

The Open View of God: Practical Implications

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As we have seen, there are a number of distinct ways to conceive of the relationship between God and our world. Within some of these conceptual models God is viewed as totally unaffected by what occurs on earth, while within others varying degrees of affective response are allowed. Within some God is considered the all determining ruler, while within others it is believed that control over earthly affairs is voluntarily (or involuntarily) shared with other beings. Within some God is characterized as knowing infallibly all that will occur in the future, while within others it is held that God's knowledge is limited to that which has occurred and is now occurring. The purpose of this book has not been to discuss all of these conceptual models in detail, but rather to discuss one such model -- what we have called the open view of God -- emphasizing how it differs from its leading competitors. The purpose of this final chapter is to consider in a comparative manner the practical implications of conceiving of God in this fashion. Specifically, I will consider the implications of affirming the open view of God for six issues of importance to Christians: the efficacy of petitionary prayer, the discernment of God's will, the appropriate Christian explanation(s) for evil, the appropriate Christian response to social problems, and the Christian's evangelistic obligations. We have noted and discussed throughout this book the basic characteristics of the God of the open model, but it is important to reemphasize the five that are most significant for our present purpose:

1. God not only created this world ex nihilo but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs.
2. God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom --freedom over which he cannot exercise total control.
3. God so values freedom -- the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible -- that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results.
4. God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and thus is affected by what happens in our lives.
5. God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although he may well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make.

With these divine characteristics in mind, let us now consider what it means in practice to commit oneself to an 'open' understanding of the God-world relationship.

Petitionary Prayer

All Christian traditions emphasize the importance of prayer. And for some types of prayer--prayers of worship, praise, confession and so forth--the view of God that one holds may not be very relevant. However, within most Christian traditions, it is quite clearly held, to use the words of David Mason, that believers "are to ask God for things" and that God "hears, is affected by our importunities, and responds adequately to them." That is, most Christians engage in petitionary prayer, prayer that they believe changes things. And the view of God one holds does significantly affect the way in which the efficacy of petitionary prayer can justifiably be understood -- the way in which it can justifiably be said that petitionary prayer changes things.

Some Christians -- some Calvinists and others sympathetic to the Reformed tradition -- affirm what I will label "specific sovereignty." God, they believe, has total control over everything in the sense that all and only that which God wants to occur will occur. He could have created any number of self-consistent systems but chose to create exactly what we now have. Thus, this world represents God's preordained, perfect plan.

Many in this camp are compatibilists who claim that God retains total control over human activity by unilaterally influencing the voluntary decision-making process of all individuals in such a way that they always make the exact decisions he would have them make. However, some in this camp, perhaps surprisingly, are incompatibilists. They deny that God can ever unilaterally control the voluntary decision-making process itself, but believe that in some paradoxical manner beyond our ability to comprehend, God is still able to ensure unilaterally that all individuals always freely make the exact decisions that he has determined should be made.

However, in whatever manner the means of divine control are explicated, all proponents of specific sovereignty deny that human decision-making can in any way limit God's providential activity in our world. God may use human choice as a means to accomplish desired goals. But our choices, and thus our activities, never thwart or hinder in any way God's perfect plan. The implications of this view of God for petitionary prayer are significant. Proponents of specific sovereignty remain free to distinguish between God's secret will, which "pertains to all things which He wills either to effect or permit and which are therefore absolutely final," and his revealed will, which "prescribes the duties of man," and thus to claim that petitionary prayer is justified because God has requested (indeed commanded) that we petition him. Moreover, proponents of specific sovereignty can justifiably maintain that prayer of this type may affect the petitioners themselves--for example, make them more sensitive to the role she might play in the context in question. And they can justifiably maintain that such prayer may strongly affect the person who is aware of the fact that petitions are being offered on her behalf.

However, most Christians also continue to believe firmly that whether God directly intervenes in our world depends at times on whether we use the power of choice over which God has given us control to request such intervention? That is, most Christians continue to believe that God has granted us the power to decide whether or not to request his assistance and that at times the decision we make determines whether we receive the

help desired. Or, to state this important point differently yet, most continue to believe that at times 'we have not because we ask not' in the sense that certain states of affairs that God can and would like to bring about do not occur because we have chosen not to request that he intervene. But proponents of specific sovereignty cannot maintain justifiably that petitionary prayer is efficacious in this sense. They do, of course, remain free to maintain that God has decided to bring about some states of affairs in response to requests that he do so. And thus they are free to maintain justifiably that petitionary prayer may well 'change things' in the sense that God may at times intervene in our world in ways that he would not have intervened if petitions had not been offered. They remain free, for example, to maintain that God has touched a fevered body or guided the thinking of a world leader or granted peace to a troubled mind in ways he would not have if petitions had not been offered.

