

My Only Comfort in Life and in Death: A Pastoral Response to Open Theism

Brian R. Keepers

Introduction

I am a pastor of anxious souls. Every week I clamber up into the pulpit and stare out into the faces of real people who are dealing within hardship and loss and uncertainty. Even for those who try to conceal their anxiety beneath a pleasant countenance, all of us, in some way or another, must navigate through the morass of life changes that so often seem confusing and out of our control. It is both the privilege and the burden of the pastor to walk with people through anxious times and provide wise biblical counsel, pastoral care and leadership. And this means we must deal with God. Where is God when bad things happen? Does God play a role in our pain and loss? Does God know the future? Does God have a specific plan for our lives? How should we pray? And does prayer change God's mind? These and a whole host of questions like it loom in the minds and hearts of people in our congregations (and outside) as they deal with change and struggle to make sense of their experiences.

It's from this angle, then – ministering to people in anxious times¹-- that I am most intrigued with the contemporary debate among evangelicals regarding divine providence. I was asked to respond to open theism as a pastor, thinking through some of the pastoral implications of this view of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Arguably, there are few Christian doctrines that have stronger applications for the Christian life than the doctrine of divine providence. As Thomas Oden writes, “many practical questions of care of souls amid sickness, personal crisis, poverty, and death hinge on how well one understands this pivotal issue of providence.”² .

As a pastor of anxious souls, I see the way people's heightened levels of anxiety hold them in a yoke of slavery, bend their focus inward, diminish them and keep them from

¹ Of course anxiety is not a new thing. Nor is anxiety in itself an entirely bad thing. As Peter Steinke points out, anxiety is “a natural reaction designed for self-preservation.” We have been created with a strong urge for survival, and anxiety, at one level, can make us “alert, more self-conscious, and highly motivated to take action.” Stated most simply, anxiety is an automatic reaction “to a threat, real or imagined.” But Steinke goes on to warn us about the danger of when anxiety becomes elevated. At a heightened level, “anxiety can be a paralyzer (the word anxiety is derived from a word meaning “to choke” or “to cause pain by squeezing”). If intense and prolonged, anxiety has a strangling effect, depleting people's energy, disturbing their thinking, and dividing their loyalties.” Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006, 3.

² Thomas Oden, *The Living God*, Vol. 1, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987, 272.

experiencing the spacious salvation offered us in Christ.³ While anxiety is not a new thing to the human experience, I have to wonder if the level of anxiety in our society is heightening.⁴ I long for members of my congregation to be set free from the chains of anxiety and to live joyfully and obediently in the spacious with-God-life that is ours because of our union with Christ. I long for them to experience Jesus' promise when he says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and *I will give you rest*. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and *you will find rest for your souls*."⁵

Finding Comfort in Anxious Times

In the Reformed tradition, we embrace the creeds and confessions as instructive tools that have not only arisen out of the witness of Scripture but also help provide framework for how we read and interpret God's revelation in Scripture. The Heidelberg Catechism in particular has much to say about the doctrine of divine providence, written by Olevianus and Ursinus in a poetically lyrical way that feeds both the mind and the heart.⁶ Over the last four centuries, countless believers in the

³ So much of Scripture, in expressing the human condition, reflects this same sense of anxiety as constraint. In Psalm 18:6 the psalmist declares, "In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help." *Zarar*, the frequently used word for distress in the psalms, is literally translated "narrow space." Anxiety tightens and suffocates us, and as a result we think in narrow-minded ways or behave in predictable patterns. The antonym of *zarar* is *yahsa*, which connotes "open space." *Yasha* can also be translated "salvation" (the base word for *Yeshua* or Jesus). In contrast to the constraining power of anxiety, the psalmist declares in joyful confidence: "The LORD is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear?" Being less anxious, we feel relaxed because there is room to breathe. We feel expansive and joyful when we have open space or freedom. "I have come to give you life," said Jesus in the gospel of John, "and give it you in abundance" (10:10). "For freedom Christ has set us free," writes Paul. "Stand firm, there, and do not again submit to the yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). Steinke, 8.

⁴ German sociologist Ulrich Beck seems to think so. He writes: "People are losing their orientation. The political, social and economic systems that brought prosperity over the past fifty years no longer function and people see no alternatives. They feel caught in a web of change they neither understand nor control. The result is a high level of anxiety, insecurity, and confusion...Faced with unnamed and unseen forces controlling their lives—as illustrated by the plethora of TV programs and movies dealing with alien and unseen forces that threaten to plunge human life into the abyss of chaos—people feel anxious and paralyzed" Cited by Alen J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 66-7.

⁵ Matthew 11:28-9 (italics mine).

⁶ Ursinus and Olevianus were two young Reformed thinkers who were commissioned to write the Heidelberg Catechism by Frederick III, ruler of the Palatinate, in 1530. The impetus behind Frederick III's sponsoring the writing of the catechism was to settle raging theological disputes among Protestants in the Palatinate, disputes especially pertaining to the Lord's Supper. Interestingly enough, rather than sponsoring Lutheran theologians to write it, he sought out Ursinus and Olevianus who were both Reformed theologians (of the Zurich type) because Frederick privately believed the Zurich theology of Bullinger to be more biblical than Lutheran theology. While both Olevianus and Ursinus are given credit for writing the catechism, it is agreed that Ursinus, who was exceptionally brilliant, was the primary author. Cornelius Plantinga, *A Place to Stand: A Reformed Study of Creeds and Confessions*. Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, MI, 1979, 19.

