of thought to reconcile God as the mediate "cause of all the actions of men without being the author of sin and moral turpitude."¹⁵⁰ Human reason must, he said, be discarded here and appeal made to unfathomable mystery. Some adherents of the no-risk model do, in fact, appeal to antinomy at this point claiming that God's ways are not our ways. On the misuse of Isaiah 55:8 and the illegitimacy of antinomies see chapter two.

Thirdly, there is no room for the biblical lament tradition in the model of specific sovereignty model. If everything happens for the greater good then complaint is out of the question for it reveals an immature faith. According to specific sovereignty the complaints and laments of Moses (Ex. 5:22-3), David (Ps. 13) and Habakkuk show that they did not see things from God's perspective. If

¹⁴⁹Mavrodes, "Is There Anything which God does not do?", 388.

¹⁵⁰David Hume, An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Charles W. Hendel, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 111.

only they had allowed for the "big picture" they would not have spoken to God in such accusatory fashion. But then again, God specifically ordained their laments for some reason--perhaps so we would see their folly if God also ordains that he wants us to see the folly of lament.

A fourth problem with this explanation of sin and evil is that it implies that God only causes (remotely, of course) those evils which serve his specific purposes for a greater good. This puts human morality in a bind, however, since either (1) God will prevent me from doing harm to another if doing harm is not for a greater good, or (2) God will not prevent me from doing harm to another if the harm will produce a greater good.¹⁵¹ Therefore, I can only serve as God's instrument for good and cannot bring it about that I cause anyone an ultimate harm. It is all for the best. If each specific sin happens by divine decree then whatever is, is right. That is, right for that particular time and place. Helm denies that exhaustive sovereignty implies that what is coincides with what ought to be.¹⁵² Helm is correct that what is, does not imply that it ought to be for all time but he fails to recognize that whatever is, is specifically intended by God to be and so it ought to be for that particular time and place. God may, of course, decide to change things tomorrow in which case whatever is, tomorrow, will be right. Also, one may claim that it is wrong for us to commit such acts, but it is "right" in the sense of being precisely what God intended to happen.

Finally, it does not make sense in the no-risk model for the biblical writers to say that God was genuinely grieved (Gen. 6:6) or angered (Isa. 1:10-15) by sin. These must be reinterpreted as mere anthropomorphisms. If God gets precisely what he intends in each and every specific situation since his secret will is never thwarted then it is incoherent to also claim that God gets upset at certain of

¹⁵¹See William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," Faith and Philosophy 9, no. 1 (Jan. 1992): 29-30.

¹⁵²Helm, Providence, 137.

these situations.¹⁵³ Does God get upset with himself? Moreover, it may be asked whether this view entails a serious split between the purposes of Jesus and the Father. For instance, Jesus instructs his disciples to be servant leaders and models this by washing the feet of the disciples. The church, however, has often operated by power relations rather than with a servant's heart. But if the Father gets precisely what he wants in each and every situation then people in the church have done specifically what the Father wanted them to do. Since the followers of Jesus have not always done things the way he wants them done but have always done things the way the Father wants them done there seems to be a serious problem within the godhead regarding divine intentions. The Son and the Father seem to be at odds with each other.

6.4.3 *Evil and the Risk Model*

6.4.3.1 *The Divine Project*

Throughout this thesis the problem of evil has been discussed in light of the divine project in which God desired to create beings capable of entering into genuine give-and-take relationships of love with him and one another. Unfortunately, the problem of evil, like the divine attributes, is often discussed without concern for the type of project God desires. If, however, the divine project is kept in mind it becomes possible to place the issue within the context of divine wisdom and love in pursuing such relationships. This enables us to see the difficulties raised by evil and suffering within the context of personal relationships and trust rather than simply the attempt to reconcile evil with the abstract concepts of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence.

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

¹⁵³Some proponents of the no-risk view appeal to antinomies at this point, saying that they simply do not know how to harmonize human responsibility with exhaustive divine control of all things. In chapter two I argued that this theological manoeuvre was illegitimate (see 2.5.2).

desires is a reciprocal relationship of love. Love is vulnerable and does not force itself on the beloved so there is the risk that the beloved may not want to reciprocate love. In creating such conditions God takes the implausible yet possible risk that his creatures may reject him. This view may be called the "logic of love defense" since it stems from the divine love as well as bearing a family resemblance to the free will defense.¹⁵⁴ The free will defense is grounded in God taking the risk of creating people with libertarian freedom and refusing to exercise specific sovereignty. Proponents of the free will defense, however, tend to affirm the intrinsic value of libertarian freedom (freedom for freedom's sake) or freedom as requisite for morality. However, as was argued above (6.1.5) God does not desire that we have the liberty of choice without concern for what we choose. Rather, God wants a relationship of personal love, grants freedom to that end, and is not satisfied until we reciprocate the divine love. Thus, the free will defense needs to be grounded in the love of God, God's desire for give-and-take relationships and the conditions necessary for this to come about. The logic of love defense connects the discussion to God's purposes in creation rather than to the supposed intrinsic worth of human freedom.¹⁵⁵

In order for the conditions of love to be met God must exercise general rather than specific sovereignty and this provides an answer to why God does not prevent all evil. God has sovereignly established the structures whereby he does not always get what he desires in each and every specific situation. If God habitually prevented moral evil then God would overturn the very project he

¹⁵⁴The most celebrated statement of the free will defense is Alvin Plantinga's God, Freedom and Evil (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977). See also, Michael Peterson, Evil and the Christian God (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982).

¹⁵⁵See Gorringer, God's Theatre, 45-6 and Brümmer, Speaking, 133, 139-144. Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.3, 292, 365, rejects the free will defense since it places the blame on the creatures implying that evil arises out of God's good creation. He seeks to avoid this by speaking of the "Nothingness" and so emphasize God's opposition to and victory over it in Jesus. However, it seems to me that Barth has not escaped making God culpable since the Nothingness arises from God's No. Furthermore, Barth here loses touch with personal categories.

initiated.¹⁵⁶ Some object, however, saying that if God is like a human parent then God ought to intervene more often to prevent harm and suffering. After all, what parent would stand by while her child is raped without attempting to prevent it? Though it is true that God is like a human parent, God is also unlike a human parent. God is, after all, responsible for upholding the ontological, moral and relational structures of the universe. That is, God has a role unlike that of any human.¹⁵⁷ Yet, even we have different roles in life. As a parent I have responsibility to care for the health of my children but this does not make me obligated to prescribe medical drugs for them or perform surgery on them. In his role as the one who establishes and sustains the project God cannot also bring it about that he abandons the very conditions for the project. Take morality, for example. What if God prevents us from intentionally harming another? Anglin provides a number of illustrations which render this supposition problematic.¹⁵⁸ Suppose I accidentally discharged a gun while it was pointed at someone's heart. In this case God would not prevent it and the person would be killed. But if I fired it intentionally then God would prevent it and the person would remain unharmed. A scientist seeking to discover truth would get the correct results of an experiment while if he were attempting to demonstrate his superiority to a hated rival God would foil his experiment. If God practiced such a policy then our intending harm to someone would be a sure way to avoid hurting them accidentally. God simply cannot operate this way without undermining the very project he has established.¹⁵⁹ In this respect, God's role is fundamentally different from the role of, for example, a teacher whose responsibility is to put a halt to any trouble in the classroom, by physical force if necessary. Only God occupies such a unique role. The almighty God could veto any specific act but if

¹⁵⁶See Keith Ward, Divine Action (London: Collins, 1990), 119-133.

