

## Divine Regulation of the World: A Selected Reformed Reading

**Philip Tachin, PhD**

Department of Religious Studies  
National Open University of Nigeria,  
Jabi, Abuja,

+2348039318161, ptachin.coramdeo@gmailcom

### Abstract

As the church faces persecution and tribulation in this present evil age, grasping the nature of God in his covenantal relation to his people and his regulation of all things proves that the church seeks the anchor for her faith and the ground for her hope in Jesus Christ. A new form of theism, known as Open Theism, contends that God is not unchanging in his being and knowledge as he relates to creation. Rather, God's being develops and his knowledge changes in his give-and-take with creatures. God's mode of existence contains the same mutable and temporal features as the creature so that he can "risk" himself along with the creature in the world. This essay contends that if God does not remain *a se*, omniscient, and unchanged in his relation to creation, then the church has no true hope. Therefore, this essay argues that the biblical, creedal, and reformed understanding of God as self-contained and immutable in his revelation alone grounds the church's hope in union with Christ. God does not change, so that we are not consumed in union with the Lord who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8). In short, the classically Reformed understanding of God gives the church hope; the Open Theist view eviscerates hope. The question, however, is whether we trust the God of Open Theism who is dependent on vulnerable human beings that are supposed to depend on him. This essay briefly fleshes out the position of Open Theism and redirects us to the classical Reformed position, which is here represented by Turretin, Hodge and Bavinck.

**Keywords:** Classical theism, Open theism, Providence, Fore-ordination

### Introduction

Given the constant challenges that the global Christian faith encounters in its proclamation of the gospel, the question is whether or not a finite and developing deity can offer hope for the present or the future. Open theism has attempted to offer scriptural explanations in the context of the inexplicable perplexities that we face but proper scrutiny rather exposes its theological failure. Certainly, there is a tension of faith when there is delayed intervention in the human predicament. In his time, Prophet Habakkuk (1-3) was so bothered because an ugly situation persisted for a



long time, and he prayed for divine intervention but it seemed God was not moved to act immediately.

This phenomenon replicates itself in every generation. Many philosophers have lost their faith in the existence of God on account of this while others have chosen a deistic view. Some primal religions believe in the creator God who is the supreme ruler of the universe but for lesser things of humanity, he has delegated responsibilities to the intermediary and lower deities that meet their immediate needs when approached. There is a general consensus of theologians of African Traditional Religions that deities in African worldview are ministers of the Supreme God that serve humanity in various needs such as providing procreation, wealth, health, etc., as approved by the Supreme God.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Reformed theology provides a different perspective that addresses the following questions: Does God care and govern his world every day? If so, how does he do it? Are all things happening according to his plan for the world or contrary to his expectations? What is the nature of providence as God's regulative framework? Open Theism attempts to provide answers to the above questions which are inadequate to secure the unwavering faith of believers.

### ***Open Theism?***

As long as humanity lives, the perplexity of unending challenges in life will continually raise questions of divine sovereignty in regulating things in the world. However, the nature of the God who remains absolutely sovereign and metaphysically unchanged in his freely willed relation to the world remains the best option. Nevertheless, how should we understand the sovereignty of God in our trying moments? Are our prayers relevant, and if yes, why does it sometimes take so long for God to answer? Open Theism makes God's knowledge of the future as uncertain as the creatures. His knowledge is in development just like the creature's knowledge, and this requires that he “reacts” to our circumstance since he does not (a) ordain in advance or (b) know in advance all things. Ham argues that the God of classical theism, as held by the confessional Reformed tradition, makes God aloof and distant. Only a mutable God involved in a give and take--a God who changes like the creature--can interact with us in our changing situations marked by distress and turmoil. In a stunning claim, he argues that only a finite and developing God can

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<sup>1</sup> See Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara “God, divinities and spirits in African traditional religious ontology,” *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences*, 1/2 (2010): 209-218. DOI: [10.5251/ajsms.2010.1.2.209.218](https://doi.org/10.5251/ajsms.2010.1.2.209.218); AniediAbasi Okon Ekpatt, “Concepts of God, Divinities, Ancestors, and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Thought: Conceptual Analysis,” *Phenomenological Approaches to Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Essien D. Essien (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2021): 18-43.

interact with us and comfort us in our trouble.<sup>2</sup> He urges that prayer “is an activity that brings new possibilities into existence for God and us.”<sup>3</sup> This implies that as much we are affected by realities around us and we pray, so also shall God be affected.