But proponents of specific sovereignty maintain, remember, that God not only can but does unilaterally ensure that we always freely make the exact decisions that he would have us make. Thus, for proponents of specific sovereignty, it can never be the case that God is prohibited from bringing about that which he can and would like to bring about--a healing, guidance and the like--because we have not requested that he do so. That is, it can never be the case that whether God brings about some state of affairs in our world depends on whether we utilize the power of choice over which God has given us control to petition his assistance. Rather, as Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and Martin Luther all clearly understood, if a God with specific sovereignty has decided to bring about some state of affairs in response to a prayer offered freely, he can always ensure that this prayer will be offered freely and thus that the desired state of affairs will come about. No person ever has it in his or her power to make it otherwise. Process theists, on the other hand, have a radically different understanding of the God-world relationship. They believe that all entities -- human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate -- always possess some power of self-determination (some freedom of choice). Thus, even though they believe that God displays his concern for our world by presenting to every entity at every moment the best option available and then attempting to persuade each entity to act in accordance with it, they deny that God can ever unilaterally intervene in any sense in earthly affairs. Hence, we should not be surprised that process theists must also deny that petitionary prayer can ever be efficacious in the sense that it initiates unilateral divine activity that would not have occurred if it had not been freely requested. Like proponents of specific sovereignty, process theists can justifiably maintain that petitionary prayer can be efficacious in the sense that it can affect petitioners and those for whom petitions are offered. But since process theists believe that we always possess some power of self-determination and that God is already doing all that is possible to persuade us to make the choices that he would have us make, they can never claim that petitionary prayer brings it about that God becomes more involved than he would otherwise have been. God is already involved in earthly affairs--for instance, in the sharing of wisdom or peace--to the extent that any petitioner could request that he be.

For those of us who affirm an open view of God, however, the situation is quite different. Unlike proponents of specific sovereignty, we do not believe that God can unilaterally ensure that all and only that which he desires to come about in our world will in fact

occur. We maintain, rather, that since God has chosen to create a world in which we possess significant freedom and since we can be significantly free only if he does not unilaterally control how this freedom is utilized, God voluntarily forfeits control over earthly affairs in those cases where he allows us to exercise this freedom. However, unlike proponents of process theism, we maintain that God does retain the right to intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs. That is, we believe that freedom of choice is a gift granted to us by God and thus that God retains the power and moral prerogative occasionally to inhibit our ability to make voluntary choices to keep things on track.

Consequently, those of us who affirm an open view of God are not limited to conceiving of the efficacy of petitionary prayer in only those ways in which such efficacy can justifiably be affirmed by proponents of specific sovereignty and process theism. Like proponents of both of these other perspectives, we can justifiably maintain that prayer is efficacious in the sense that it can affect petitioners and those for whom petitions are offered. And, like proponents of specific sovereignty, we believe that petitionary prayer can be a component used by God to bring about desired ends. However, it is also possible for proponents of the open model to conceive of petitionary prayer as efficacious in the crucial sense in which it is not possible for proponents of either specific sovereignty or process theism to maintain that it is. Since proponents of specific sovereignty believe that God always insures that we freely make the exact decisions that he would have us make and since process theists deny that God can ever unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs, those in neither camp can justifiably maintain that petitionary prayer initiates unilateral divine activity that would not have taken place if we had not utilized our God-given power of choice to request such divine assistance. However, since those of us who affirm the open view deny that God can unilaterally control human decision-making that is truly voluntary but affirm that God can unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs, it does become possible for us to maintain justifiably that petitionary prayer is efficacious in this sense--that is, to maintain justifiably that divine activity is at times dependent on our freely-offered petitions. It becomes possible to maintain justifiably, for instance, that God does at times give guidance to a leader or soothe a troubled mind because we have utilized our God-given power of choice to request that he do so. This does not mean, though, that all proponents of the open view are equally comfortable with all of the ways in which Christians commonly petition God. For instance, it is not unusual for Christians to ask God to involve himself in the lives of other people--to offer assistance to a friend in need, for example. But a key assumption in the open model is that God so values the inherent integrity of significant human freedom -- the ability of individuals to maintain control over the significant aspects of their lives--that he will not as a general rule force his created moral agents to perform actions that they do not freely desire to perform or manipulate the natural environment in such a way that their freedom of choice is destroyed. Accordingly, most of us who affirm the open view of God doubt that he would override the freedom of one individual primarily because he was freely asked to do so by another. We doubt, for instance, that God would override the freedom of someone in a troubled marriage primarily because he was freely petitioned to do so by a friend of the couple. What if we assume, however, that what is being asked of God is not that he override the freedom of others but rather only that he influence their lives in such a way that it will be more likely that things will work out for the best? Does this not resolve the