¹⁵⁷See George B. Wall, "A New Solution to an Old Problem," Religious Studies 15, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 519-22.

¹⁵⁸Anglin, Free Will and the Christian Faith, 141-2.

¹⁵⁹See Ward, Rational Theology, 207, Langford, Providence, 118-120, van den Brink, Almighty God, 251-2, and Brümmer, Speaking, 142-4.

he makes a habit of it then he turns the beloved into an automaton and finds himself alone, which is not the sort of relationship he wants. God cannot prevent all the evil in the world and still maintain the conditions of fellowship intended by his first order desire.

Yet, two objections may be raised against this view. First of all, it may be asked why God did not create only those whom he knew would love and trust him? Why did God create those whom he knew would do evil and those who would be damned? The risk or personal fellowship model claims that this was not possible for God to do. As was discussed in the previous chapter it does not matter whether the proponent of the risk model affirms present knowledge or simple foreknowledge since divine risk is not eliminated by knowledge but only by foreordination. If one affirms present knowledge then God did not know, for a fact, when he decided to create that we would commit moral evils. God did not foreknow that we would actually sin, only that it was possible.¹⁶⁰ But even if one holds that God has simple foreknowledge or timeless knowledge of what creatures with libertarian freedom will do it does not eliminate divine risk. Hick says that foreknowledge makes God ultimately responsible for sin since God chose to create a being whom he foreknew would freely sin.¹⁶¹ This, however, is a misunderstanding of foreknowledge. According to simple foreknowledge (or timeless knowledge) God decides to create this particular type of world and then atemporally learns what will happen in this world. God did not know prior to his decision to create what would happen in this world. Once God becomes aware of what will actually happen in this world he cannot make events "deoccur" such that what does actually happen does not actually happen. Not only is this incoherent, it also falsifies God's foreknowledge. So long as one affirms the fellowship model divine risk remains whatever view of foreknowledge one takes. According to both simple foreknowledge and presentism the present world is something of a

¹⁶⁰Wall, "A New Solution to an Old Problem," provides one of the best discussions of this view (though he overvalues human freedom).

¹⁶¹Hick, Evil and the God of Love, 66, 69.

divine adventure or experiment the results of which were not foreknown when God decided to create. This allows the risk model to say that this world could have been better than it is and that God is not responsible for failing to create only those beings he knew would ever love him.

Secondly, it may be objected that God should at least intervene to remove moral monsters such as Hitler. But this assumes a rather individualistic understanding of human life. The Hitler's, Stalin's and Idi Amin's of the world do not act alone neither do they develop alone. Their personal development and their horrendous actions arise out of complex social frameworks. Hence, it is not simply a matter of God removing a single individual and thereby correcting the problem.¹⁶² This is why, I believe, God destroys so much of the human race in the Genesis flood story. One does not put a halt to the Holocaust or the massacres in Rwanda merely by preventing one individual from harming others. If God is going to intervene to prevent such terrible evils then God is going to have to radically alter the conditions of the project. It is not self-evident that the elimination of such tyrants would mean that no one else would take their place. Given the web of social relationships God cannot prevent such moral monsters from arising without abandoning the type of project he established.

Again, we can only hold God accountable for what he does intentionally. We may hold God responsible for creating the sort of world where such evils are possible--even though it seemed unlikely from the outset. But we cannot hold God responsible for the particular acts of moral evil since God does not specifically intend them. Though God permits them under the conditions of the project he does not intend them. But if God is love and does not want us to commit moral evils and has no purpose for them, is there pointless evil?

6.4.3.2 Gratuitous Evil

¹⁶²See Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 137-9 and Wall, "A New Solution to an Old Problem," 518.

The distinction between permission and intention (6.1.4) and the discussion of the ways in which God's will may be thwarted (6.1.7) laid the framework for claiming that at least some evil is pointless.¹⁶³ Saying that some evil is gratuitous does not mean that it fails to fit into any purpose of God whatsoever. Rather, God adopts certain overall strategies and policies by which he seeks to accomplish his project. The overarching structures of creation are purposed by God but not every single detail that occurs within them. Within general providence it makes sense to say that God intends an overall purpose for the creation and that God does not specifically intend each and every action within the creation. Thus, God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil. Some evil is simply pointless since it does not serve to achieve any greater good. The "greater good" of establishing the conditions of fellowship between God and creatures does not mean that gratuitous evil has a point. Rather, the possibility of gratuitous evil has a point but its actuality does not.¹⁶⁴ That is, God has a reason for not preventing gratuitous evil--the nature of the divine project--but there is no point for the specific occurrence of gratuitous evil.

It is generally agreed that some evils are justified for some greater good. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that for certain goods to be possible it must also be possible that certain evils could obtain. How can one be brave, for example, if cowardice is not possible? Moreover, it is also generally agreed that theodocists have not shown that each and every evil either serves a greater good or that their possibility is logically necessary. When a two-month-old child contracts a painful bone cancer for which there is no cure, only endless suffering until death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident causing the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in

¹⁶³The best work on gratuitous evil is Peterson's Evil and the Christian God. See also Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil."

¹⁶⁴See van den Brink, Almighty God, 251-2.

mind for these. Some may wish to claim that God intends such suffering in order to teach the parents something, or the Jews something, or the young girl something. Indeed, numerous well-meaning believers attempt to comfort the suffering with standard responses regarding God's intentions for the sufferer.¹⁶⁵ Did God want the Holocaust in order to teach us a lesson? Is such pedagogy justifiable? In the case of my brother's death some Christians informed me after my conversion that his death was ordained for the purpose of bringing me to Christ. My immediate question was: God killed my non-Christian brother so that I would become a Christian? But without middle knowledge God could not have known this would happen. This would mean that God goes around killing people and causing disasters in the hopes that some may then repent and confess Christ. The model of general sovereignty does not allow for each and every such evil to be explained this way since God is only responsible for the structures within which we operate and for those specific acts in history God elects to do.

Some may wish to make the more modest claim that God uses, rather than causes, these evils in order to stimulate people to repentance and love. But does God always succeed in this? Even in the church I see a fair number of people who become embittered towards God--though they seldom say so publicly! They typically lead lives of quiet resignation or secretly hate God. In my view, God may seek to bring something good out of tragedy, but there are no guarantees. God is working in the lives of those who love God to redeem even evil situations and bring forth something good (Rom. 8:28). But contrary to specific sovereignty, the God of general sovereignty cannot ensure that people who are suffering will respond positively to his redemptive love. Given the fellowship model of providence where God does not force his will on us it is possible that we thwart God's redemptive activity regarding suffering in our lives. Considering the personal aspects of the divine-human relationship, God cannot guarantee that a

¹⁶⁵For two works which offer real life situations in which the standard answers of exhaustive sovereignty are used, but ultimately rejected, see Philip Yancy, Where is God When it Hurts? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977) and Penny Giesbrecht, Where is God When a Child Suffers? (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1988).

greater good will arise out of each and every occurrence of evil.¹⁶⁶

6.4.3.3 Natural Evil

What is the relationship between the risk model of providence and natural evil? It depends upon the reason one gives for diseases, hurricanes and the like. If one believes that God creates a world where air currents and water vapor bring needed rain but cannot in the same system prevent these elements from sometimes forming hurricanes then God takes the risk that people will suffer from them and may turn away from his love.¹⁶⁷ Water sustains us but we can also drown in it. Lightning brings essential nitrogen to the soil but it may also strike us causing injury or death. Certain genetic traits make us resistant to malaria but the same genes make us susceptible to other diseases.¹⁶⁸ The risk of human suffering simply is not avoidable in the world as we know it. If one believes that all natural evils are the result of either God's punishment on human sin or the product of demonic forces then God takes the risk that in creating such a world these evils may eventuate.¹⁶⁹ Even if one attributes natural evils to human or

¹⁶⁶See Basinger, "Human Freedom and Divine Providence," 505.