Reformed tradition have looked to the Heidelberg Catechism as a source of strength and comfort in the midst of their own anxious times. This theme of comfort is pervasive through the whole catechism. As Fred Klooster writes, “In the Heidelberg Catechism we have a masterful picture of the *only comfort*. The first question and answer of this catechism is a comfort song echoing the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ:”⁷

1 Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own,
but belong –
body and soul,
in life and death –
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven:
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me whole heartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

Before we go any further, it is necessary to clarify what the catechism means by “comfort.”⁸ As Klooster points out, “in today’s world comfort has lost its depth and power. Our consumer society has robbed the word of its meaning.”⁹ Contrary to any connotations of comfort as being egotistic and sentimental, when the catechism speaks of comfort it has more to do with a deep sense of trust – that is, of security and protection outside of ourselves. And this comfort does not cause us to sink back into the cozy chair of our own safe personal piety; rather it frees us from our anxiety and motivates us to live courageously and obediently in the world as one who belongs to

⁷ Fred Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988, 22.

⁸ In the catechism, “comfort” is the English translation of the German word *trost*. The root meaning of *trost* is “certainty, protection.” It carries with it the notion of “trust.” See Klooster, 33-4, for a fuller explanation.

⁹ Klooster further explains: “When we think of comfort today, we usually think of comfortable homes, easy chairs, vacations and rest. Comfort has come to refer to something cozy....Some people may think the catechism is speaking of comfort as a spiritual sedative that induces peaceful sleep and rest. Comfort then becomes a spiritual pain killer” Klooster, 33.

God in Christ. “The comforted believer is Spirit-enabled to ‘seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33)...Comfort thus induces courage for everyday Christian living and fortitude for obedient service in God’s kingdom.”¹⁰ This is what the catechism has in mind when it speaks of comfort.

This only comfort that the Heidelberg speaks of is comprehensive – it spans both life and death, body and soul. It involves one’s whole person and whole history. And it is based entirely on our union with Christ.¹¹ The second stanza of Answer 1 depicts the comfort involved in Christ’s providential watching over those who belong to him. He has not only paid for my sin and freed me from the devil’s tyranny, but “he also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.”

It is in Q&A’s 27 and 28 that the Heidelberg Catechism addresses more explicitly the nature of divine providence and how knowledge of this benefits us.

27 Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. Providence is
the almighty and ever present power of God
by which he upholds, as with his hand,
heaven
and earth
and all creatures,
and so rules them that
leaf and blade,
rain and drought,
fruitful and lean years,
food and drink,
health and sickness,
prosperity and poverty –
all things, in fact, come to us
not by chance
but from his fatherly hand.

28 Q. How does the knowledge of God’s creation and providence help us?

A. We can be patient when things go against us,
thankful when things go well,
and for the future we can have
good confidence in our faithful God and Father

¹⁰ Ibid, 40.

¹¹ In his Commentary on the catechism, Ursinus says that the “substance” of this comfort “consists in this, that we are grafted into Christ by faith, that through him we are reconciled to, and beloved of God, that he may care for us and save us eternally.” Ibid, 34-5.

that nothing will separate us from his love.
All creatures are so completely in his hand
that without his will
they can neither move nor be moved.

The catechism clearly reflects John Calvin's influence, both in thought and wording. For Calvin, this understanding of providence as God's continual preservation and governance of all creation is essential to finding comfort not just in death but here and now *in this life*. Calvin writes, "Pious and holy meditation on providence" enables us to "receive the best and sweetest fruit."¹² And without this understanding of providence, Calvin says that life would be "unbearable."¹³ Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism assert that the doctrine of divine providence benefits us in three ways: It provides us (1) patience in adversity, (2) gratitude in prosperity, and (3) hope for the future.¹⁴

While all three of these benefits are important for the Christian life, this essay will explore two of them (patience in adversity and hope for the future), keeping this question in mind: *Does open theism undermine these benefits?*¹⁵ Or does open theism offer a much needed corrective to a flawed understanding of divine providence? It is to these questions that I now turn.

Patience in Adversity

How does the believer make sense of suffering and adversity? What should be the believer's response in the face of adversity? Is God to blame for our suffering? These

¹² *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.17.6.

¹³ *Ibid*, 1.17.10

¹⁴ Calvin concludes his discussion of God's providence in the *Institutes* with a chapter on "How We Might Apply This Doctrine to Our Greatest Benefit." Calvin mentions the three benefits we find here in A 28 of the catechism, only he names them in a slightly different order: "Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge." *Institutes*, 1.17.7.

¹⁵ By not giving attention to the second benefit of God's providence listed in A 28 in the catechism, which is being "thankful when things go well," is not to say that this fruit of gratitude is less significant than the other two benefits mentioned. Calvin comments that thankfulness is one of the "best and sweetest fruits of God's providence." He observes that "the Christian heart" will always look to God "as the principal cause of things" since we are "thoroughly persuaded that all things happen by God's plan, and that nothing takes place by chance." *Institutes*, 1.17.6. I have decided to focus on the fruits of patience in adversity and hope for the future because I believe they are most relevant to the chief question this essay is addressing: *how can we find comfort in the midst of anxious times?* Even though I will not discuss the ramifications of open theism as it pertains to the benefit of gratitude in prosperity, I do believe that the openness view diminishes our sense of gratitude when it comes to both issues of salvation and thankfulness for God's daily provision. According to the openness view, we can be grateful to God when good things happen because he has created a world (set up the project) in such a way that prosperity can and does happen. But this does not mean that God is directly responsible for bringing that specific act of prosperity. This, I believe, diminishes our sense of gratitude towards God when things go well.

are indeed important questions that have practical applications for the Christian life. According to A 28, “knowledge of God’s creation and providence” enables us to be “patient when things go against us.” In his commentary, Ursinus add this further comment: “for whatever comes to pass by the will and counsel of God and is profitable for us...we ought to patiently bear.” Ursinus goes on to assert that all things are profitable for us, “even those that are evil,” for they “happen by the counsel and will of God.” Therefore, Ursinus concludes, “we ought to bear these patiently, and in all things consider and recognize the fatherly will of God towards us.”¹⁶