difficulty? The answer depends on what those who affirm the open model mean when we say that God loves all individuals in the sense that he is always seeking the highest good for each. For some of us this means that God would never refrain from intervening beneficially in one person's life simply because someone else has failed to request that he do so. And, accordingly, we naturally find prayers requesting even noncoercive divine influence in the lives of others to be very problematic.

Other proponents of the open model, though, see no necessary incompatibility in affirming both that God always seeks what is best for each of us and that God may at times wait to exert all the noncoercive influence that he can justifiably exert on a given person until requested to do so by another person. And thus they readily acknowledge the potential efficacy of prayers of this type. Christians, however, do not only ask God to help others; they also at times ask God to intervene beneficially on their own behalf. And with respect to petitioning of this type, there is much less debate among those who affirm the open model of God. Since we believe that God greatly respects our freedom of choice, all of us find it quite reasonable to assume that God will at times refrain from doing all that he would like to do for us until we personally request such assistance. Some of us, it must be admitted, believe it is important to qualify the scope of such efficacy. Since the God of the open model wishes us to become morally mature individuals, we argue, it is quite unlikely that God would respond positively to requests that he, for example, take total control of our lives or relieve us of the responsibility of doing or discovering what we can do or discover for ourselves. But we all agree that it is, at the very least, quite reasonable to view petitionary prayer as a means whereby we grant God the permission to influence our noncognitive states of mind and/or share with us those cognitive insights concerning ourselves and others that will help us to better live out our Christian commitment in this world.

Accordingly, even granting the reality of a number of "intramural debates," it should not be surprising that those who affirm the open model believe the status of petitionary prayer within this model to be one of its most attractive features. All Christian perspectives on the God-world relationship can justifiably consider petitionary prayer to be a meaningful, efficacious activity. But the open model of God is one of the few in which petitionary prayer is efficacious in the manner still presupposed by most Christians: as an activity that can initiate unilateral divine activity that would not have taken place if we had not utilized our God-given power of choice to request his assistance.

Divine Guidance

We as Christians do not only believe it is important that we share our thoughts and concerns with God. We also want God to share his thoughts and concerns with us. That is, we desire God's guidance when deciding how to think and act. But Christians differ considerably with respect to the type of knowledge we believe God possesses, and this has important implications for the type of guidance available. As noted in the last chapter, while some Christians believe that God knows only what will happen to us beforehand--that he possesses only simple foreknowledge-- others believe that he also knows

beforehand what would happen, given each of the options open to us--that he possesses middle knowledge. And, of course, if God does possess middle knowledge, then a great deal of very specific guidance is available to us. If God possesses middle knowledge, for instance, then he knows much more than simply whether a couple appear at present to be well suited for each other or even whether they will in fact marry. Rather, he possesses very useful comparative information about their potential marriage: he knows exactly what will happen if they do marry and exactly what will happen if they do not marry, and can offer guidance on this basis. However, proponents of the open view do not believe that God possesses middle knowledge--that God always knows beforehand what would happen, given each option open to us. In fact, we do not even believe that God always knows beforehand exactly how things will turn out in the future--that God possesses simple foreknowledge.