¹⁶⁷Bartholomew, God of Chance, points out that randomness in nature can lead to the advancement of life as well as deformity. With the concept of chance the sufferer is relieved of guilt or the burden of divine calling. I do not know whether God could have made a different natural environment where hurricanes and earthquakes were impossible while still providing the needed air and water movements. We do know that in the present system this is not physically possible. Some believe that heaven will be such a hedonic paradise. Although the scriptures describes a place of incredible delight with some dramatic changes from what we presently experience, I am not sure precisely what the new heaven and earth will be like.

¹⁶⁸Peterson, Evil and the Christian God, 111 maintains that for God to eliminate the ill effects of good natural resources would be to eliminate the natural order all together. Others go beyond this claiming that natural evil is necessary for our growth as persons. For a critique of this claim see Gijsbert van den Brink, "Natural Evil and Eschatology," ed. van den Brink et. al. Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 39-55.

¹⁶⁹Plantinga, God, Freedom and Evil, 58, suggests that it is "logically possible" that demonic forces are to blame for natural evils. Others, however, go further and use this idea in developing a theodicy. See Anglin, Free Will and the Christian Faith, 147-9 and Gregory Boyd, Letters From a Skeptic (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994), 35-7. Boyd is elaborating this thesis in connection with a risk taking God into a two volume work forthcoming from InterVarsity Press.

demonic sin it still implies that God took the risk of creating the context in which such evil and the suffering it brings could arise.

My intention here is not to provide a theodicy for natural evils but only to highlight the risks God takes in light of them. If God creates a world in which humans have a great deal of say regarding government policies, food distribution, agricultural practices, where people decide to live, etc., then possibilities arise for human suffering which God did not intend. For instance, the policies of the Ethiopian government were largely to blame for the famine of the 1980's. Many thousands of people suffered and died because of human decisions. The same sort of thing has recurred countless times throughout history. Moreover, there is enough food on the planet to feed everyone but it is not well distributed. In this God depends upon us to care for one another. If we do not care for others then suffering which God did not intend may come about. We make choices, individually and corporately, about how to spend our resources. A good deal of relief from diseases and even natural disasters could be accomplished if we chose to spend them on such enterprises. That we often do not and at times even blame God when we suffer from them is the risk God takes in establishing this sort of world. If we cut down the rain forests or spray pesticides on our food we may bring on ourselves devastation and disease that God never wanted us to experience. These are choices that we make and God works with us, attempting to redeem the situation, but the risk of suffering is there nonetheless.

Again, there is no divine guarantee that we shall respond to the Spirit's prompting in response to natural evils. Anglin, however, is quite optimistic when he claims that "for every one person who chooses to respond to the evil by rejecting God, there are a hundred who choose to respond by leading better lives."¹⁷⁰ Though I often observe people sending aid in response to a natural disaster I am not at all sure that Anglin's claim is correct (especially when diseases are involved). Regardless, it still implies risk for God since people

¹⁷⁰Anglin, Free Will and the Christian Faith, 153.

do not have to respond positively to these situations.

6.4.3.4 Jesus is God's Answer to Evil

God's policy decision to permit gratuitous moral and natural evil means that God takes the risk that his project may not go exactly as he would like in every detail. In the two chapters surveying the biblical narrative it was observed that things did not always go the way God desired and those experiencing suffering did not always respond with confidence in God. God is not in exhaustive control of the world but neither does God stand impotent before it.¹⁷¹ God seeks to convey his powerful love to us in various ways and faithfully works with us, soliciting our trusting response. God's definitive way of addressing evil is the cross of Christ. We know where God stands in relation to sin and suffering on the basis of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. God fights against them, not by playing their game, but by opening up new possibilities for life. This seems weak and foolish to us for we want a display of brute force against evil. But God chooses, instead, to bear the full force of evil. God brought redemption (good) out of a most horrendous evil. God himself became involved in our struggle and suffering in order to overcome suffering and evil. Jesus, human and divine, experiences our troubles and death yet remained powerful in love. Through the resurrection he completes the victory over suffering and evil. The resurrection is our sign of hope that the future will bring a transformation of our present situation. The resurrection is a promise that suffering and death do not have the last word--they cannot ultimately separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35-7). God is victorious over evil but not in the way we want. We would rather God simply change the natural order and remove the possibility of moral evil, making our lives free from suffering. We do not really want God to transform our hearts so that we share his values and love. We would rather God remove the possibility of suffering than work with us through it for it is not the sort of help we desire.

¹⁷¹The impotency of God is stressed by Rabbi Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken, 1981) as well as in the "fellow sufferer who understands of process philosophy.

This must not be construed to mean that God never heals, liberates or establishes justice. But it does mean that we do not see it as much as we wish. We look forward to a time when God's sovereignty will be more fully manifested de facto against the forces of evil and suffering. In this respect we are no different from the biblical characters. Israel remembered God's mighty hand which delivered them from bondage and hoped for a future where they would again experience such liberation (e. g., Jud. 6:13).¹⁷² So too, the church remembers the power of the resurrection and hopes for the time when all will be renewed in glory. The memory of biblical faith helps us cope with suffering for several reasons. First, we may count on and experience the comforting presence of a God who was unafraid of sharing our plight in Jesus. Secondly, we do see in the world from time to time signs of God's provisional liberating power. These give us, thirdly, both the confidence that God will continue his work and the courage to persist in our efforts to be God's fellow laborers in the struggle for shalom. The witness of God as both suffering and powerful love gives us hope for a future where God is victorious over all evil.

God has not given up on us as is clearly manifested in the cross. Despite our sin God perseveres. Writes Barth

God's mercy does not act in such a way as to overpower and blot out its object. God does not take the place of the creature in such a way as to annihilate it. . . . [God' mercy] is so powerful that it can wait, allowing us to continue. The abyss in the heart of God is so deep that in it the other, the reality distinct from God, can be contained in all its wretchedness.¹⁷³

God does not destroy us but seeks to transform us through redemptive love. God is working to bring good out of evil. God is not causing the evil for Jesus stands against it. In the light of Jesus we have no doubt that God intends our

¹⁷²The following is indebted to Guthrie, "Human Suffering, Human Liberation, and the Sovereignty of God," 33.

¹⁷³Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2.1, 411.

wellbeing. God is not causing our suffering but seeking to bring something redemptive even out of terrible suffering. But God's efforts do not meet with success apart from us since God has sovereignly chosen not to do it without us. Repeatedly in the biblical narrative God called on people to trust him in the face of suffering (e. g. Hab. 2:4). God desires to be known as a God of goodness, wisdom and justice who is ever present with us. Yet, he may be experienced by us as a bumbling, absent deity who is silent before his suffering creatures. The risk was: will anyone have confidence that God is wise and loving in working this way? Would anyone trust God and choose to follow him down a path that seems to us one of weakness and foolishness?