Calvin says something similar in the Institutes when he points to the lives of Joseph, Job, and David as biblical examples of patience in adversity. The general principle is that when “anything adverse happens,” the believer should immediately turn to God, “whose hand can best impress patience and peaceful moderation of mind upon us.”¹⁷

What is problematic about this view, of course, is that it may be interpreted to cast God as the author of evil and the one directly responsible for suffering. This is especially problematic when we are presented with cases of gratuitous evil and severe suffering and injustice. Even as I make my final revisions on this paper, the nation experienced the horrible tragedy of a mass shooting on Virginia Tech’s campus (Blacksburg, Virginia) where a mentally disturbed student walked into some classrooms and shot thirty-two of his classmates, injured many more, and then turned the gun on himself. Such a senseless and heinous event conjures up haunting memories of the shootings at Columbine eight years ago (April 20, 1999). How do we make sense of such gratuitous suffering? Can we really say that even something like this comes to us not by chance but from God’s fatherly hand?

Open theism presents an alternative view of God’s sovereignty that claims to avoid holding God directly responsible for all cases of adversity. Open theists like Sanders have pointed out that while a view of specific sovereignty may be intended to give believers comfort when bad things happen, so often it has the reverse effect. To tell a couple in your congregation that their teenage son was killed in a car accident by a drunk-driver because “God willed it” and God had a reason for it can feel like a trivialization of their suffering and, rather than strengthening their faith, push them away from God. In his book *The God Who Risks*, Sanders writes:

¹⁶ *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*. Translated by the Rev. G.W. Williard, A.M., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1954, 163.

¹⁷ In light of such biblical examples Calvin learned that “if there is no more effective remedy for anger and impatience, he has surely benefited greatly who has so learned to meditate on God’s providence that he can always recall his mind to this point: the Lord has willed it.” Therefore, Calvin continues, “It must be borne, not only because one may not contend against it, but also because he wills nothing but what is expedient.” (Inst. 1.17.8).

Indeed, numerous well-meaning believers attempt to comfort the suffering with standard responses regarding God's intention for the sufferer....But does God always succeed in this? Even in the church I see a fair number of people who have become embittered toward God – though they seldom say so publicly. They typically lead lives of quiet resignation while secretly hating God.¹⁸

I sympathize with Sanders' concern pastorally about how this way of thinking can devastate people's faith and convey a picture of God who seems more like a sadistic bully than a loving parent. But does open theism offer a better alternative? Sanders presents a view of God's providence that embraces a general sovereignty in which God, in his almighty wisdom and power, created this type of world where human beings are freely capable of entering into genuine give-and-take relationships of love with God and one another. In order for this give-and-take relationship to be a reality, God limits himself by refusing to impose his will on his creatures. In creating the world this way, God risks that his creatures may reject him and abuse their freedom. While God can act unilaterally if God chooses, most often God does not act this way because it would compromise the conditions of his project. According to Sanders, this explains why God does not prevent all evil. "If God is going to act to prevent such terrible evils, then God is going to have to radically alter the conditions of the project."¹⁹ This means that there are things that happen in this world that are by sheer chance. For example, it is quite possible (even likely) that the couple who lost their son to a drunk-driver experienced this tragedy for no reason what so ever. It was a tragedy that came about simply because in a world like this, these sort of things can happen. It's not that God lacks the power to intervene. It is that God chooses not to because to do so would alter the conditions of the project. So God may be present in our suffering, and God suffers with us, but God's hands are tied (even if God willfully tied them himself).

According to Sanders, this means that there is "pointless evil." He writes: "Some evil is simply pointless because it does not serve to achieve any greater good...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."²⁰ So in Sanders' view, God cannot be held responsible for evil and all the suffering that happens in our world. God is only responsible for creating the world with these conditions (in which evil and suffering can happen) and for those rare specific acts in history God does elect to do.²¹

The problem with this, in my opinion, is that it may *seem* to "get God off the hook" when it comes to holding God responsible for suffering, but *does it really?* As Sanders acknowledges, according to the openness perspective, God may not be responsible for the event of evil or suffering, but God *is* responsible for setting the conditions by which

¹⁸ Johns Sanders, *The God Who Risks*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 262-3

¹⁹ Ibid, 260.

²⁰ Ibid, 262.

²¹ Ibid, 262.

these sort of things can happen. And one wonders if God is guilty then of divine incompetence and irresponsibility for setting the world up in this sort of way. Does open theism really offer more comfort to those who suffer when it suggests that God's hand is *not* in their adversity? As one young woman in my congregation said, "I would rather endure tragedy knowing that God is still in control of that situation, even if I don't understand why it is happening, than live in a world where suffering is out of God's control!"

In contrast to the openness view, the catechism affirms that nothing in this world, no matter how tragic, is out of God's control in the sense that God's hand is not still somehow upholding, allowing and governing these events. This does not mean that God is directly responsible for evil or all cases of adversity. Nor does it mean that those who perform wicked acts are not responsible and shouldn't be brought to justice. What it means is that God permits certain adversity to happen by way of secondary causes. Theologians of the past have made a distinction between God's *active will* (God's actively causing something to happen) and God's *permissive will* (God permits something to happen by way of secondary causation). Thomas Oden makes this important clarification: "Evil is not an effect caused by God, but a *defect* of secondary causes that are permitted by God." ²²

This is pertinent to our discussion because I believe that the catechism's understanding of God's providence in adversity is a better alternative than the openness view. The openness view is addressing a key problem when it comes to issues of theodicy (How can evil and suffering be a reality if God is perfectly good, loving and all-powerful?). I'm not suggesting that the catechism's view is free of any problems. But I do believe that the openness view, in seeking to get God off the hook when it comes to being responsible for all adversity that happens in this world, opens the way for a whole new set of problems. And these problems diminish our capacity to be patient when things go against us. Let me offer some of those problems that emerge.