We maintain, rather, that God possesses only what has come to be called "present knowledge." God, we acknowledge, does know all that has occurred in the past and is occurring now. Moreover, God does know all that will follow deterministically from what has occurred, and can, as the ultimate psychoanalyst, predict with great accuracy what we as humans will freely choose to do in various contexts. God, for instance, might well be able to predict with great accuracy whether a couple would have a successful marriage. But since we believe that God can know only what can be known and that what humans will freely do in the future cannot be known beforehand, we believe that God can never know with certainty what will happen in any context involving freedom of choice. We believe, for example, that to the extent that freedom of choice would be involved, God would not necessarily know beforehand exactly what would happen if a couple were to marry. And, accordingly, we must acknowledge that divine guidance, from our perspective, cannot be considered a means of discovering exactly what will be best in the long run--as a means of discovering the very best long-term option. Divine guidance, rather, must be viewed primarily as a means of determining what is best for us now.

Is this a negative aspect of our model? Many conservative Christians may think so. Most have been taught that God can furnish them with comparative, long-term divine guidance. Hence many may find the fact that our model does not allow for such guidance to be an unappealing feature. However, proponents of the open model believe there to be significant theological benefits in denying that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future. For instance, many Christians who believe that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future believe as a result that he has a specific plan for their lives. That is, they believe that God has identified for them the ideal way in which their lives would run, if all went as God desired. But some in this category also believe that it is possible to stray from this plan and, therefore, expend a great deal of time and energy trying to determine whether they are within God's perfect will at any given moment and, if not, what can be done to reenter it or at least what would have occurred if they had not settled for "second best." This is obviously not an issue with which open view theists need to grapple in the same sense. The God of the open model does have a general will for each of us. He does want us to live in accordance with the principles that he has established. And he does at every moment know which available option is "best" for us and desire that we actualize this short-term ideal. Thus, it is perfectly reasonable for those who affirm the open view to wonder whether we are in God's will in the sense of wondering whether we are now

acting in accordance with what God has identified as the best present course of action. And it is perfectly reasonable for us to resolve to be more diligent in our attempts to identify and actualize this ideal in the future. In fact, it is even reasonable for us to feel that we may have failed to follow God's leading in the past and have thus missed an opportunity that might have led to a better, more satisfying life than we now lead. However, since we do not believe that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future, it makes no sense for us to think in terms of some perfect, preordained plan for our lives and, hence, to worry about whether we are still within it. And, accordingly, we need never feel--no matter what has happened in the past--that must now settle for "second best" in this rigid sense.

Moreover, we see a second, related benefit in assuming that God does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future. Christians are often convinced at one point in time that they have correctly discerned God's will, but later come to wonder whether they actually did so. A student, for example, who was totally convinced that God was leading her into a given field of study may come to question whether this was really God's leading when she cannot find related employment. Of course, certain possibilities are open to all Christians in such cases. As I will discuss in some detail later, it is always possible that what a given individual thought was God's will initially really was not. It is always possible, for instance, that a person's own intense desire to enter a profession was wrongly interpreted as God's will. Moreover, it is always possible that what an individual has identified as God's specific will in a given context really is God's will and that the reason things have not worked out as expected is because God has always had something else in mind. But for open view theists another explanation is available. We seek and trust in God's guidance. Only he is aware of all the relevant factors, and only he is in a position to determine the best course(s) of action given these factors. However, since God does not necessarily know exactly what will happen in the future, it is always possible that even that which God in his unparalleled wisdom believes to be the best course of action at any given time may not produce the anticipated results in the long run. For example, given that God may not know exactly what the state of the economy will be over the next five or ten years, it is possible that what God in his wisdom believes at present to be the best course of study for a student may not be an option that will allow her after graduation to pursue the profession for which she has prepared.

In other words, as we see it, a person who finds that her attempts to follow God's will do not produce what she perceives to be a positive state of affairs need not assume automatically either that she did not properly discern God's will in the first place or that what appears not to be a positive state of affairs in some mysterious way actually is (and thus that she ought not attempt to change anything). Since it is always possible that what will occur as the result of following God's specific will at a given time will not be exactly what even God envisioned, she can justifiably assume that this may have occurred in her case. Of course, it does not follow from the fact that this may have occurred in her case that this is what did actually occur. But if, after consideration, an individual remains convinced that she was indeed following God's will initially and can over time discern no hidden benefit in maintaining the status quo, then, given the open view, she is free to turn to God without remorse or guilt to attempt to discern his new specific will for her life.