6.4.3.5 Questioning God's Wisdom

Despite God's faithful track record, biblical characters such as Moses (Ex. 5:22-3) and Habakkuk (1:2-4, 12-17) confronted God with their anger and disappointment. Moses blamed God for the oppression getting worse while Habakkuk railed against God for not doing anything about the terrible injustices in the land. These complaints were taken seriously by God since their concerns became God's concerns, but God did not always answer such questions in the way they were asked. People of faith may, at times, find reason to call the divine wisdom into question. In the church, however, we are usually taught not to question God. Rather, we are instructed to acquiesce to the divine will. The biblical witness is that we may question God and may, at times, even prevail such that God alters his plans to take our concerns into account. The lament tradition should be part of our worship. It is not an immature faith. True, in Jesus we have God's clear-cut answer to sin and evil--redemptive love--but even this does not exclude all room for questioning whether the world manifests the divine wisdom.

Some, such as David Hume, brashly suggest that the world must be the product of either an infant deity who knows no better or of a deity in old-age who simply

cannot do what needs to be done.¹⁷⁴ The fictional character Ivan Karamazov asks whether this world--this project in which God takes risks--is worth the price. He tells of a little girl abused by her parents and cries to "dear, kind God to protect her. . . . Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much?"¹⁷⁵ Ivan sees no justice in the world and certainly no God of justice. Consequently, he claims that God's experiment is too costly, it is not worth the price of all the suffering, and so he desires to return his ticket for admission to God. Ivan's brother, the monk Alyosha, does not find faith in God easy in light of Ivan's descriptions of human evil but he sees in Jesus reason to trust God. We may know that God loves us but there is still room to question the wisdom of creating this sort of world.

The skeptic may be confident that God was wrong to establish this type of project yet the skeptic faces some serious questions. Davis writes: "Of course it is possible that if I knew all relevant facts I would create a world very different to this one. But it is also possible that I would create a world as much like this one as I could. I just don't know enough to say, and neither does anyone else, in my opinion."¹⁷⁶ In evaluating God's policy decision we do not know all the relevant facts so how can we justifiably claim it was a bad decision? Moreover, since God is striving to achieve his purposes this means that the project is not yet complete--the results are not yet in. The cost-effectiveness of the policy cannot be made until the eschaton. Although these points deflect the critic's charge we do not arrive at indubitable certainty. Instead, we are faced with the decision whether or not to trust in the God of Jesus Christ. God has demonstrated his love towards us in Jesus. If he does not convince us of

¹⁷⁴David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 169.

¹⁷⁵Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, 1950), 287.

¹⁷⁶Davis, Logic and the Nature of God, 108.

God's concern for us, what can? What then are we to do with our questions? We may pray to God the way Moses, Habakkuk and even Jesus did. They took God seriously and contended with God against God and God took them seriously even if he did not always do precisely what they requested. In such a relationship, we acknowledge that we still trust in God and that we have not given up. We are, after all, still talking to God so a relationship remains. Our faith in God has a solid basis in Jesus and we have good reason to be confident that the redemptive work God has begun he will finish. We hope for what God will accomplish in the future in bringing about new and greater things.¹⁷⁷ In love we seek to follow the path

¹⁷⁷The nature of "heaven" and the question whether both moral and natural evil will by divine decree immediately cease to exist in such a state raise a number of significant problems such as why God does not now or did not originally create such a state. George B. Wall, "Heaven and a Wholly Good God," Personalist 58 (1977): 352-7 and "Other Worlds and the Comparison of Value," Sophia 18 (July 1979): 10-19, explores these questions without resolving them.

Those who affirm a compatibilistic definition of human freedom sometimes make the accusation that proponents of libertarian freedom are committed to believing that we will be able to sin in heaven. The compatibilist does not have this problem since God will then ensure that all of our desires are only righteous desires. The problem for the compatibilist is to explain why God gives us compatibilistic freedom in this life and why God did not originally create us with only righteous desires .

Is the possibility of sin removed somehow? If so, is it removed instantaneously or progressively? In the eschaton will we continue to develop and renew our minds in the likeness of Christ? Will the process of sanctification go on? Will the presence of God so change us that we have no further need of process and transformation? Will we all instantaneously arrive at Christlikeness in our individual and social lives? David Brown, "No Heaven Without Purgatory," Religious Studies 21 (Dec. 1985): 447-456, argues that the traditional doctrine of purgatory is necessary since God always desires a free response involving complete self-acceptance from the individual and this requires a temporal purgatory for its complete achievement. Will heaven involve the abolition of human freedom so that we are not permitted to sin or will it involve a process of transformation resulting in the confirmation of our character? Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, Immortality: The Other Side of Death (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 150-1, suggest that the glorification process involves the free choice to attain the state where we are either unable to sin or consistently able not to sin. Perhaps our material freedom becomes so confirmed and pervasive that we freely never use our formal freedom to sin. Even should it possible to sin in the eschaton it may be that the effects will not then be so deleterious due to the work of Christ and the ministry of the Spirit in our lives.

Will all natural evil and suffering be automatically removed or will our ability to cope with it and our acceptance of God's help be such that its negative effects are greatly lessened? At the least it would seem that there cannot be any natural evil which would result in the destruction of or irredeemable impairment of those in heaven. All such issues direct themselves to the divine wisdom: was God wise to create and govern the world the way he has? I am not exactly sure what heaven will be like nor do I understand why God delays bringing about the new heaven and earth. Admittedly, these issues need to be more fully explored.

Jesus has blazed. It is God's desire that, despite our experience of suffering and evil, we will respond to his love in faith, hope and love.

6.4.4 Conclusion to Evil

The logic of love defense provides a way of understanding the structures in which suffering and evil could come about in God's creational project even though he never intended them. The structure of love coupled with general sovereignty yields the conclusion that there is gratuitous evil. Terrible events happen which God does not specifically want to occur and this was a risk God took in establishing these structures. Regarding natural evil it may be said that whichever way one wishes to explain its origin it involves God in the risk that it may hamper human trust and love in the divine-human relationship. In the face of both moral and natural evil Jesus stands fundamentally opposed to them and seeks to overcome them by suffering and resurrection. Moreover, God continues to work to redeem the evil situation. God is not yet finished and so long as God is working there is hope that the future will be different from what we presently experience. Although this approach does not remove all ambiguity regarding suffering and evil there is, in light of the cross and resurrection, reason to trust God, hope for the future and respond in love to God.

6.5 Prayer

6.5.1 Introduction

Prayer has many forms including praise, confession, intercession and contemplation. Though all of these are connected to the doctrine of providence, one sort of prayer is especially significant regarding divine risk: impetratory prayer--getting something because one requests it. Does God ever respond to us and do something because we ask for it? Interestingly, different understandings of God give rise to different views on the role of such prayers. The models of specific and general sovereignty generate different understandings of prayer so the two models will again be compared and contrasted on this topic. Before doing

so, however, it should be noted that the problem of reconciling petitionary prayer with the attributes of God is quite old. In 233 A. D. Ambrose sent Origen some questions which a lady named Tatiana had asked him. "First, if God foreknows what will come to be and if it must happen, then prayer is in vain. Second, if everything happens according to God's will and if what He wills is fixed and no one of the things He wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain."¹⁷⁸ In short, does foreknowledge or foreordination render prayer useless? In his reply Origen says that God's foreknowledge does not rule out God's responding to our prayers and he rejects the notion that God foreordains all that comes to pass. Having already dealt with the subject of foreknowledge and prayer (chapter 5) I will concentrate on the relationship between the two types of divine sovereignty and prayer.