Adversity without Purpose

One problem with open theism is that much of what happens to us (maybe even *most* of what happens to us) is the result of chance. Is it possible to be patient in times of adversity when it is likely that what is happening to us has no divine purpose but is a matter of chance? Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl has said that "despair is suffering without meaning." If patience is directly tied to perseverance, which is sustained by hope (the opposite of despair), how does one persevere when it is possible (even likely) that there is no meaning to our suffering? The adversity we face may very likely be happening to us not because God has something in mind but because this is simply the sort of world where things like this happen.

²² Oden, 296. For a helpful overview on the nature of divine providence and God's cooperation with secondary causes, see Oden's *The Living God*, 279-302.

Sanders does insist, however, that God does have an overall intent to redeem creation, and that God's definitive way of addressing evil is Christ's death on the cross and the resurrection. Through Christ's sacrifice and rising from the grave, God has completed victory over suffering and evil.²³ And he would say that while God does not control everything that happens in this world, God is infinitely resourceful and is able to bring good out of any situation (even though this cannot be guaranteed either).

But is it enough to say that nothing can separate us from God's love, and that God has an overarching intent to redeem this world, but I cannot live with the confidence day to day, in the details of life, that God is not only present but actively working out his purposes in my life? It is enough to say that God is infinitely resourceful and is able to bring good out of my bad, but he did not have a specific purpose for the adversity (besides what God may *reactively* bring out of it)?

As Jerry Bridges points out, God does not exercise his sovereignty in a broad way, leaving the smaller details of our lives to "chance" or "luck." "God our Father, who exercises his sovereignty in such minute detail as to control the destiny of a little bird, will certainly exercise his sovereignty to control even the most significant details of our lives....There are innumerable events and circumstances of our lives that, considered in themselves, are calculated to make us afraid.... If God is not in control, then I ought to be afraid. It is of little comfort to me to know that God loves me if he is not in control of the events of my life."²⁴

Bridges goes on to apply God's specific sovereignty to situations of suffering. "God's sovereignty over people does not mean we do not experience pain and suffering. It 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 for the child of God."²⁵

I believe Bridges is right when he says that knowledge of God's specific sovereignty "enables us to trust God" and enable us to "obey Jesus' command, 'Don't be afraid' because we know that our lives are not subject to chance or luck, or the whims of nature, or the malevolent actions of other people."²⁶

²³ "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. 8:35-39)." *The God Who Risks*, 264.

²⁴ Jerry Bridges. "Does Divine Sovereignty Make A Difference in Everyday Life?" *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*. Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000, 298-9.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 301.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 299.

Of course we must be careful not to presume that we can always ascertain the purpose in suffering or that all adversity can be explained. The question “Why?” often goes unanswered. And we must avoid offering simplistic explanations and religious platitudes to questions for which we have no real answers. Klooster’s advice should be heeded by us all, especially when we minister to those who are in the midst of suffering: “Silence and tears may be all one can offer in the face of sickness, tragedy and death. Remember Job’s friends! Flawed theology and mistaken explanations can turn well-meaning friends into ‘miserable comforters’ (Job 16:2)...Without giving particular and specific answer to each of life’s tragedies, Q&A’s 26-28 provide guidance on what is true, what we are to believe, what we must trust, and what we may confidently hope for.”²⁷

Taking Matters into Our Own Hands

Another significant problem with open theism is that it elevates human responsibility to such a high level that, particularly in cases of adversity, it seems to produce *impatience* rather than patience. According to open theism, we have a strong role in determining the future. So much of what God does or does not do is contingent upon us. Therefore, in the midst of adversity, rather than being patient, we may easily be compelled to “take matters into our own hands.” One of the common unhealthy ways we deal with anxiety is to over-function. We are bent towards activism in our culture anyway. Patience is already in short supply in a consumer culture where instant-gratification is the predominant undercurrent. If I embrace the openness view, then how am I to respond to adversity? Is this adversity happening to me because I’m not doing enough on my part to change the situation? Open theism may well evoke a greater sense of anxiety in us that we need to take it upon ourselves to find a way to escape from our troubles rather than patiently endure them.

Furthermore, does an openness view lead one to deny experiences of adversity rather than to embrace them for the experiences of growth and character formation they so often prove to be? Does an openness view fuel a kind of impatience that is so strongly focused on changing the circumstances rather than seeing how God might be present and active in them, and thus rob us of an opportunity to learn to trust God more deeply in barren places?

Praying Through Adversity

A third problem with open theism concerns its perspective on prayer, specifically petitionary prayer. Sanders claims that our prayers do cause God to do something that God would otherwise not do unless we ask. Sanders also says that God may grant us a prayer request that is not good for us. God listens to our prayers and gives us what we ask for, good or bad, because this, according to Sanders, is necessary for a genuine

²⁷ Klooster, 302.

relationship between God and his creatures to occur.²⁸ While Sanders wants to present a view of prayer that affirms that God takes our prayers seriously and our prayers do make a difference, the problem with Sanders' view is that, again, we see a heightened degree of responsibility placed on human beings. And this heightened degree of responsibility has a tendency to breed greater anxiety rather than produce fruits of patience.