There remains, though, one other practical issue related to God's will that we should consider: In what way(s) does God attempt to share his will-- his guidance--with us? This is a question with which all Christians must grapple. However, those who affirm the open model are committed to a response that is somewhat different from that is than either process theists or proponents of specific sovereignty.

Process theists clearly believe that God attempts to share his will with us. In fact, as we have seen, they believe that God is at every moment presenting to each of us the best available option and attempting to persuade us to chose it. However, process theists do not view this process--God's presentation of the best available option--as something of which individuals are normally aware at the conscious level. Rather, in the words of process theist John Cobb, the process whereby God shares his desires with us "is most of the time below the level of consciousness or at its fringes. Clear conscious decisions in relation to clear conscious knowledge of possibilities is a rare phenomenon."

For those of us who affirm the open model of God, things are, in principle, much different. We do not necessarily deny that God is at all times trying to persuade individuals at the subconscious level to act in accordance with his general will--for instance, to treat others with respect. However, we also believe, as do proponents of specific sovereignty, that God does at times break through to give specific, conscious guidance to individuals--for instance, that God does at times furnish specific conscious guidance with respect to marriage or career options. However, the relationship between such guidance and human decision-making differs significantly within the two models in question. Those who affirm specific sovereignty deny that God is in any sense dependent on human choice and thus deny that such choice can ever thwart or hinder in any way God's perfect plan. This does not mean that proponents of specific sovereignty cannot justifiably seek God's "revealed will" -- that which "God is pleased to have his creatures do." But it can never be the case within this model that someone fails to become aware of guidance that God desires to make available because this person has decided not to seek God's will. If God desires a given individual to receive certain guidance--if this is part of God's perfect plan--then that person will receive the guidance in question.

However, this is not the case for proponents of the open model. Since we believe that God does not as a general rule override human freedom and/or the natural order, we acknowledge that numerous reasons exist why individuals might fail to receive that which God desires to share with them. Some might, for instance, fail to ask for such guidance. Or there may exist some psychological or physiological condition that prohibits others from clearly receiving or understanding God's guidance, even when it is sought with sincerity. For instance, some individuals may find it difficult to discern God's specific will for a possible marriage because of the very strong hormonal or psycho social impulses involved. Or the influence of friends or respected spiritual leaders might so overwhelm some individuals that they simply cannot discern clearly what God would have them do. Accordingly, open view theists have good reason to take very seriously a series of well-known, practical checks and balances when attempting to discern God's specific will. We have good reason, for instance, to test seemingly direct divine guidance against general scriptural principles or to wait to see whether this 'guidance' stays

consistent over time. There is, however, one very popular method for discerning God's guidance on which we who affirm the open model cannot rely heavily: the 'opening and closing of doors' by God. It is not uncommon for Christians to maintain that if they cannot discern in some clear, direct way God's leading in a given context, they should proceed in a given direction and wait for God to respond. If God does not approve of the direction in which they are moving, he will close the door -- for instance, will bring it about that the schools to which they apply will not accept them or that the individuals they desire to marry will refuse their proposals--while if God approves, the door will remain open.

To affirm the open view of God does not categorically rule out guidance of this fashion. After all, we who affirm the open view do not deny that God can, and even does, occasionally intervene in earthly affairs by overriding human freedom and/or the natural order. However, since we believe that God unilaterally intervenes quite infrequently, there can be no assurance, from our perspective, that what happens -- including what happens as the result of a person's decision to proceed in a certain direction-- is God's will. There can be no assurance, or even strong probability, for instance, that a school's decision to accept or reject an application or a person's decision to accept or reject a marriage proposal is a 'closed door'. Given the open view, such occurrences are more likely to be the result of human decision-making over which God has not exercised control. We must acknowledge that some (or even many) Christians may consider this a negative aspect of the open model. However, we believe just the opposite to be true. While those who rely on the "closed door" technique must guard against becoming quite passive--against simply sitting back and assuming that they are on the 'right track' unless God puts some barrier in their way--proponents of the open model do not face this danger. Since we can never be sure that what occurs naturally is a 'sign' from God, we must be quite proactive in our attempts to discern God's will. And, as we see it, this is a very positive consequent of commitment to our model.