6.5.2 The No-Risk Model and Prayer

Proponents of specific sovereignty may rightly claim that prayers of praise, confession and petition play a significant role in our lives. God has ordained that we should, at a particular time and place, praise God, confess our sins or make a request. Each and every such prayer is precisely what God intended it to be. Regarding prayers of petition it may be said that God not only decrees what will happen after the prayer but also the very prayers themselves as the means by which God will bring the results about. Calvin says that petitionary prayer is not superfluous even though God is asked to provide things which he has decreed from all eternity to provide because God not only ordains goals, he also ordains the means to accomplish these goals.¹⁷⁹ Helm agrees saying that for the no-risk model: "Intercessory prayer is not one means of settling God's mind on a course of action, but one of the ways in which the already settled mind of God

¹⁷⁸Origen, On Prayer, in tr. Rowan Greer, Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1979), 92.

¹⁷⁹Calvin, Institutes, 1.17.3.

effects what he has decreed."¹⁸⁰ Suppose, for example, that God has eternally decreed that Mary should be converted on July 28, 1999. Suppose further that God desires to regenerate her only after my prayer for her salvation on July 27. Can I place her salvation in jeopardy if I decide not to pray for her on the 27'th? Not at all, because according to specific sovereignty God's will cannot be thwarted in the least detail. Consequently, God can guarantee that I will pray on the 27'th and that he will on the 28'th give Mary the grace by which she will inevitably believe. God not only decrees her salvation but also my praying for her the day before. Thus, petitionary prayers are meaningful in the sense that God wills them as the means through which he brings about what he desires.

But what about impetratory prayers? Does it make sense for proponents of specific sovereignty to claim that God grants something because of or in response to the request made? Helm says that even if the impetratory prayer is divinely decreed it may be said that "God answers because men pray."¹⁸¹ Storms agrees saying, "Divine sovereignty does not preempt prayer, nor does prayer render God's choice contingent. The God who is pleased to ordain the salvation of sinners, based solely on his good pleasure, is no less pleased to ordain that he will save them in response to the prayers of others."¹⁸²

But what does it mean for the God of specific sovereignty to "respond" or to do something "because" he was so requested? It cannot mean that because of the request, God did something which God was not otherwise going to do. Both Storms and Helm are clear that there is no contingency in God. But if there is no divine contingency then how should their remarks be understood? I suggest that what they mean, or should mean, is something like the following. To say that God "responds" to the petitioner means that God, who ordained the specific request by that

¹⁸⁰Helm, Providence, 159.

¹⁸¹Helm, "Prayer and Providence," 110.

¹⁸²Storms, "Prayer and Evangelism," 224.

particular petitioner, ordained to fulfill that request after it was requested. That is, for God to respond means simply that God first decided to have someone pray a particular request and then decided to do what was requested after the person made it. Obviously, this is not normally what we mean by the word response since God is "responding" in terms of his own decrees. The "God who hears" prayers is the God who hears himself speaking through second causes. Furthermore, to say that God does something "because" of what the creature requests sounds as though God is in this respect dependent upon the petitioner. Writes Storms: "from the human perspective, it may rightly be said that God's will. . . is dependent upon me and my prayers, as long as it is understood that God, by an infallible decree, has secured and guaranteed my prayers as an instrument."¹⁸³ Hence, it is only from a "human perspective" or anthropomorphism that God may be thought to be dependent. In actuality, however, God is not dependent upon our prayers, rather, our prayers are dependent upon God decreeing them. Thus, God may be said to do X "because" we prayed only in the sense that God had always decreed that God was going to do X after we prayed the prayer he also decreed. In this respect Jonathan Edwards put it correctly when he said, "speaking after the manner of men, God is sometimes represented as if he were moved and persuaded by the prayers of his people; yet it is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers. . . . he is self-moved. . . . God has been pleased to constitute prayer to be antecedent to the bestowment of mercy; and he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence of prayer, as though he were prevailed upon by prayer."¹⁸⁴

Hence, the God of specific sovereignty is not actually prevailed upon by prayer. God, in fact, never responds to us or does anything because of our prayers as this would imply contingency in God. In this model it is difficult to make sense of the biblical statement "you have not because you ask not" (James 4:2) because

¹⁸³Storms, "Prayer and Evangelism," 228.

¹⁸⁴Edwards, "The Most High a Prayer-Hearing God," Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2, 115-6 (emphasis mine).

if the God of specific sovereignty wanted you to have it then he would ensure that you asked for it. If God's will is never thwarted in any detail then we can never fail to receive something from God because we failed to ask for it. Moreover, James says that we sometimes petition God from wrong motives and so we do not receive (4:3). But if the God of specific sovereignty desires to give us something we can rest assured that he will get us to ask properly since there is no risk that God's desires will be frustrated in any way. Consequently, proponents of specific sovereignty may rightfully claim that petitionary prayer is justified because God has decreed that he would perform a certain action after the request is made. Moreover, in this model it makes sense to say that God has ordained such prayers for therapeutic benefit to those who pray as well as to those who are aware that others are praying for them. But proponents of the no-risk model of sovereignty cannot legitimately claim that God responds to our prayers or does something because we prayed: there is no place for impetratory prayer in this model.

6.5.3 *The Risk Model and Prayer*

The situation regarding impetratory prayer is quite different, however, in the risk model where God enters into genuine personal relations with us. According to the fellowship model God is genuinely responsive to us. For instance, God removed certain plagues at the request of Moses (Ex. 8:13, 31). When God told Moses that he was going to destroy the people and start over again with Moses, Moses gave God reasons why he should not follow through with this plan and God changed his mind from his proposed plan to accommodate Moses' desires (Ex. 32:11-14). When God announced to king Hezekiah through the prophet Isaiah that he would die very soon Hezekiah prayed and gave God reasons why he should let him live longer. Because of his prayer God sent Isaiah back to Hezekiah to inform him that God had changed his mind and would grant his request (2 Kings 20:1-6). If Moses and Hezekiah had not prayed to God about these matters biblical history would have been different. To modify James' statement: they had because they asked. In this model it is quite possible for us to miss a blessing which God desires to

give because we fail to ask for it (James 4:2-3).

Our prayers make a difference to God because of the personal relationship God enters into with us. God chooses to make himself dependent upon us for certain things. It is God's sovereign choice to establish this sort of relationship, it is not forced on God by us. In Exodus 32:10 God asked Moses to leave him alone so that the divine anger may grow against the people. Furthermore, God repeatedly instructs Jeremiah not to pray for the people (7:16; 11:14; 14:11; and 15:1). Why would God say such things if Moses and Jeremiah did not have an impact on the divine life? James says that the prayers of righteous people make a difference (5:16). The prayers of God's people make a difference not only in the lives of the people but also in God's life. God takes our prayers seriously and weaves them into purposes and actions for the world. God desires a deep personal relationship with us and this requires genuine dialogue rather than monologue. The fellowship of love God desires entails a give-and-take relationship where God gives and receives from us.