The rationale for prayers is both for mutual communication between creatures and their God and to also effect changes in our unpleasant situations by drawing him into action. And the more reason we have to pray is because it “demonstrates God’s desire for genuine relationships with his creation. If he simply always provided for our needs and fulfilled our desires without asking, our relationship with him would be distant, hidden, and impersonal. Prayer creates the ‘conditions necessary for God to be able to give us as persons what we need or desire.’”<sup>4</sup> There is interdependence between the Creator and the creature as both are open to new learning opportunities.

While Sanders employs the same concept of providence as a means by which God relates with humanity, he differs sharply from the orthodox understanding of what it means because he denies God’s “exhaustive control of all things.”<sup>5</sup> However, Strimple argues that open theism is Socinian in that it denies God’s foreordination and God’s foreknowledge of all things, and this view collapses the traditional concept of divine omniscience.<sup>6</sup> Hence, God cannot control what he has not ordained and what he does not know in advance. This is in sharp contrast to classical orthodoxy’s view of God who knows the end from the beginning. Open Theism’s exegesis, by trying to absolve God of the problem of evil, calls into question, the infinite knowledge of God. The real concern of Open Theism is human freedom and dignity rather than the glory of God.<sup>7</sup> Schreiner challenges the consistency of Open Theism which both adapts literal and non-literal interpretations in different cases that implicate the knowledge of God.<sup>8</sup> In all this, the questions are: does a dependent and developing God offer us any hope? Or is our hope alone in the independent and absolute triune God of classical Reformed theism? We shall see quite clearly that the absolute and immutable triune God of classical theism is not only doctrinally

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<sup>2</sup> Garrett Ham, “Practical Implications: Prayer, Providence and Theodicy,” published online on July 2, 2015 at <https://www.garrettham.com/prayer/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. He appeals to Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Ham, He appeals to Tiessen, 106.

<sup>5</sup> John Sanders, *The God who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Strimple, “What Does God Know?” *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 140-141.

<sup>7</sup> See Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Editorial: Sovereignty, Suffering, and Open Theism,” *SBJT* 4/2 (2000), 3. <https://equip.sbts.edu/category/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/sbjt-42-summer-2000/>.



necessary but only he secures our religious hope and guarantees we will not be consumed (Mal. 3:6). By offering us a fallible and dependent God, which implies no guarantee of human security, it is worth reiterating the Reformed position by presenting a selected reading of three Reformed theologians.

### **Francis Turretin**

The self-contained triune God both foreordains and foreknows whatsoever comes to pass in a way that grants authenticity to secondary causes and the choices of his image-bearing creatures. God's instruments of governance of the world are his eternal decrees. These decrees are founded upon his infinite wisdom, absolute perfection and immutability.<sup>9</sup> The decrees are structured to take care of all things that would happen in time. How does this account for God's change of planned action? Theologians explain these realities in terms of God's eternal decrees that hold all things together. God decrees the conditions that would uphold or change his course of action in time.<sup>10</sup> The old philosophers tried to understand how God directs all that happens in the world. The Epicureans gave all things to fortune. However, Turretin appeals to several grounds in arguing against the Epicurean position. He draws from nature, the consent of nations, Scripture, the nature of God and from the nature of the created things, harmony and order in the world, revolutions of empires, blessings and judgments and human conscience.<sup>11</sup> He argues that nature constantly demonstrates that God has not left it alone to its fate as what he decrees about it regulates every day.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the consent of great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics such as Seneca and Cicero have all attested to this.<sup>13</sup> Seneca wrote:

“Providence is over all and God takes care of us...It is superfluous at present to obtrude the truth that so great a work cannot stand without a guardian and that this certain revolution of the stars is not by fortuitous impulse and that what chance incites is often disturbed and quickly destroyed; that this uninterrupted velocity proceeds under the government of eternal law, that this order is not wandering matter.”<sup>14</sup>

Seneca tries to reconcile the scientific and the theological in his view.

Appealing to Scripture, Turretin urges that God is not only the Creator but also the “constant provider, cherishing and sustaining his own work by his continual influx

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1992), 4.q2.314.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 4.q2.315.

<sup>11</sup> Turretin, 6.q1, 489-492.