Human Suffering

Here is a common situation: a house catches fire and a six-month old baby is painfully burned to death. Could we possibly describe as "good" any person who had the power to save this child and yet refused to do so? God undoubtedly has this power yet in many cases of this sort he has refused to help. Can we call God "good"?

Sometimes philosophers and theologians are said to be out of touch with the thoughts and feelings of nonacademics. But this is certainly not the case with respect to what is called the problem of evil. For centuries both 'professionals' and laypersons alike have struggled with the question posed above: If God exists, why is there so much evil? In response, few Christians deny that there is a great deal of pain and suffering in this world. Moreover, no Christian believes that God finds human pain and suffering intrinsically valuable in the sense that God delights in its occurrence. No Christian, for example, believes that God derived pleasure from the fact that so many died horrible deaths during the Holocaust. But Christians do differ significantly on the question of what types of evil our world contains and on the question of how 'responsible' God is for its occurrence. And these differences have important implications for how we explain and react to the evil we

experience.

For those who believe in specific sovereignty -- who deny that human decision making can ever thwart or hinder in any way God's perfect plan -- all evil must be considered nongratuitous. That is, all evil must be viewed as a necessary means to a greater good in the sense that it is something that God causes or allows because it is a necessary component in his preordained plan. On the other end of the spectrum is process theism. Proponents of this model, as we have seen, do not deny that some of the evil we experience may happen to be nongratuitous--that it may lead to a greater good of some kind. But since they believe that all entities possess some power of self-determination, they maintain that God can never unilaterally bring about or prohibit any state of affairs. What occurs always depends in part on the 'decisions' made by such entities. Accordingly, since they also believe that self-determining beings not only can, but often do, choose less than the best option available, process theists quite naturally assume that much of the evil we as humans experience may well be gratuitous -- may well not lead to any greater good. Those of us who affirm an open view of God are much closer to process theists at this point. Unlike process theists, we believe that God could have ensured that this world contained no gratuitous evil by refraining from granting other entities significant freedom. And unlike process theists, we believe that God may at times allow the occurrence of an evil state of affairs in order to bring about some greater good. But we believe that God has chosen to create a world in which individuals possess significant freedom and, hence, does not as a general rule unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs. And we, like process theists, maintain that humanity not only can, but does, often choose less than the best option available. Thus we, like process theists, believe that much of the pain and suffering we encounter may well be gratuitous -- may well not lead to any greater good.

Moreover, viewing evil in this manner has practical significance. For instance, it means that we, unlike proponents of specific sovereignty, need not assume that some divine purpose exists for each evil that we encounter. We need not, for example, assume when someone dies that God 'took her home' for some reason or that the horrors many experience in this world in some mysterious way fit into God's perfect plan. We can justifiably assume, rather, that God is often as disappointed as are we that someone's earthly existence has ended at an early age or that someone is experiencing severe depression or that someone is being tortured. This does not mean, it must quickly be added, that those who affirm the open model cannot justifiably maintain that God is involved in our lives. As we see it, God at every moment experiences with us whatever evil is at hand and desires that we turn to him for comfort. Nor do we deny that something good can come out of even the most tragic occurrence. Even process theists can justifiably contend that something positive or redemptive can be found in every situation. But even in those cases where something good has clearly come out of a tragedy, we who affirm the open model need not assume that God caused or allowed the evil in question as a means to this end. We remain free to assume that the tragedy was an undesired by-product of misguided human freedom and/or the normal outworking of the natural order. But why would any Christian want to make this assumption? Would not every Christian like to be able to assume instead that all tragedies are necessary

components in God's overall plan for this world? In response, we must acknowledge that this may be the case for some Christians, especially in relation to individual instances of tragedy. Some Christians may prefer to assume, for instance, that the death of a child who has been hit by a drunk driver or the failure of a student to be accepted into graduate school is part of some meaningful, perfect divine plan. However, this is not the case for most of us who accept the open view. From our perspective, to view specific tragedies in this world as the result of a system over which God has chosen not to exercise complete control is more appealing than to view such events as the outworking of some specific, preordained divine plan. We find it more comforting, for example, to view the death of a child hit by a drunk driver as the result of faulty human decision-making or the failure of an individual to be accepted into graduate school as the result of insufficient preparation or discrimination or a careless selection process.