Some object to this claiming that we have no business advising God who possesses vastly superior wisdom. Is it not the epitome of hubris to think we can counsel an omniscient God who already knows all the data?¹⁸⁵ Such remarks may arise out of sense of humility and a desire to be still before God. Though this has its place in the spiritual life the biblical record is more than a call to silence. It also calls us to make our requests known to God (Phil. 4:6; 1 Jn. 5:14-5) and to ask what we will in Jesus' name (Jn. 14:13-4). Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Jesus reasoned with God and did not always acquiesce in God's presence.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain answer this by affirming that God chooses to respect our privacy in such a way that prayer becomes genuine disclosure of that which God would not otherwise know. See their "God and Privacy," Faith and Philosophy 9, no. 3 (July 1992): 369-386.

¹⁸⁶On the importance of presenting reasons to God in biblical prayers see Patrick D. Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer," Word and World 13, no. 4 (1993): 356-362 which is reprinted in his They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1994).

Rather they dialogued with God in order to determine together what the future would be. God wants this sort of conversation not because we have anything stupendous to advise God, but simply because God decides to make our concerns his concerns. God wants us to be his partners, not because he needs our wisdom, but because he wants our fellowship. It is the person making the request which makes the difference to God. The request is important because God is interested in us. God loves us and takes our concerns to heart just because they are our concerns. This is the nature of a personal, loving relationship.¹⁸⁷ The relationship is not one of domination or manipulation but of participation and cooperation where we become "colaborers with God" (1 Cor. 3:9). Again, it did not have to be this way. It is so only because God wanted a reciprocal relationship of love and elected to make dialogical prayer an important element in such a relationship.

In chapter three (sect. 7 and 11) several biblical texts were examined to show that God may be prevailed upon. God makes himself open to us and the future is open in some respects because God elects not to decide everything apart from our input.¹⁸⁸ Biblical characters prayed boldly because they believed their prayers could change things, even God's mind. They understood that they were working with God to determine the future. World conditions may appear to us as fixed but they are not ultimate and in impetratory prayer we show that we believe things can be different. God has open routes into the future and he desires that we participate with him in determining which ones shall be taken. This should not be construed,

¹⁸⁷Very helpful on prayer as a vital element in a personal relationship with God are the following: Terence Fretheim, "Prayer in the Old Testament: Creating Space in the World for God," and Paul Sponheim, "The God of Prayer," both in ed. Paul Sponheim, A Primer on Prayer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Vincent Brümmer, What Are We Doing When We Pray?; Samuel E. Balentine, Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue, Overtures to Biblical Theology, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); A. van de Beek, Why?, 316-332; and Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

¹⁸⁸Paul Helm caricatures this view of prayer as one where God functions like an old-fashioned switch board operator putting calls through if the line is open. He believes this view of prayer makes it a force which controls God. See his "Asking God," Themelios 12, no. 1 (1986): 24.

however, to mean that we get whatever we want. What is being claimed is that we may prevail with God since God genuinely takes our desires into account. Yet, God may also prevail with us, getting us to change our minds and pursue a course of action which we did not initially think best. In this regard prayer provides a resource for God to work in the world.¹⁸⁹ When we turn to God in prayer we open a window of opportunity for the Spirit's work in our lives, creating new possibilities for God to carry out his project. Dialogical prayer affects both parties so the situation is now different than it was prior to the prayer.

Our failure to practice impetratory prayer means that certain things which God wishes to do for us may not be possible because we do not ask. In the words of Peter Baelz: "our asking in faith may make it possible for God to do something which he could not have done without our asking."¹⁹⁰ Consequently, if God's bringing about a certain state of affairs is contingent and our requesting God for it is contingent then God is taking a risk that some particular good may not come about. It might be objected that God, being omnibenevolent, must always act to bring about the most valuable state of affairs whether he is asked to do so or not.¹⁹¹ God must, it is claimed, always act to help without being asked in order to maximize goodness. Two points may be made in response. First of all, it is not clear whether it is coherent to claim that there is a most valuable state of affairs.¹⁹² God has multiple options for action dependent upon what those in

¹⁸⁹See especially Fretheim, "Prayer in the Old Testament," and Tupper, Scandalous Providence, 274-280.

¹⁹⁰Peter R. Baelz, Prayer and Providence: A Background Study (New York: Seabury, 1968), 118.

¹⁹¹On this debate see Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," American Philosophical Quarterly 16 (April, 1979): 81-91; David Basinger, "Why Petition an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Wholly Good God?" Religious Studies 19 (1983): 25-41; Joshua Hoffman, "On Petitionary Prayer," Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 1 (Jan. 1985): 21-9; Stump, "Hoffman on Petitionary Prayer," Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 1 (Jan. 1985): 30-7; Michael J. Murray and Kurt Meyers, "Ask and it Will be Given to You," Religious Studies 30, no. 3 (1994): 311-330; David Basinger, "Petitionary Prayer: A Response to Murray and Meyers," Religious Studies 31, no. 4 (1995): 475-484; Ward, Divine Action, 159-166; and Brümmer, What Are We Doing When We Pray?, 47, 55-9.

¹⁹²See Ward, Divine Action, 158 and Lucas, Freedom and Grace, 37-40.

fellowship with him decide to do. Secondly, if what God holds as "most valuable" is the personal relationship with us then God will not want to do everything for us without our asking as this would lead to a breakdown of the type of relationship God desires to have with us.

Another problem might be raised at this juncture. What if we prayed for something which God did not believe was in our best interest, might God grant it anyway? Would God open himself up to the requests of finite and even sinful creatures? In my opinion, God has at times done so. God allowed Aaron to do the public speaking for Moses even though God wanted Moses to do it (Ex. 4:14) and God allowed the people a king even though he said this was not the best for them (1 Sam. 8). God fulfilled these requests, I believe, in the hope that the people would mature in their relationship with him. Parents often face the same sort of problem. For instance, a child may want some item which the parent knows the child will not use wisely. The parent may go ahead and give the child the item in the hope that the child will learn from this mistake. In this sense, of course, the parent (or God) has the long-term best interest of the child in mind.

Impetratory prayer is significant not only for our own individual lives it is also important for the lives of other people who make up the community of faith. There are numerous biblical references to Christians praying for one another and injunctions for us to pray for one another (e. g. 2 Cor. 9:14, 13:7; 2 Thes. 1:11, 3:1; Heb. 13:18; James 5:14). Impetratory prayer matters: Jesus wanted his disciples to pray with him and for him in Gethsemane. The body of believers, by praying for one another, helps to shape the future of the community.¹⁹³ Apparently, what God decides to do for others is sometimes dependent upon my prayers. That is, God might sometimes refrain from acting beneficially in one

¹⁹³See Balentine, Prayer, 272-295 and Miller, They Cried to the Lord, 325-7.

person's life because others have failed to pray.¹⁹⁴ This may not sound fair to those of us in the West with our high value on individualism but God values community and desires that it be fostered, in part, by our concern for one other and by manifesting this concern in intercessory prayer for others. This is one means that God uses to build a community of fellowship and mutual concern. Moreover, as Ward argues:

Our actions usually involve others, so that our good acts help others and our evil acts harm them. It is not sensible to complain, that, if I fail to pull my neighbor out of a ditch when I could easily do so, God is responsible for leaving him there. It is no more sensible to complain that, if I fail to pray for my neighbor when I could easily do so, God is responsible for not doing what my prayer might have effected. . . . Our request may make it possible for him to help them in ways which otherwise would have been constrained by the structures of the natural order.¹⁹⁵

Thus, God takes the risk that at times he may want to do something for us or someone else, yet may not do it because we fail to ask for ourselves or for others. In the fellowship model it is not possible to say, as in the specific sovereignty view, that God gets precisely what he desires in each and every situation. Yet, overall, God is responsible for establishing the conditions for this sort of relationship. God took the risk that we might not ask for ourselves or intercede on behalf of others and so things might not go exactly the way God desired. This does not mean, however, that God cannot act unilaterally in earthly

¹⁹⁴David Basinger, a proponent of the risk model, disagrees with me on this point. See his "Practical Implications," Clark Pinnock, et. al. The Openness of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 161. For discussion of this debate see the references in note 180. Paul Helm, Providence, 159, believes the risk model of prayer makes us responsible for Auschwitz (he prefers to place the responsibility on God's shoulders).