<sup>12</sup> Turretin, 6.q1, 489-490.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 490.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Turretin cites Seneca, *De Providentia* 1.1, 2 [Loeb, 1:2-4].

and taking perpetual care of it.”<sup>15</sup> He stands on the shoulders of Augustine who says, “for neither as one departs from the structure of the house he has built and, he stopping and departing, his work stands, can the world so stand even an instant if God withdraws from it his control.”<sup>16</sup> By the very nature of God, it is illogical that he would create a world that he would not manage, for “the same reasons which impelled him to create also impel him to govern.”<sup>17</sup> It is against his nature to will a creaturely mode of existence for the sake of so-called give-and-take with the creature. But it expresses his nature to be the unconditioned, all-conditioning, self-contained sustainer of all things in his providence. Therefore, it is against his nature not to be providential. Also, from the nature of the creation itself, since it was created out of nothing, it cannot be self-subsistent, which therefore means that it depends entirely on the Creator every single moment. The persons of the Godhead never subsist in anything other than the divine essence. There is no intermediate category between the Creator and the creature. God remains who he is, without modification, as the Creator, Sustainer, and Governor of all things. In this understanding, providence grants liberty of contingencies but firmly controls their means.<sup>18</sup>

Turretin disputes allusions to random fate as it is commonly understood in heathen cultures except if it is linked to divine providence.<sup>19</sup> God does not undermine the details of his creation for he has shown his greatness in both great and small things and all things hold together by his power (Heb. 1:3). All things contingent and fortuitous are connected to providence: “Therefore, nothing in the nature of things can be granted as so fortuitous and causal as not to be governed by the providence of God and so not happening necessarily and infallibly with respect to the divine decree.”<sup>20</sup> Some references are made to the casting of lots and selling and exaltation of Joseph (Prov. 16:33; Gen. 45:8; 50:20).

How does this affect the image-bearing creature, characterized as created by rational free agency? Free actions are granted but they fall under providence. Some selected Scriptures attest to this. “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Citing Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4:12 [ACW 41:117; PL 34. 304].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 491.

<sup>18</sup> As the WCF 3, 2. teaches, this view is not fatalism: “Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” God, remaining immutable and simple in his providential relation to creation, grants creatures freedom, without himself becoming creaturely in his mode of existence. This is where the Reformed in distinction from all forms of Open Theism, locate the mystery of the providential relation of God and his image bearing creatures.

<sup>19</sup> Turretin, 6.q3.4, 497, following Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.8, 207, discourages believers from its usage.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 499.



tongue is from the LORD” (Prov. 16:1); “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps” (Prov. 16:9) and “I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps” (Jer. 10:23). The logic of providence is that since all things were not self-made but were created by God so also their subsistence depends upon him.<sup>21</sup> The point of the argument is that if providence does not count in human freedom, humanity will be absolutely and completely independent of God and God would rather follow the will of man rather than vice versa.<sup>22</sup> Turretin makes a strong and cogent argument thus: “God by an absolute and efficacious will decree from eternity all acts (even free) antecedently to the foresight of the determination of the free will itself. Therefore, he ought also in time to predetermine the will to the same acts; otherwise, God’s eternal decree could be frustrated.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the decree and its execution must be consistent.

As with the issue of salvation, the question is how humans will synergize with divine decree which determines all things according to the purpose of God. Turretin contends with one of the most difficult questions which he admits may not be very adequately answered to inquisitive minds. “How can the concourse of God be reconciled with the contingency and liberty of second causes especially of the will of man?”<sup>24</sup> He warns that while we seek to understand these divine truths, we should only “follow the light of the divine word and *religiously* restrain ourselves within the bounds prescribed by it.”<sup>25</sup> This warning is very significant because we cannot seek to understand these mysteries outside of the biblical revelation of God. While human reason may understand the liberty of human behaviour, it will depend entirely on the word of God to understand the same when it comes to how we respond to his plans for us. What is most clear from Scripture is “that the providence of God concurs with all second causes and especially with the human will; yet the contingency and liberty of the will remain unimpaired.”<sup>26</sup> Yet how this synergy works is what “no mortal can in this life perfectly understand.”<sup>27</sup>

For while we act freely, there is nothing in our free actions that is contrary to the determination of God.<sup>28</sup> The following Scriptures attest to this reality (Matt. 18:7; 26:54; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 24:7, 46; 1Cor. 11:19). Explaining this, Turretin said: “The true method is founded upon the order of causes and the mode of acting proper to them.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 501.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 503-504.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 508.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 6.q6, 511.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 512.



In this case, the causes are unequal in nature as human will as the second cause of action is subordinate to the providence of God which is the primary cause. The predetermination of God's providence is both general and special but all secondary causes move "according to their own nature and do not take away from them their own proper mode of operating."<sup>30</sup> Again, this does not happen as a "coaction" between God and man but rationally, the human will is influenced in a "manner that is suitable to itself" as it is not destroyed, yet it concurs with the definite plan of God.<sup>31</sup> God's accordance with human will discriminates between good and evil. While he assists human will to perform good whether in the general or particular sense by virtue of being the author of all goodness, for evil he only concurs by permission and directing its end, not by enablement or approval of wicked actions. The truth is that while all humans have been morally and spiritually depraved, which none can do good (Rom.3:10-12, 23; 8:7-8; Ps. 14:3; 53:1-3), God "works in us both to will and to do" (Phil. 2:12, 13), but he does not apply the same energy in other unbelievers for them to "will and to do." For this sort of discrimination which is best known to him, God gets the glory for the repentance, faith, salvation and good deeds of believers but unbelievers' guilt rests on them.<sup>32</sup>

God does not infuse or inspire sin or wickedness. However, "sin ought not to be removed from the providence of God, for it falls under it in many ways as to its beginning, progress, and end. As to its beginning, he freely permits it; as to its progress, he wisely directs it; as to its end, he powerfully terminates and brings it to a good end."<sup>33</sup> How do we get this? God is not the direct author of sin, and we do not need to revert to the Pelagian conception of libertarian freedom to affirm such a truth. God wills that evil will necessarily come to pass in history, yet he wills it through the freedom and contingency of secondary causes, and he in no way violates but rather establishes such freedom in his decree and its outworking in history. How much is the case remains the precise locus of mystery for us as Reformed Christians. The happening of sin or evil "to God is indeed the holiest work because, from a good principle, it tends to a good end; to men, however, as most wicked because from an evil principle, by evil means, they tend to an evil end."<sup>34</sup> In other words, God "uses the sins of creatures beyond their intention to a good end; not by making the wills or actions of creatures evil, but ordaining them to a good end." Thus, God authentically relates to the creature as sovereign without himself losing his absolute and immutable nature as God. The mystery of such a relationship remains ultimately and permanently inscrutable to the creature.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 513.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 514.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 516.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 522.



## Charles Hodge

Hodge expatiates that the entire governance of the universe stands on the decrees of God and these decrees are the expression of the glory of God. Whatsoever has happened in the past, that is happening now and will happen in the future in the human context is regulated by the decrees to the glory of God alone. This means “from the indefinite number of systems, or series of possible events, present to the divine mind, God determined on the futurity or actual occurrence of the existing order of things, with all its changes, minute as well as great, from the beginning of time to all eternity.”<sup>35</sup> According to this view, all events in their details could not take place outside of or without the predeterminative will of God. All things happening in our world were comprehended in the eternal plan of God to be executed in time. When some events that God intended were suspended, it is not that God’s purpose was changed but the event was suspended on a condition which were all captured in the plan of God. God created those conditions that would warrant the suspension of planned actions to happen which in human eyes would be futuristic. All these are done for our sake so that we can see the hope of appealing to God to intervene and change situations.

God effects good things and permits evil happenings too, all by the same decree.<sup>36</sup> Based on the submissions of Scripture and human reason, it is cogent that the universe was created for a definite purpose and the execution of all things could, therefore, not have been left bare contingent but deliberately happening according to the decree.<sup>37</sup> God does not only determine the events but also the means of execution.<sup>38</sup> This does not destroy the free agency of the instruments of execution of the events because all free acts whether holy or sinful are foreordained.<sup>39</sup>

Four arguments have been advanced against the view of the foreordination of events. First, it is “inconsistent with free agency,” second, “foreordination of sin is inconsistent with holiness,” and third, it “destroys all motive to exertion,” and finally, “it is fatalism.”<sup>40</sup> On the first point, Hodges responds thus: “The decrees of God, therefore, which only secure the certainty of events, are not inconsistent with liberty as to the mode of their occurrence. Although his purpose comprehends all things, and is immutable, thereby ‘no violence is offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 537.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 541.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 543.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Hodges appeals to a number of Scriptures such as Acts 2:23; 4:27; Lk. 22:22; Rev. 17:17; Gen. 45:7, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 545-549.



liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”<sup>41</sup> On the second point, he argues on Scriptural and experiential grounds that while God ordains the event of sin such as the crucifixion of Christ, he does not become guilty of it. This ordination here refers to his decretive permission. While God is and sin also exists does not annul his holiness.<sup>42</sup> On the third point, he argues that motives are for actions, which are not destroyed; rather “proper motives” stand on the “command of God,” and are designed to “produce the effect,” which are the necessary means to an end; and finally, God promises blessings to those who obey his will to achieve good ends.<sup>43</sup> Concerning the fourth and last point of fatalism, he insists that contrary to the heathen concept of fate, fore-ordination of events, all things are “ordained and controlled to accomplish the highest conceivable or possible good.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, foreordination admits to “necessary and free causes” so that the “freedom and responsibility of man are fully preserved.”<sup>45</sup>

Hodge discusses this issue more extensively under the topic of “Providence.” The doctrine of Providence explains how God regulates all his creation including the actions of his creatures.<sup>46</sup> He roots his arguments in Scripture which attests that God regulates the world by his word, by the in-built “powers of nature,” and by the non-sentient and sentient creatures.<sup>47</sup> The triune God not only grants existence to the universe through the work of creation but upholds and directs it in its entirety. The preservation of the world encompasses its substance, form, essence, qualities, properties, and invested powers within every creature.<sup>48</sup> The triune God in no sense simply observes an autonomously functioning creation. The doctrine of providence avoids every spectre of Deism that views the universe as a wound clock that runs on its own independent natural laws.

Hodge argues his position on several grounds. Our general religious nature demands that God not only hears our prayers but also answers and provides for all our needs every day. To this view, “This doctrine of providence, therefore, is the foundation of all practical religion, and the denial of it is practical atheism, for we are then without God in the world.”<sup>49</sup> This providence is exerted on individuals regarding birth, life, and death so that “whether weak or strong; with many, or with few talents; whether we are prosperous or afflicted; whether we live longer or a shorter time, are not

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 547-8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 548.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 549.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 575.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Hodge, 584.



matters determined by chance, or by the unintelligent sequence of events, but by the will of God.”<sup>50</sup>

God exercises sovereign power over the free acts of humanity, whether good or evil. However, for evil acts, God’s control is only permissive rather than decretive.<sup>51</sup> With reference to the Scriptures, “God’s providence in relation to the sins of men, is such that the sinfulness thereof proceedeth (sic) only from the creature and not from God; who neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.”<sup>52</sup>

With respect to *how* God regulates all things, Hodge avers that the Bible “nowhere attempts to inform us how it is that God governs all things, or how his effectual control is to be reconciled with the efficiency of second causes.”<sup>53</sup> This makes comprehensive rational attempts to explain the *how* of God’s control of things futile as such exercises create more difficulties than answers.

His argument was set against Deism which affirms that God has created the world and endowed it with certain laws, properties, and free agency as each is left to function according to its own natural laws.<sup>54</sup> He also disputes those who held the views of humanity’s absolute dependence on God in such a way that its “motions, exercises, or actions must originate in a divine efficiency.”<sup>55</sup> Following this, “God creates all the volitions of the soul, and effects by his almighty power all changes in the material world.”<sup>56</sup> Hodge challenges this view on the logical ground that “it cannot be proved that it is inconsistent with the nature of God that He should call into existence creatures capable of originating action.”<sup>57</sup>

Hodge further adduces arguments of the doctrine of *concursum* which asserts the “influence of the omnipresent power of God not only sustaining creatures and their properties and powers but exciting each to act according to its nature.”<sup>58</sup> Those who followed this teaching are Thomists, Dominicans and Augustinian theologians, who state in addition to the above position that “there is a previous, simultaneous, and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 588.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 588-9.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 590.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 591.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 594. Nathanael Emmons held this view where he blamed God for all human actions as the efficient cause of everything whether good or evil. See Abel Millard, “Nathanael Emmons,” *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1902): 17-34. Cited at <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/477928>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 599.