What if I don't know how or what to pray? And what if I pray for the wrong thing, even if my intentions at the time are good? As human beings, we are incapable of knowing the future ramifications of our present desires. I believe that we can offer genuine prayers of lament and petition to God but also rest in confidence that God, who is perfectly wise and knows the future, will bring about what God determines best. In fact, I think this view of prayer (in contrast to Sanders' view) has the potential to foster a more honest and intentional prayer life because I know that God's response will not ultimately be dependent on what I pray or fail to pray. There is not pressure for me to "get my prayers right," but simply to keep dealing with God in prayer as honestly as I can at the time. Rather than putting pressure on ourselves to pray right, we place our confidence in the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us when we pray and in God's wisdom to bring about his good and perfect will.

Another problem with Sanders' view of petitionary prayer is how do we interpret circumstances where we *don't* get what we ask for? What does it say about the character of God that he refuses to grant a heartfelt request like prayers for a sick child to be made well? And if God doesn't grant this request, what does it say about the faith of those who prayed it? Is it the parent's fault when their sick child does not get well and dies because they lacked the faith necessary to heal him? Were they not persuasive enough (and the congregation who prayed with and for them) to get God to change his mind? Again, doesn't this just feed our anxiety rather than allow us to find rest in God's faithfulness?

Patience in Adversity is Not the Same as Indifference to Suffering

It may be argued, as Sanders has, that Calvin's view of God's sovereignty fosters indolence and resignation among believers. Rather than calling God to account through prayers of lament, we grit our teeth and bear it, all the while quietly resenting God for the adversity we endure. Even further, Calvin's view seems to encourage the unchallenged acceptance of *all* suffering. Sanders also challenges Calvin for promoting the status quo, particularly when it comes to issues of social and economic injustice. We shrug our shoulders in the face of injustice and say, "this is God's will." We advise the wealthy and the poor alike to accept their lot in life, but call for no change, no redistribution of resources. Sanders is right to point out Calvin's apparent lack of

²⁸ See *The God Who Risks*, 273-4.

concern on issues of social and economic injustice.²⁹ All though it should be noted that Calvin distinguishes his view of providence from fatalism, and he calls believers to prudent and faithful living and condemns disobedience and wickedness as inexcusable.³⁰ Being patient in adversity must never lead to indifference towards suffering (whether it's we who suffer or the suffering of others), nor can it serve as an excuse for condoning and perpetuating injustice. Believers have a responsibility to participate in the mission of God, to exercise godliness and enact justice here and now, even as we can trust that ultimately this adversity is not outside the will of God and God will be faithful to bring good from it.

Hope for the Future

Let us now move on to a consideration of what the catechism names as the third way the knowledge of God's providence benefits us: *hope for the future*. In the catechism's words, "for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father than nothing will separate us from his love." This confidence arises from the wonderful promises of Romans 8:35-39, "a part of the chapter that serves as the basis of the entire catechism's emphasis on comfort."³¹

Ursinus explains how knowledge of God's providence produces, "hope in regard to future things." This hope burgeons from a full assurance "that if God by his providence has so far delivered us out of past evils, he will also in [the] future make all things subservient to our salvation, and never so desert us that we perish." However, "we would not have a good and certain hope in relation to future things if we were not fully persuaded that the will of God, in regard to our salvation, and that of all his people, is unchangeable."³²

Can We Have Assurance of our Future Salvation?

Does open theism undermine a believer's hope for the future? While both the Heidelberg and Sanders stand in agreement that salvation is a gift of sheer grace from God in Christ, received by faith, they significantly disagree on their views of the depth of one's bondage to sin, the effect of grace, and the nature of election. I cannot give a full enough treatment of these divergent views here, but let me briefly address the issue of salvation and its pastoral ramifications.

²⁹ Calvin explains that "even though the rich are mingled with the poor in the world, while to each his condition is divinely assigned, God, who lights all men, is not at all blind. And so he urges the poor to patience; because those who are not content with their own lot try to shake off the burden laid upon them by God." Calvin further asserts that it is by God's "secret plan" that "some distinguish themselves, while others remain contemptible." *Institutes*, 1. 16. 6.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 1.17.3-5.

³¹ Klooster, 300.

³² *Commentary*, 164.

Sanders is critical of the Calvinist affirmation of irresistible grace and advocates instead for what he calls *enabling grace*. Since God refuses to impose his will on us but is determined to elicit a reciprocal relationship of love on our part, God provides an enabling or prevenient grace by which we are enabled but not coerced to give our consent to God. This enabling grace opens up a new option in the life of the sinner to choose to respond to God. But Sanders makes the point strongly that enabling grace is “invincible” but it is not “factually irresistible.”³³ God will not overpower us with his grace. A person who is enabled by the Spirit may nevertheless reject the divine love.³⁴

Sanders goes on to say that there is no absolute guarantee *for us* that we are genuinely redeemed. And it is possible, even if one comes to faith, that at some point down the road he or she may apostatize and lose their salvation. Moreover, Sanders cites Eberhard Jungel who points out that “desire for security is an attempt to gain control over the other the other, a lack of trust,” and that “trust in the relationship renders the need for control superfluous.”³⁵

But is a desire for security on our part really only an attempt to gain control over God? I would argue that this is a simplistic explanation for a deep-seated desire in every human heart. Certainly our need for security can be traced back to the Fall, but I am inclined to see this desire as implanted in us by the Creator from the beginning. Our desire for security is a reflection of our creaturely limits, and our utter dependence on God. If God is not the one in whom we seek security, then we will invariably go hunting for it in lesser gods, even bend inward on ourselves. Desiring security and striving to control are not synonymous. Efforts to gain control may be the result when our desire for security is misguided and driven by sinful tendencies, but to desire security in our relationship with God and our future salvation is not to be spurned as a sinful effort to control God. Both the Scriptures and our confessions seem to affirm that God sees it fitting and to our benefit to grant us security in our salvation.