¹⁹⁵Ward, Divine Action, 166.

affairs for God can and does do so.¹⁹⁶ Yet, God has decided to seek a personal relationship with us and works to build a community of believers who love one another. In this sort of project it becomes possible to affirm that we have not because we ask not. God genuinely responds to our petitions and sometimes acts because of our impetratory prayers.

6.6 Divine Guidance

6.6.1 The No-Risk View of Divine Guidance

Though the question about the ways in which God guides his people is important it will not be addressed here.¹⁹⁷ Instead, as with the other topics discussed thus far, only the relation between divine guidance and risk will be examined. Following the pattern established so far, the no-risk view of guidance will be examined before the risk model.

According to the no-risk view of providence God always has something specific he intends for us to accomplish. In each and every situation God has a definite act in mind which fulfills part of his exhaustive plan. God has a master blueprint

¹⁹⁶Regarding why sometimes intervenes but not always see the helpful discussions by Ward, Divine Action, 134-153 and Tupper, Scandalous Providence. In my opinion, God is much more active than we can ever identify, his work goes largely unseen--like an iceberg. Nevertheless, God does at times intervene. Gordon Kaufman, Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 302-3, criticizes this idea since, he believes, it implies: (1) that God was incompetent in creating the world if he has to intervene in it; (2) that God plays favorites because he does not do the same for everyone. Others ridicule a personal God who intervenes by labeling such a God a "magician" or "spook." However, as Kirkpatrick, Together Bound, 90-2, argues a God who answers prayer is a God who intervenes. Moreover, what Kaufman and others really want is a uniform code of egalitarian relations which God must follow. Some people simply cannot stand that God might be unfair by their standards. They would rather have an impersonal principle, manageable by human ideals, than a personal God who gets involved with us.

¹⁹⁷Two helpful works on the means by which God guides are: Garry Friesen, Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View, Critical Concern Book (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980) and Derek Tidball, How Does God Guide? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991). Both authors propose the "wisdom model" with which I agree. However, both authors also seem to affirm exhaustive divine sovereignty where God's will is never thwarted yet, also affirm that God has no exhaustive blueprint for our lives. Given the emphasis in their books on the way of wisdom it would seem that they should not affirm specific sovereignty.

which he ensures is carried out in exacting detail. For instance, if God wants Bob and Susan to marry then God brings it about, through second causes of course, that they are married. God has a specific will for whether I should be married and, if so, God also has a particular person selected for me to marry. God has a specific will for our lives concerning issues of vocation, where to live, how many children to have, what sort of education to pursue, where to go on vacation, what clothes to purchase, etc. God's exhaustive sovereignty is comprehensive, nothing is overlooked. There is no decision too insignificant for God's concern and sovereign control. Also, there is no circumstance so unimportant that God does not have it planned. Every specific thing that happens to us is part of the blueprint. For specific sovereignty, it will be remembered, there are no such things as chance events or accidents. So each and every circumstance serves as God's mouthpiece identifying part of the divine plan.¹⁹⁸

Moreover, according to the no-risk model we can never fail to be led by the Spirit. Whatever guidance God wishes to bestow on us at any particular time is infallibly given to us and understood by us in precisely the way God intends us to understand it. Our interpretation of divine providence in our lives at any moment is precisely the interpretation God intends us to have. This does not mean, however, that we are never confused about the leading of the Spirit. It only means that if we are confused it is because God intends for us to be confused at that particular time in our lives. If we do not clearly perceive where God is guiding us we may rest assured that God does not intend for us to grasp his direction at that particular moment. We may hope that God will see fit to remove the confusion in the future.

Furthermore, for the no-risk model we can never fail to align ourselves with the divine plan since God's blueprint is infallibly carried out in every detail. It is inappropriate to ask whether we are following God's guidance since we cannot

¹⁹⁸Hence, the great interest by some Christians in interpreting circumstances as "open and closed doors" and the search for divine "signs."

but follow it. It is not a question of whether or not we submit to God's leading for God's leading is never thwarted or frustrated in the least detail. Otherwise, God would in some sense be dependent or contingent upon us to follow his guidance.¹⁹⁹ Clearly, the no-risk model cannot allow that God's exhaustive plan would fail to be fulfilled in the least detail for God is in no way dependent upon us for our following his direction. For instance, if Susan wonders whether God wants her to write a novel she cannot but fail to receive and follow the precise guidance God intends for her at that particular time. If God wants her to write it then God ensures that she is so guided and that she, in fact, does it.

6.6.2 The Risk View of Divine Guidance

According to the fellowship model of sovereignty God does not have a blueprint which we are to follow. God has a goal for our lives but there are numerous open routes to its achievement. Having said this a qualification must immediately be given. Just because there is no exhaustive divine plan for every single decision we want to make does not mean that God never desires a specific individual to do some particular act. After all, God requested certain people in the Bible to perform specific acts (e. g., God asked Gideon to tear down the alter of Baal, Jud. 6:25). Yet, for most of us there is no such specific guidance. The will of God for our lives is not a list of activities regarding vocation, marriage and the like. Rather, it is God's desire that we become a lover of God and others as was exemplified in God's way in Jesus. "When people talk about God's leading," says van de Beek, "it is usually not rooted in the way of Christ, but in a general concept of omnipotence and protection."²⁰⁰ The way of Jesus is a way of life not concerned about blueprints but about being the kind of person God desires. God's major goal is to renew us in the likeness of Jesus (with all the attending individual and social implications). In this sense it could be said

¹⁹⁹A fair number of writers on divine guidance fail to see this.

²⁰⁰van de Beek, Why?, 49.

that God has a specific will for each and every situation: to live as Jesus would. This is not, however, what people usually have in mind when they seek specific divine guidance. It is God's desire that we enter into a give-and-take relationship of love and this is not accomplished by God forcing his blueprint on us. Rather, God wants to go through life with us, making decisions together. Together we decide how the actual course of my life shall go. God's will for my life is not a list of specific activities but a personal relationship and in such a relationship God does not dominate over us with his blueprint for our lives. Rather, as lover and friend God works with us wherever we go and whatever we do. To a large extent our future is open and we are to determine what it shall be in dialogue with God. God does not simply turn us loose to do whatever we please. Rather, we are to seek God's wisdom for our lives (James 1:5). For example, there may be a variety of vocations available to me with which God is pleased and there usually will not be one that is the "best" or "perfect" in comparison to the others. I am free to make my choice in consultation with God. In my opinion, God is concerned about which vocation I select but is much more concerned about how I live my life in that vocation. Whatever vocation I choose God wants me to do it Christianly.