Moreover, all Christians at times wonder about the seemingly unjust distribution of evil in our world. Why are one billion individuals in the Third World starving while many of us in North America have much more to eat than we need? Why are so many innocent children sexually abused by individuals who are never made to pay for what they have done? Why do so many 'good' people live in their own private mental 'hell' while so many 'bad' people seem to enjoy life to the fullest?

Proponents of specific sovereignty can offer a self-consistent answer: the amount and type and location of all evil serve are necessary components in some preordained purpose, although we as humans may never understand how this could be. But we who affirm the open model need not maintain that God's creative goals require that one billion in the Third World be allowed to starve or that millions of children be allowed to suffer abuse. We are free to maintain, rather, that these evils, and also their patterns of distribution, are by-products of a world containing freedom, by-products that God, as well as each of us, wishes had not occurred. And most of us find the ability to respond in this fashion to be a psychological, as well as theological, benefit.

Social Responsibility

Closely related to the problem of evil is the question of social responsibility. All Christians are rightly concerned about the devastating problems facing many in our world today: starvation, disease, racism and sexism, to name a few. But to what extent is it our responsibility as Christians to help rid the world of such evils? For those Christians who believe in specific sovereignty, remember, human decision-making can never in any sense thwart God's will. All that and only that which God has preordained to occur will occur. This does not mean, it is important to note, that proponents of this perspective must consider our actions totally irrelevant to the social ills we face. They can justifiably maintain that a direct causal relationship exists between these problems and our actual behavior. They can legitimately maintain, for example, that many individuals in Third World countries are starving in part because we in Western cultures consume too much food or have not done more to create a more equitable global economic system. Thus they can justifiably maintain that changes in our behavior might very well have a beneficial impact.

However, given specific sovereignty, it can never be maintained justifiably that the primary reason why our world continues to face pervasive social problems is because of what we as humans have freely chosen to do or not do. For example, it cannot be said that the primary reason why so many face starvation is because we as humans have failed to choose freely to do what we can to rectify the situation. Since we can in no sense thwart God's perfect will, the primary reason why we continue to face problems such as mass starvation is because God has preordained that it be so. He might, of course, decide to have us freely modify our behavior in such a way that social conditions will improve. But whether he does so or not is out of our control. For proponents of process theism, not surprisingly, the situation is much different. Since process theists believe that every entity always possesses some power of self determination, they maintain that there can be no guarantee that what God desires that we do will ever in fact come about. Thus, within the process system we as humans bear a tremendous amount of responsibility for that which occurs in those social contexts where human decision-making is relevant. For instance, since God can unilaterally ensure nothing, it is true not only that the fate of hundreds of millions of starving people, but that the very survival of the human race itself, depends primarily on whether enough of us make the right choices.

Not surprisingly, proponents of the open model believe that process theists are much closer to the truth on this issue. Since the God of the open model can unilaterally intervene on occasion, we who affirm this model do not believe that humanity bears quite as much responsibility for what occurs as process theists believe. Specifically, unlike process theists, we believe that God has a very general plan for humanity that he will not allow human decision making to alter. Thus, for example, whether our race survives is ultimately dependent on God and not us. However, since we also believe that God does not as a general rule intervene in earthly affairs, we quite naturally assume, like process theists, that humanity bears primary responsibility for much of what occurs in those contexts in which human decision making is involved. We assume, for instance, that to the extent that starvation and cancer are the result of human decision-making, humanity bears primary moral responsibility for such states of affairs. Accordingly, it becomes very important for us to attempt to discover ways in which we can remedy social problems.

Evangelistic Responsibility

Christians, though, are not only concerned about the social ills we humans confront. Almost all Christians (even process theists) believe that many people are not properly related to God personally and, accordingly, that it is also important to share with them the "good news" -- the joy and excitement of being properly related to God. In short, almost all Christians also support some form of evangelistic effort. On the basis of what has already been said, however, it should not be surprising that the primary basis for such evangelistic concern differs significantly among the models of divine-human interaction we have been discussing. Proponents of specific sovereignty can justifiably feel an obligation to share the good news with others. After all, they are commanded by God to do. But, given specific sovereignty, remember, human decision-making can never in any

sense thwart God's will. Human effort may well be used by God as means to accomplish his purposes. But humans are never the primary initiators of what occurs.