Both Calvin and Wesley pointed the believer to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit as confirmation of salvation. And Jonathan Edwards, in his brilliant *Religious Affections*, directs the believer to look for the fruits of the Spirit in his/her life as evidence of a regenerate heart.

No doubt the notion of irritable grace can and has been abused in the sense that it may cause indolence and passivity in some when it comes to the Christian life. But as a pastor, I have always found the notion of irritable grace, made powerfully visible in the

³³ According to Sanders, “Enabling grace is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of our redemption.” *The God Who Risks*, 245.

³⁴ “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. God does not rape us, even for our own good.” *Ibid*, 246.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 250.

sacrament of baptism, a wonderful source of comfort for both the believer (who will likely experience doubts about his/her salvation at some time or another) and families (who are experiencing the heartache of watching a loved one walk away from the faith). "If everything depended on my belief," writes Ruth Tucker, "there are some days when, I think, I would be doomed. But salvation does depend on the strength of my faith; it depends only on God's grace. Even when my faith is weak, I have confidence in God's hold on my life."³⁶

Sanders' view stresses an elevated responsibility that we have to respond to God and keep our faith. True, Sanders agrees that we can only respond to God because of his grace which is at work in us, but salvation ultimately is a matter of our choosing. The catechism's understanding of salvation in no way eliminates human responsibility. Nor does assurance of salvation warrant indolence and irresponsibility on the believer's part in matters of sanctification. Just the opposite is true. It is *because* we have this assurance of our salvation that we are set free from worry and are able, out of gratitude, to be "wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him" (Third stanza of A 1). Certainly more space can and should be given to this issue of sin, grace and salvation. However, I want to turn now more specifically to the issue of divine guidance. Salvation, no doubt, is not just about our future eternal life beyond the grave but this abundant life is breaking in now. And our hope for the future has to do with a confidence that God is guiding and directing our lives here and now with his wisdom and power.

Understanding Divine Guidance

Does God have a plan for our lives? Can we trust God to guide us in our decisions about the future so as to realize that plan? The issue of divine guidance has not only to do with big decisions about our future (Who will I marry? Where should I go to college? What should I choose as a career? Should I have children? And so forth.). It also has to do with the daily choices we make that collectively prove significant for the path that our lives take.

Sanders argues that, when it comes to divine guidance, God does not have a specific blueprint that we must follow. Rather, God has a goal for our lives in which there are numerous open routes to its achievement. While he acknowledges that there are occasions when God does desire a specific individual to do some particular act, this is the exception not the norm. He writes:

Yet for most of us there is no 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

³⁶ Ruth Tucker, *Walking Away From Faith: Unraveling the Mystery of Belief and Unbelief*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002, 26.

exemplified in God's way in Jesus....The way of Jesus is a way of life not concerned about blueprints but concerned about being the kind of person God desires...In this sense it could be said that God has a specific will for each and every situation: to live as Jesus would.³⁷

Sanders denies any kind of specific blue print for the future because "to a large extent our future is open and we are to determine what it will be in dialogue with God."³⁸ Sometimes God unilaterally decides how to accomplish his goals but "he usually elicits human cooperation such that it is both God and humanity who decide what the future shall be."³⁹ Sanders asserts that God is temporal (God is not outside of time but experiences temporal succession). Moreover, he ascribes a "dynamic omniscience" to God which means that God knows the past and the present with "exhaustive definite knowledge" and knows the future as "partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open)."⁴⁰ Again, the emphasis is on us collaborating with God to bring the open part of that future into being. This includes our prayers of petition ("impetratory prayer"), which actually do bring about something in the future that God otherwise would not do unless we ask for it.

There is much about Sanders view here that I find helpful, particularly when it comes to the way we understand (or frequently misunderstand) divine guidance. As a pastor, I frequently see people overwhelmed by the multitude of choices they face, and, consequently, immobilized when it comes to "discovering God's will," which for them usually means they must discover that *one path* otherwise they will miss the will of God.

In his book *The Will of God as a Way of Life*, Gerald Sittser addresses this misguided understanding of God's will that ensnares so many Christians. In a similar vein as Sanders, Sittser exhorts the believer to not be preoccupied with discovering that "one" path (Sittser agrees there are multiple paths one could choose) but to do the will of God in the present that we already know, contained in Scripture and most specifically in Jesus' command to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness in whatever path we choose. He writes:

We do not, therefore, need to fret when we have to make big decision about the future, worrying about the terrifying possibility that we might miss God's will for our lives. We simply need to do what we already know in the present. God has been clear where clarity is most needed. The choices we make every day – to love a spouse after an argument, to treat an unkind coworker with respect, to serve food at a soup kitchen, to pray for God's help when we do not feel much need for it – determine whether we are doing the will of God. If we have a problem, it is

³⁷ *The God Who Risks*, 276.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 277.

³⁹ See his essay in this journal, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

not lack of knowledge; rather, it is our willingness to respond to the knowledge we do have.⁴¹

But does acknowledging that we have multiple paths we could choose, all which would be in God's will, exclude the notion that there is ultimately only one path that God intended for us? Does this mean that God doesn't have a larger plan that involves the specific choices we make? Is the future really open, left for us to decide with God? This is where Sittser diverges from Sanders' view, and rightfully so. I find Sanders view to be inadequate because it denies God's specific guidance in a believer's life, it places too much responsibility on human beings, and by claiming that God is temporal and thus ignorant of the future I believe it diminishes the hope one can have about the future. I would commend to my readers Sittser's view as a much better option that holds the tension of both our responsibility to make godly choices but also the exercise of specific guidance on God's part (so that God's larger plan cannot be thwarted by us).