Furthermore, according to the relational model explored in this thesis there are "chance" happenings and genuine accidents which God did not specifically intend. God has granted humans significant freedom such that we may do things to others which God does not intend us to do. An employer, for instance, may harass and fire Jane without good reason. Jane should not view this circumstance as a "sign" that God's will for her life has changed. She may, however, be confident that no matter what others do to her God is working in her life to redeem the situation. Since most circumstances we experience in life, such as being in a train accident or meeting an old friend on the street corner, are brought about by human freedom we should not attribute them to God. God is resourceful to work with us in any and every situation but God is not causing all our circumstances as this would imply a great deal of manipulation of humans. God has sovereignly chosen not to

practice that sort of providence as his normal way of dealing with us. Though God can (even unilaterally) bring certain circumstances about, God normally works with us in whatever circumstances we experience. Hence, according to the risk model of providence Christians should not attempt to read all circumstances as signs of God's will for their lives.²⁰¹ King Saul, for example, made this mistake when he had David trapped for he said that "God has given him into my hand" (1 Sam. 23:7). That God had done no such thing is made shown in the fact that David escaped. Furthermore, when the murderers of Saul's son told David that God had avenged David of Saul, David rejected their interpretation and had them killed (2 Sam. 4:8-12). In the no-risk model of providence texts such as these are problematic because misinterpretation of what God is doing is not meaningful for specific sovereignty since everything that happens not only is specifically decreed by God, but so is its interpretation or misinterpretation. In the risk model, however, it is possible to mistake a divine action and misconstrue circumstances.

Regarding the leading of the Spirit, the risk model implies that we may or may not fail to understand the Spirit's direction. We may not understand what God expects of us in a particular instance. We may not accurately grasp the divine wisdom God attempts to give us for some problem. God will do all he can to help us but since God is dependent upon us for some things there is no guarantee that we will properly appropriate the divine wisdom. Moreover, even though we might correctly understand the Spirit's leading we might fail to carry it out. Suppose that God is guiding me to spend more time with my children. I may or may not get God's leading straight and even if I understand it I may or may not do it. The deeper our personal relationship with God develops, however, the better we experience his love which enables us to both better understand how we should live and give ourselves in loving service to God. In so doing we follow his leading.

²⁰¹John Boykin, The Gospel of Coincidence: Is God in Control? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), critiques the common assumption that all circumstances are God's doing.

6.7 Conclusion to chapter Six

This chapter has developed the theme of divine sovereignty in light of the particular sort of project God freely chose to establish. It was God's sovereign grace which brought about a creation in which it was possible for creatures to enter into personal relations of fellowship with God. In the fellowship model God does not exhaustively control every event that happens. God grants humans "space" in order that we may freely respond to the divine love with our own love. God desires genuine give-and-take relations with us. Consequently, God restrains the use of all of his power so as not to overwhelm us. In such a relationship God has established the conditions within which certain of God's desires may be thwarted. Yet, even in the face of some defeats God does not give up on us but works in various ways to achieve the fulfillment of the divine project. All this is in contrast to the no-risk model of sovereignty where absolutely everything happens according to what God specifically intends to happen. The risk and no-risk models were compared and contrasted to see how each model would explicate the doctrines of salvation, suffering and evil, impetratory prayer and divine guidance. It was seen that certain claims could be made within one model which were incompatible with the other model. Overall, one of the key issues which arose in the course of the discussion is whether or not God ever makes himself dependent upon us in any respect. That is, is there any contingency in God? Does God ever respond or react to us because of what we do? The fellowship model of providence answers yes to these questions while the specific sovereignty model does not. Although the manipulative view of sovereignty provides God with great security since God takes no risks, it denies certain understandings of our fellowship with God assumed by most Christians as an integral part of their piety. I have sought to defend these common practices as well as provide a theological framework for understanding what a personal relationship with God involves.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis has examined the biblical, theological, philosophical and practical issues surrounding the model of a risk-taking God. It has been argued that this model meets the three criteria outlined in chapter two: consonance with the tradition, especially the Bible; conceptual intelligibility; and adequacy to the demands of life. Chapters three and four discussed a good number of texts commonly either overlooked or given a different interpretation by the model of the non risk-taking God. It was seen that the scriptures depict God in dynamic give-and-take relationships with his creatures. God has sovereignly decided not to control everything which happens. Rather, God is sensitive to us and has decided to be responsive to us and be conditioned by us. This is the watershed issue between the risk and no-risk views of providence. According to the risk view God adapts his strategies to take account of our decisions. There is no eternal blueprint by which all things happen exactly as God desires.

Although this understanding of providence does break with certain elements of the Western Christian tradition, it is in continuity with others. The tradition has continually affirmed both the personhood of God and that God enters into personal relationships with humans, yet the tradition has not sufficiently articulated providence in light of what is entailed in personal relationships. Hence, the model of a God who, in some respects, is conditioned by his creatures is a God who takes risks in working out the divine project. The notion of divine conditionality has often been rejected in the tradition while simultaneously affirming the personal and loving nature of God's relationship to us. The fellowship model defended in this thesis addresses this problem and so it may be claimed that the risk model does greater justice to the heart of tradition: God in personal relationship with us.

Chapters five and six discussed the conceptual intelligibility of the proposed model. It was claimed that the risk model better articulates the type of

sovereignty God has actually decided to exercise in history, a sovereignty connected to the nature of God as loving, wise, free, faithful and almighty. This is the God who takes the risk that we might not respond to his love yet who is extremely resourceful and competent in his wisdom and the manifestation of his powerful love. God does not give up on us, even in our sin, but comes to us in the person of Jesus to win back our trust and love. Since Jesus manifests the real nature of God, there is no conflict between the type of providence he displayed and that of the godhead. The God who comes to us in history is a God who relates, adapts, responds, and loves us. This is what God is actually like.

This is a God who is able to meet the challenges we face in life and work to bring good out of our evil. Chapter six examined how the risk model of providence is adequate to the demands of life. God is working to bring about a future which redeems us from sin and suffering. The God who takes the risk of love provides a coherent model of God in relation to human suffering: God is opposed to it. Since God stands against suffering and sin there is no need to posit a "secret" intention in God which takes precedence over his revealed intentions. There is no question about God's intentions towards us for he loves us and desires our best. Thus, when things do not go as God desires we may share God's sense of outrage--there is a place for lament in the Christian life.

But there is more than lament in the Christian life, there is also hope because God is working to redeem his entire creation. God has the wisdom, power, love and perseverance necessary to meet the challenges ahead. God is competent and resourceful in working with us. We are called to have confidence in the way God seeks to carry out his project. According to the fellowship model of providence God elicits our participation in his project. This understanding of divine sovereignty deeply affects our views concerning salvation, suffering and evil, prayer, and divine guidance. God has sovereignly decided to make some of his actions dependent upon our requests and actions. This is part of what it means for God to take risks.

Although the risk model of providence meets the three criteria, it has not been claimed to have been "proved" in any hard sense of the term. A cumulative case has been set forth with enough evidence to warrant a hearing for the model but there is much more that needs to be said in order to respond to all the questions it poses for the various doctrines and life-applications of the Christian faith. Doctrines are interconnected and so are our applications of them. A change in a key model means more changes elsewhere and these must be examined. But that takes more time than is permitted here. There is yet more to be written about the God who takes risks.

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