Thus, according to this perspective, it can never be said that we bear direct moral responsibility for the status of any other person's relationship with God. This does not mean, of course, that proponents of specific sovereignty must deny the existence of any significant causal connection between our actions and someone else's relationship with God. They can justifiably claim, for example, that parents often do in fact have a great impact on their children's spiritual well-being. However, given specific sovereignty, it can never be the case that someone either comes to be rightly related to God, or fails to do so, primarily because of decisions we as humans have made. God may well use us as "tools" by which he brings someone into a proper relationship with himself. But all and only those whom God desires to be "saved" will be saved, according to this perspective. And thus the fear that some will fail to enter into a proper relationship with God because of some negligence on our part can never serve as a justifiable basis for evangelistic efforts.

The situation is in some ways quite different for process theists. As they see it, everyone is in one sense automatically related to (connected with) God to the extent possible: God is always offering to every individual, at the subconscious level, the best options available, and every individual is always feeling, at the subconscious level, some compulsion to act in accordance with this guidance. However, process theists also maintain that we often fail to appropriate consciously the benefits of this relationship to the extent we could. Accordingly, proponents of this perspective can justifiably maintain that we ought to encourage others to be as open as possible to what God is "saying." But it remains the case, given process thought, that we need never fear that someone else will fail to establish or maintain the capacity to interact fully with God because of some failure on our part.

The situation, though, is very different for those of us who are proponents of the open model. We agree with process theists that individuals can fail to appropriate consciously all that God has to offer and, hence, agree that we should encourage each other in this respect. But, unlike process theists, we also believe that a significant initial separation between God and humans -- an initial inability for God and humans to interact to the extent possible--that can only be bridged completely when we choose freely to enter into a relationship with God. And thus we believe that we also have a responsibility to help others become rightly related to God in this sense. This is not to say, it must quickly be added, that all proponents of the open model are necessarily committed to the contention that some will spend eternity separated from God because we have failed to share the 'good news' with them. While most proponents of the open view do believe in an afterlife, many maintain that each person's eternal destiny will ultimately be determined by God on the basis of the 'light' available to him or her (or by other criteria). But those who affirm the open view are clearly committed to the contention that some may fail to relate properly to God at least in this life because of our failure to share the 'good news' with them. Moreover, we are clearly committed to the contention that a personal relationship with God is what gives this life its fullest meaning. Thus, given the open view, the fear

that some will fail to enter fully into a relationship with God--that some might not avail themselves of the totality of God's transforming power--because of some negligence on our part can justifiably serve as an important basis for evangelistic efforts.

Or, to state this important point in a slightly different manner, while proponents of all three models rightly feel an obligation to obey God's command to "preach the gospel," it is within the open model that our decision to obey or disobey this command has the most significant impact on whether others will develop their relationship with God in this life to the fullest extent possible. And while proponents of the open view find this sobering, we also find it highly motivating.

Conclusion

My primary purpose in this chapter has been to set forth what I believe to be the most significant implications of affirming an open view of God. However, it is obvious from the manner in which I have discussed these implications that I, like the other authors of this book, do not only consider the open model to be significantly different from its main competitors but to be superior. Accordingly, it is important in closing that I clearly identify the exact manner in which I consider this to be so.

I do not consider our model to be logically superior to all other models--that is, to be the only one self-consistent, comprehensive model that can justifiably be claimed by its proponents to be a plausible perspective on the relationship between God and the world. Nor do I believe the open model to be superior in the sense that it is the only model that any thoughtful, sincere person could find truly satisfying. Just as not all children will agree on the most appealing parenting style and not all students will agree on the most appealing teaching style, not all Christians will agree on the most appealing type of divine-human interaction. And I see no objective basis for denying that proponents of other models can justifiably continue to view their perspectives on the relationship between God and our world as the most fulfilling personally. But I do believe the open model to be superior in the sense that I personally find it to be the most plausible, appealing conceptualization of this relationship. And thus I, along with the other authors of this book, invite those Christians who have not seriously thought about this issue or who are not totally comfortable with their present perspective to consider carefully the model we have proposed. There are certain risks involved. Things do not always turn out as either God or we desire. But the God to which we as open view theists are committed is always walking beside us, experiencing what we are experiencing when we are experiencing it, and is always willing to help to the extent consistent with our status as responsible creations of his. And we find this to be both exciting and spiritually rewarding.