Sittser asserts that if we seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, which *is* the will of God for our lives, then "*whatever choices we make concerning the future become the will of God for our lives.*"⁴² There are many paths we *could* follow, many options we *could* pursue. As long as we are seeking God, all of them can be God's will for our lives, although only one – the path we choose – actually becomes his will. He writes:

As we will see, God does have a plan for our lives. We will discover that plan, however, as we simply do the will of God we already know in the present moment. Life will then gradually unfold for us...Over time we will begin to see a pattern emerge – that the course our lives took was exactly what God intended. We will observe this pattern, however, *only by looking back* on what has already happened, only by viewing our life story in retrospect.⁴³

Where as Sanders calls us to live as Jesus would in the present, accepting our responsibility to collaborate with God in determining a future that does not exist as yet (without any kind of specific divine plan), Sittser presents a view of divine guidance that I believe is more reflective of the catechism and calls us to live responsibly in the present, but to do so trusting that God knows the future and does have a larger plan that is being worked out.

Pertinent to this discussion is the difference between God's *revealed will* and God's *hidden will*. Not only do I find this distinction to be biblical and supported by key Christian thinkers who have gone before us, but I find it to be enormously helpful pastorally when it comes to helping people find hope for the future.

⁴¹ Gerald Sittser, *The Will of God As A Way of Life*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000, 19.

⁴² Ibid, 30.

⁴³ Ibid, 34-5.

God's revealed will refers to the revelation of God's will that we receive from the Bible. The Bible reveals that God's primary will for our lives is to love God with everything we have and above everything else, and also to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It exhorts us to discipline ourselves in godliness, cultivate character, pursue wisdom, care for the poor, advocate justice for victims of injustice, to live our lives patterned after the way of Jesus. Even though the Bible may be clear on these matters, that clarity does not always make our choices any easier. Even with the Bible as our guide, it is still difficult to make decisions about the future with confidence and assurance.

But there is a second way to understand the expression "the will of God." The will of God in this second sense is not only revealed to us in Scripture, it is also *hidden* from us. The hidden will of God consists of his sovereign control over the entire universe. We can say that *everything that happens* is the will of God in this second sense because God governs and upholds, by providence, all of creation and all of human history. Someday God will bring history as we know it to its glorious conclusion and utterly renew this material world. Then he will demonstrate just how complete and glorious his rule over this universe is and always has been.

God's hidden will not only applies to a more comprehensive sense of creation and human history, but to our individual lives as well.⁴⁴ God's will is hidden because at any given moment we cannot comprehend how he is working to fulfill his eternal purpose. In contrast to open theism which says God is temporal, classical theism affirms that God transcends time (even as God simultaneously has entered human history) and sees the end from the beginning and controls every aspect. Sittser reminds us that our vision, however, is limited because we are *inside* the story, experiencing it as it unfolds. "In our perspective we see only a small part of the bigger picture. We can believe with confidence *that* God is in control, but we many not always know *how*. Thus, we are called to trust his sovereignty, believing that he will accomplish his glorious purpose."⁴⁵ We can trust that God's hidden will is being worked out not only when we are confronted with choices about the future, but also when we endure adversity. We may not understand why we endure certain adversity, but we can have good confidence that God is working all things together for our salvation.

I am drawn to Sittser's work for a similar reason I am drawn to Sanders — because I know both of their questions, and their answers, arise from the real struggles their own personal lives as they recognize that theology at its best is always to be *lived*, not simply held. Sittser lost his wife, daughter, and mother in a head-on collision with a drunk-driver. Perhaps the most poignant section of his book is where he writes personally of his own wrestling with these issues of divine providence and human responsibility:

⁴⁴ See Calvin's discussion in his *Institutes*, 1.16.9.

⁴⁵ Sittser, 113-14.

God's role [in the tragedy]...was not clear. How, I wondered, could God allow such a tragedy to occur? Even after these many years I still do not understand why three precious members of my family lost their lives. It seems such a waste, a meaningless event, as if God were like a child who for no apparent reason squished three ants who happened to be crossing the sidewalk at the wrong moment. I still cannot find one convincing reason why it happened or had to happen.

I remember spending hour after hour pondering the tragedy in the months that followed, trying to make some sense out of it. I looked at the event from within my own human experience. What I saw was horrible to me, very painful, very senseless. One man used his freedom irresponsibly and had changed our lives forever. But was God in it, too? Did he play a role?

It eventually occurred to me that perhaps my vision was obscured by my own finitude. I could only see the event from my own limited perspective. I finally conceded that I could be wrong in the facile judgments I had made. So I decided, slowly and cautiously, to believe that God was still at work, however unfathomable and mysterious it appeared to me. The story of Joseph as well as many other biblical stories helped me to believe that my story could be part of a bigger story and that my perspective was like a blink of an eye in light of God's perspective. I started to believe that more was going on than meets the eye.

So I concentrated on doing the obvious, not on figuring out the oblique. I figured that I had nothing to lose trusting in God, though I was aware that I had plenty to lose if I made the wrong choice. I lived in hope, invested in my children, and set a course for my life that would honor God and be redemptive for everyone concerned. I began to read the story of my own life through the redemptive story of the Bible, embracing the revealed will of God I already knew and trusting that God was working out his hidden will. That hidden will, I sensed, was not cold and hard, like an icy cliff, but vital and dynamic, like a rushing river. I learned to separate what I did know and could do from what I did not know and assumed God was doing. *I learned to live with mystery. That decision saved my life* (italics mine).⁴⁶

Learning to Live with Mystery

Even though Sanders dismisses the way theologians and laypeople alike appeal to "mystery" and "paradox" as all too often an excuse for holding on to theological inconsistencies⁴⁷, I believe there really is no other way to take both Scripture and our

⁴⁶ Ibid, 123.