determining concurrence of the first, in all second causes, both in the cause and in the effect; that is, not only exciting to action, but sustaining, guiding, and determining the act; so that its being as it is, and not otherwise, is to be referred to the first, and not to the second cause in every case.”<sup>59</sup> This view does not however, implicate God because he does not supersede or interfere “with the agency of second causes.”<sup>60</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith* says: “God orders events to ‘to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.’”<sup>61</sup> The difficulty that this doctrine encounters is concerning sin. In other situations, such as God concurring with holy acts which remain the acts of the person, how can it also be said with respect to sinful acts as in God cooperating with the sinner? For any occurrence, there must be an efficient cause in which God is involved ultimately. An attempt to absolve God seeks a redefinition of sin as a mere defect or lack of “conformity to the moral law,” which God is not the cause of the deficiency.<sup>62</sup> But if all existence owes itself to God, how does deficiency’s existence not owe itself to God? A further defence of God says in a particular instance of Joseph’s brothers that while God “did not infuse envy and hatred in the hearts of Joseph’s brethren, He [sic] guided the exercise of those evil passions, so as to secure the preservation of Jacob and the chosen seed from destruction.”<sup>63</sup>

The Reformed theologians rejected the doctrine of *concursum* because “it is founded on an arbitrary and false assumption. It denies that any creature can originate an action.”<sup>64</sup> This assumption stems from the view of the dependence of the creature on the creator which accords God’s sovereign control over the creature but this also contradicts the free agency and human consciousness.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, it means that “The power of spontaneous action is essential to the nature of a spirit; and God, in creating us in his own nature as spirits, endowed us with the power to originate our acts.”<sup>66</sup> While we consent that God governs all things, it is rather inexplicable to know *how* he does it.

Hodge admits that the doctrine of providence which concerns “God’s relation to the world” is “confessedly the most comprehensive and difficult in the compass either of theology or philosophy.”<sup>67</sup> In trying to understand how God relates to all events in the world, it is important to maintain his sovereignty in all affairs, controlling all

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 600.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 601.

<sup>62</sup> Hodge, 602.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 603.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 604.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 604-5.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 605.



things to their end while at the same time upholding the free agency of human volitions and actions. The worst view is to deny God's governance of the world in all its details which is to "destroy the foundation of all religion, and dries up the fountains of piety."<sup>68</sup>

### Herman Bavinck

Bavinck argues that God's natural revelation discloses the providence of God innately to all image-bearing creatures. Divine providence accounts for the consistent occurrence of seasons such as summer and winter, day and night, fruitful and unfruitful seasons, and light and darkness.<sup>69</sup> Scripture avails that God cares for all things in the world, especially human affairs as he "determines the boundaries of their habitation," turns their hearts and directs their steps, and "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Deut. 32:8; Acts 17:26; Prov. 21:1; 5:21; 16:9; 19:21; Jer. 10:23; Eph. 1:11). Bavinck argues that apart from providence, there would be no "room for prayer and sacrifice, faith and hope, trust and love."<sup>70</sup> Like Turretin, Bavinck admits that non-Christian philosophers such as Cicero and Sophocles believe in divine providence.<sup>71</sup> The understanding that heaven, earth, family, people, kingdom, politics, and the state are all grounded in the "natural, cosmic, divine order" is universal.<sup>72</sup> Though Aristotle also subscribes to a certain view of providence, he aligns it with natural causes because God is essentially in "solitary self-contemplation outside the world."<sup>73</sup> His view is essentially deistic. However, providence is more clearly tied to God's external act of government and preservation of the world. It implies that God has foreknowledge of all things and makes them happen according to his will and cares for them in times. The Heidelberg Catechism question 27 sums this: "The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand."

Providence involves more than just giving permission for things to happen but also causing their happening and working in them to achieve God's ends.<sup>74</sup> After the

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 616.

<sup>69</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 592.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 593.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Bavinck cites M.T. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 1.2 and Sophocles, *Electra*, 173 (trans. D. Grene [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957]).

<sup>72</sup> Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 269.

<sup>73</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2., 593.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 605.

creating power of God, concurrence takes effect to preserve and sustain the creation. God works through secondary causes to sustain his creation. During the creation of the world, God conferred on all creatures the kind of existence that can bring them to fruition. By this, “[E]very creature received a nature of its own, and with that nature an existence, a life, and a law of its own. Just as the moral law was created in the heart of Adam as the rule of life, so all creatures carried in their own nature principles and laws for their own development.”<sup>75</sup> What this further means is that all things are grounded in the natural laws that God created them with and they behave in accordance with those laws as can be inferred from Scripture (Gen. 1:26, 28; 8:22; Ps. 104:5,9; 119:90-91; Eccles. 1:10; Job 38:1ff; Jer. 5:24; 31:25f; 33:20, 25). These are “hidden seeds,” “original principles” and “seminal reasons,” which “were implanted in creatures, are concealed in the secret womb of nature, and thus are the principles of all development.”<sup>76</sup> In this view, “Nature is a mechanism in which everything moves according to a fixed order, measure, and number.”<sup>77</sup> The laws of nature such as the gravitational laws must be understood in this direction. The Christian supports this scientific view that nature is “subject to the spirit and that the whole world is an instrument, an apparatus, for the realization of an eternal divine plan.”<sup>78</sup> The consistency of the laws of nature demonstrates that “Behind everything stands a great mind, superior mind, for laws and rules are everywhere.”<sup>79</sup>

The idea of God sovereignly working through secondary causes precludes all forms of Deism. God effectively and personally works his sovereign and good purpose in all things. “These laws and relations differ in every sphere: the physical and the psychological, the intellectual and the ethical, the family and society, science and art, the kingdoms of earth and the kingdoms of heaven. It is the providence of God that, interlocking with creation, maintains and brings to full development all these distinct natures, forces, and ordinances.”<sup>80</sup>

The sovereignty of God is key in understanding the rule of God over all his creation from great to small things. We may not only see God’s sovereignty in good things but even when evil pervades the scene. Though God is averse to sin, he works his purposes in it. Bavinck argues especially with respect to sin: “At its [sin] inception God sometimes acts to stop it (Gen. 20:6;31:7), destroys the counsel of the wicked (Ps.33:10), gives strength to resist temptation (1Cor. 10:13), and always thwarts sin

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 609.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Bavinck draws this insight from Augustine, *The Trinity*, III.7 and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, IV. 33.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, 97.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>80</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2., vol. 610.



in that he prohibits it and inhibits the sinner through fear and trembling in his conscience.”<sup>81</sup> Nothing in the creation is sovereign besides God himself which means whatever happens, including sin, answers to his will, for God “creates and arranges the opportunities and occasions for sinning to test humans, thereby either to strengthen and to confirm them or to punish and to harden them (Gen. 27; 2Chron. 32:31; Job 1; Matt. 4:1; 6:13; 1Cor. 10:13).”<sup>82</sup> While it is clear to understand that allowing temptations to sin to come to God’s people is to test their faithfulness, it is confusing how they can be strengthened. It is one thing to be tested to know one’s ability but how that test strengthens one is entirely another thing that needs some clarification. The testing does not impute special ability to one if the person does not have the initial ability to stand the test. The testing rather exposes one’s vulnerability and need for help. However, from Scripture, it seems that God has a hand in some events of sins (Gen. 45:8; 2Chron. 11:4; Lk. 24:26; Acts 2:23; 3:17-18; 4:28). Bavinck appeals to tons of passages to validate this view.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

As humans, we have to live with the reality of our shortcomings in trying to understand how God interacts with us in our world, especially with the problems that we face every day. Great minds have attempted to excavate the ocean of scripture for answers but like Prophet Habakkuk, we end up with both puzzles and faith. Open Theism has offered a flawed and undependable God and our best bet still stands with the classical Reformed view of divine providence. Open Theism in effect denies not only God's comprehensive foreknowledge of all things but a sovereign control over those things. In contrast, the confessional Reformed, represented by Turretin, Hodge, and Bavinck, offers us a God who not only possesses exhaustive foreknowledge but ordains and governs whatsoever comes to pass. True Christian faith cannot find a firm foundation in the ignorant and developing deity of Open Theism. However, true faith can come to rest securely on the being, decree, and providence of the self-contained and immutable Triune God of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 617.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. He connects the topic of providence here to where he exhaustively treats the concept of “divine counsel” in this volume on pages 345-46 and 393-95 and also appeals to C. Vitringa, *Doctr. Christ.*, II.196ff., 206ff.



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