⁴⁷ See chapter 2 of *The God Who Risks*.

lived experiences seriously. There is a creative tension here that Scripture, as far as I can tell, really does seem to embrace. And the fact that people seem to vacillate back and forth between what Sanders calls “meticulous providence”⁴⁸ and “general providence” is not evidence that their ideology simply isn’t matching up with their experienced reality. Sanders is right: “an unresponsive God is a hard sell in the evangelical pew.” But so is a God who does not exercise specific sovereignty. Most of my parishioners seem to embrace both the idea that God is in control of everything that happens *and* that God is responsive to us and our prayers. I think it just demonstrates that members of our congregations are much more content to live with this mystery than theologians like Sanders may be. Like Sittser, I found in most of my conversations with parishioners that learning to live with mystery, embracing both the specific sovereignty of God and their human responsibility, enabled them to live patiently in adversity and hopefully for the future.⁴⁹

Conclusion

I set out in the beginning to address the question, *Does open theism undermine the benefits of patience in adversity and hope for the future in the Christian life? Or does open theism offer a much needed corrective to a flawed theology of divine providence?* In the final analysis, I believe that open theism *is* capable of producing fruits of patience and hope in the lives of believers as they deal with anxious times. While there is much about the openness perspective I disagree with, ultimately open theism (as Sanders presents it) is able to offer the Christian comfort in knowing that God has decisively defeated evil, sin and death in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that God is infinitely resourceful in bringing about his overarching project to completion (redeeming this world). I find some of the reactions to open theism by more conservative theologians to be over-reactive and sadly quite hostile.⁵⁰ *Having said this, I conclude that the fruits of patience and hope open theism is capable of producing are, in comparison to the doctrine of providence as set out in the catechism, diminished fruits at best.* To embrace open theism is to be left with a lesser comfort in a world where we feel anxious and insecure. And ultimately this is because, according to the openness perspective, *so much rides on us as human beings.* I agree with others like Bruce Ware who have criticized open theism for demoting God

⁴⁸ This is the term Sanders regularly uses for Augustine’s and Calvin’s view of specific sovereignty. Ironically, Sanders frequently chides his critics for postulating caricatures of open theism, and yet my experience of reading Sanders presentation of both Augustine and Calvin is that he is guilty of offering caricatures himself.

⁴⁹ I engaged in numerous conversations with my parishioners, both structured and informal, about the issue of God’s providence over this past year as part of my work for this paper. As noted above, my conclusion is that I did find that most people are quite comfortable to, in the words of Parker Palmer, “live the tensions” of a God who is both perfectly sovereign and human beings who have certain free will and are responsible.

⁵⁰ For example, John Piper’s comment: “Open theism...dishonors God, distorts Scripture, damages faith, and would, if left unchecked, destroy churches and lives...” Printed on the back cover of Bruce Ware’s book *God’s Lesser Glory*. This strikes me as a rather anxious over-reaction.

and elevating human beings.⁵¹ Open theism presents a view of the Christian life that strikes me as dangerously anthropocentric rather than Theo centric. God is the one who participates in our lives rather than we are the ones who, by the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ, now participate in the Triune God's life. God must be reduced to fit into our small stories rather than sweeping us up into God's larger story. God is constantly reacting to us, adjusting his plans to accommodate us, rather than calling us to submit to and participate in his plans.

Reformed theology affirms a personal God who is relational⁵² and who has created, redeemed and summoned us to work together with God in his purposes to redeem the world. But the breaking in of God's Kingdom is never finally dependent on us. God cannot be thwarted by our weak faith or bad decisions or imperfect planning. This reality must never be used as an excuse for irresponsibility on our part, but we can take courage and comfort in the fact that God's will and God's plan are not ultimately dependent on our "coming through" for God. Roy Berkenbosh captures the only comfort of the catechism in his portrayal of Reformed Christians:

Reformed Christians are captivated by the biblical vision of a God of grace. God has good intentions toward humankind...that are never derailed by our inability to deserve them...The big blessing here is that we can rest. I need not take myself so seriously as long as I can remember how seriously God takes me. The Kingdom of God will come in all its wonder whether I am on board or not, for it is not made by human hands. It has little to do with how spiritually high I feel, how well I am contemplating the divine mysteries, or even how faithfully I observe the spiritual disciplines. The gospel is about what God has done and continues to do, not about our own actions.⁵³

As I see my parishioners burdened with fear, crippled by their worries, over-functioning and exceedingly busy because of their anxiety, I long for them to be re-oriented towards God. I long for them to find rest for their anxious souls. I want them to experience robustly the fruit of having knowledge of God's providence in their lives. I want them to know that their story is part of a much bigger story of redemption that is

⁵¹ Ware, 186.

⁵² Sanders is being misleading when he refers to the openness view as the "fellowship model" and the "relational model" as though classical theism (particularly Reformed theology) does not embrace a relational model of God's sovereignty. The dominant tone of the catechism is very much one of a personal God who invites us into a fellowship of intimacy because of our union with Christ. The Creator of the Universe is our Faithful Father and we now become children of God. The difference, of course, between open theism and the catechism is how we understand the nature of that relationship. Paul Helm warns against basing our relationship with God on human ways of relating to one another. God's relationship with his creation is *sui generis* – it is unique and unparalleled. This means that it is ultimately incomprehensible to our limited human minds. See *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, edited by James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001, 167-9.

⁵³ Roy Berkenbosh, "Reformed Theology 101: What Being Reformed Is All About," *The Banner*, February 14, 1999, 17.

being worked out. I want their hearts to join in the gospel chorus of our *only comfort* that the Heidelberg Catechism sings about. For it is this chorus that sets us free from the burden of our anxiety and worry so that we can live faithfully and courageously in this world as those who are not our own but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ!