

Issler, Klaus

"Divine Providence and Impetratory Prayer: A Review of  
Issues from Terrance Tiessen's Providence and Prayer"  
*Philosophia Christi* 2(2) 533-541, 2001

Abstract:

Divergent views on divine timelessness, foreknowledge, and human freedom are discussed concerning five of eleven models of providence surveyed by Tiessen: (from least to maximum divine involvement): Openness (e.g., D. Basinger, G. Boyd), Redemptive Intervention (B. Reichenbach, J. Cottrell), Molinist/Middle Knowledge (T. Flint, W. Craig), Middle Knowledge Calvinism (T. Tiessen), and Calvinism (J. Feinberg, P. Helm). Review includes weaknesses of each model. Regarding "impetratory" prayer (Does God sometimes respond to prayer simply *because* we ask? [e.g., James 4:2]), the first four models can affirm this, but not the Calvinist model. Two summary charts appear.

## *Divine Providence and Impetratory Prayer*

A Review of Issues from  
Terrance Tiessen's *Providence and Prayer*

KLAUS ISSLER  
*Talbot School of Theology  
Biola University  
La Mirada, California*

*Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* By Terrance Tiessen. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000. 432 pages. \$18.99.

Does God sometimes respond to prayer simply *because* we ask? Is such "impetratory" prayer affirmed in Scripture (e.g., James 4:2)?<sup>1</sup> The answer depends on one's perspective of divine providence. During the past fifteen years evangelical presses have increasingly offered significant reassessments of traditionally-held attributes of God,<sup>2</sup> particularly omniscience and

<sup>1</sup> "To impetrate": "to obtain by request or entreaty" *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1981), 570. The term is used by Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: SCM, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> For example, alternate versions appear in Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1985), Randall Basinger and David Basinger, ed., *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), William Lane Craig, *The Only-Wise God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), Clark Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Bethany House, 1989), John Boykin, *The Gospel of Coincidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), Ann Case-Winter, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God* (InterVarsity, 1991), Clark Pinnock et al. *The Openness of God* (InterVarsity, 1994), David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* (InterVarsity, 1996), John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (InterVarsity, 1998), Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Baker, 2000).

Some of the scholarly offerings during the same period include: Richard Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), William Craig, *The*

foreknowledge, eternity or timelessness, immutability, and impassibility.<sup>3</sup> In one standard evangelical theology text, *Christian Theology*, Wayne Grudem denies impassibility and proposes a qualified definition for immutability: "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations. . . . But the idea that God has no passions or emotions at all clearly conflicts with much of the rest of Scripture, and for that reason I have not affirmed God's impassibility in this book."<sup>4</sup> These modifications may elicit only a yawn from readers. But reassessments of God's eternity and especially divine foreknowledge—critical building blocks of providence—are being condemned by some theologians yet welcomed by others.<sup>5</sup>

In *Providence and Prayer*, Terrance Tiessen identifies eleven different models of providence, organized along a spectrum from least to maximum divine involvement in the details of history, clarifying how each option fares against traditional understandings of God's attributes and other related issues. Tiessen confesses, "As a systematic theologian, I have keen interest in coherence. I believe that people's beliefs should be internally consistent. . . and that their actions should be consistent with their theology" (14). Since "how we understand God's action in the world will determine how and when

---

*Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents From Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), J. R. Lucas, *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Thomas Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action* (Cornell, 1989), Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Cornell, 1989), William Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism* (Brill, 1991), Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge, 1991), Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Cornell, 1991), Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (St. Martin's, 1992), Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), Gerald Hughes, *The Nature of God* (London: Routledge, 1995), Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Cornell, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Clark Pinnock specifically identified these four divine attributes as ones requiring some fresh thinking "if it is the God of the Bible we wish to know." In "God Limits His Knowledge," *Predestination and Freewill*, edited by David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 155-6. Millard Erickson notes that, "In the final decade of the twentieth century, the doctrine of God has re-emerged as a focus of theological discussion and debate. Much of this discussion centers on the attributes of God, in particular, the natural attributes, such as eternity, omniscience, and impassibility." *God the Father Almighty: An Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 163, 166.

<sup>5</sup> Expositions defending traditional Calvinist perspectives include Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), R. K. Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (InterVarsity, 1996); Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, ed., *Still Sovereign* (Baker, 2000; a reprint of *The Grace of God and The Bondage of the Will* [1995]), and from the Thomist perspective, Norman Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1997).

and why and for what we pray" (20), clarifying common models may then "facilitate this [desired] coherence or consistency" (14). At the beginning of each chapter, Tiessen offers a brief synopsis of each model and then, after the model is explained in a fair and positive manner, a hypothetical case study is presented that illustrates a prayer to God consistent with that model, on behalf of three missionaries abducted for ransom. The appendix includes a summary chart (363-4) noting each model's stance on various issues and a glossary of technical terms. Tiessen's study permits an examination of the major options and their differences regarding views of God's eternity, foreknowledge, and human freedom.

For reasons explained below, only five of the eleven models will be included in this assessment. Tiessen groups these five according to models of "risk providence" holding to libertarian human freedom (major contemporary proponents cited by Tiessen are listed in parentheses): *Openness* (D. Basinger, G. Boyd, W. Hasker, C. Pinnock, K. Ward), *Redemptive Intervention* (B. Reichenbach, J. Cottrell), and *Molinist* (T. Flint, W. Craig); and "no risk" models holding to compatibilist or voluntary freedom: *Middle Knowledge Calvinism* (Tiessen's own proposal), and *Calvinism* (G. C. Berkouwer, J. Feinberg, R. Hazelton, P. Helm, W. Pollard, V. White).

The bookends of Tiessen's eleven-model spectrum—to the left (least divine involvement), *Semi-Deist* and *Process* models, and to the right (maximum divine involvement), *Fatalist* model—are not discussed here due to space and relevance to Christian orthodoxy. The *Church Dominion* model has received no scholarly attention and will be passed over.<sup>6</sup> Both the *Thomist* (N. Geisler) and *Barthian* models are sufficiently similar to the *Calvinist* model that no separate discussion is needed.<sup>7</sup>

As Tiessen clarifies, "there is a marked difference between those [models] asserting that God is temporal and those positing that God is timelessly

---

<sup>6</sup> In the *Church Dominion* model (based on the popular writings of Brother Andrew, Paul Billheimer, and Watchman Nee), administrative oversight of God's work has been delegated to the church in order to train believers for future leadership responsibilities. Accordingly God *only* works in the world in response to the church's ministry of prayer, evangelism and resistance of the powers of evil. Not only is the urgency of prayer significantly heightened but also the eternal responsibility for what never happens due to the church's negligence (e.g., some never hear the gospel message).

<sup>7</sup> Although Geisler's version of the Thomist model views human freedom as libertarian—a major difference indeed—in contrast to the Barthian and Calvinist commitment to compatibilism, the models in union affirm the traditional attributes of God and his eternal decrees. Yet I include the Thomist model in a final summary chart because of its position on libertarian freedom. Regarding the Barthian model as Tiessen notes, "Barth's understanding of the role of petitionary prayer is not fundamentally different from Calvin's or Aquinas', but, again, it is placed within the christological framework" (206). Since Christ is the preeminent intercessor, "our role is to discern God's will as revealed in Christ and to join Christ in praying for what God wills to do in the world" (206).

eternal" (321). The traditional view of timelessness is a central feature of the Calvinist model (and Thomist and Barthian models), whereas God's "temporality" is central to the Openness model. Yet this feature is not so clear in other models. For the Redemptive Intervention [traditional Arminianism] option, Jack Cottrell holds to timelessness while Bruce Reichenbach argues for temporality. Among Molinists, Luis Molina himself and Thomas Flint affirm timelessness, whereas William Craig argues for divine temporality subsequent to creation. In his Middle Knowledge Calvinism model, Tiessen denies that God is absolutely timeless. "I have a difficult time conceiving of a tripersonal God who existed eternally in loving relationship as completely timeless" (324). "In short, whatever God's own experience of time may be, he is not excluded from acting in our own time or from knowing the time-relatedness of all the events of created history" (323).

How is it possible to make sense of the complex matter of God's relation to time? The typical but paradoxical response is to affirm both as true, as Grudem does, "that in his own being, God is timeless; he does not experience a succession of moments," yet "God sees events in time and acts in time."<sup>8</sup> William Lane Craig suggests that such a claim actually embraces two mutually exclusive views of time.<sup>9</sup> The commonsense approach or "A-theory" (dynamic or tensed view of time) acknowledges the objectivity of temporal succession, thus the future does not yet actually exist. The "B-theory" (static or tenseless view of time) proposes that "the passage of time is purely subjective and events in the future and past are every bit as real as events in the present. . . . All moments and events—whether past, present, or future to us—are equally real and existent, and the difference between them is a subjective feature of consciousness."<sup>10</sup>

A complication occurs if a timeless view or a simple "vision" of the actual future is the sole basis of divine providence. For then even God cannot change the future. As Tiessen notes, "I am convinced that the critique of simple foreknowledge by middle knowledge theologians as well as open God theologians is correct. If God only has simple foreknowledge, that is, knowledge of the actual future, his knowledge is useless to his providential care. By the time that God actually knows what is actually going to happen, it is 'too late' for him to do anything about it" (317). Something else must be involved if one wishes to preserve God's certain knowledge of the future—options include unilateral foreordination or foreordination based on "middle knowledge."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 170, 169.

<sup>9</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Only-Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 79-81.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 79. For a review of issues related to atemporality and temporality, see Garrett DeWeese, "God and the Nature of Time," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1998.

The discussion has transitioned to the attribute of God's foreknowledge, for which each model offers a distinctive perspective. Four major options have been proposed: "present knowledge" (Openness model—God cannot have certain knowledge of the future because there is no actual future); "simple foreknowledge" (Redemptive Intervention model—God has a simple vision of the actual future; a model not offering much help for divine providence as noted above, and thus will be eliminated from further discussion<sup>11</sup>); "middle knowledge"<sup>12</sup> (Molinist and Tiessen's Middle Knowledge Calvinist models, God has certain knowledge of the future in light of an eternal plan developed through knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom) and finally, what might be termed "foreordained knowledge" (Calvinist as well as Thomist, and Barthian models; God has certain knowledge of the future based on his unilateral foreordination by which he determines all that will happen).<sup>13</sup> Table 1 presents a comparison among these three approaches to divine foreknowledge according to the remaining four models of providence.

TABLE 1 From Least Divine Involvement To Maximum Divine Involvement

	Openness Model	Molinist Model	Middle Knowledge Calvinist Model	Calvinist Model
God's "Foreknowledge"	Present Knowledge	Middle Knowledge		Foreordained Knowledge
God's Eternity	Temporal	Either: Timeless (Flint) Temporal (Craig)	Probably Temporal	Timeless
Possibility of Impetratory Prayer	Yes			No
Type of Human Freedom	Libertarian		Compatibilist	
Certainty of God's Knowledge Future?	No	Yes		
Possibility of Divine Spontaneity?	Yes	No		

<sup>11</sup> A scholarly defense for one view of simple foreknowledge is offered by Dave Hunt, "Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 394-414.

<sup>12</sup> To explain the view of middle knowledge briefly: Molina identified three logical moments in God's knowledge, in relation to creation: (1) God's natural knowledge (prevolitional knowledge of necessary truths, including all possibilities); (2) God's "middle knowledge" (knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, knowing how any creature would act if placed in various nondetermining circumstances, thus God knows what possible worlds he can actualize); [God's free decision to create], followed by (3) God's free knowledge (postvolitional knowledge of contingent truths. Making "middle knowledge" a category distinct from God's natural or free knowledge was Molina's unique contribution. See Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Tiessen cites Paul Helm's distinction between two types of foreknowledge: A-omniscience (simple foreknowledge) "to know about the future without bringing the event about," and O-omniscience (Calvinist model) "to know the future event as a result of 'ordaining or effectively willing or otherwise ensuring that *p* is true'" (252-3).

In light of each approach to God's "foreknowledge," is God responsive to the believer's "impetratory prayer"? How should James 4:2 be understood? "You do not have because you do not ask." The passage implies that God may at times answer prayers just *because* a believer asks. Earlier, I alluded to Tiessen's goal to facilitate one's consistency in belief about how God governs the universe and answers prayer. My main concern is for the believer's motivation for prayer.<sup>14</sup> As Grudem notes, "If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, as Scripture repeatedly teaches that he does, then we would pray much more than we do. If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all."<sup>15</sup> Without the possibility for impetratory prayer, it seems only duty can serve as the believer's motivation to pray. Three models affirm God's genuine responsiveness to prayer; the Calvinist model asserts that God unilaterally determines the means (our prayers) and the outcome (answers to prayer).

The models also differ on their understanding of human freedom and God's certain knowledge of the future. I believe that the concept of "middle knowledge" offers a unique means of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom. Tiessen embraces it for his modified Calvinist model, "I too have become increasingly convinced that God's knowledge of what *would* happen in hypothetical situations is an essential element in [God's] wise planning and predestining of the future of the world's history" (316).

William Hasker, a proponent of the Openness Model, asserts, "If you are committed to a 'strong' view of providence, according to which, down to the smallest detail, 'things are as they are because God knowingly decided to create such a world,' and yet you also wish to maintain a libertarian conception of free will—if this is what you want, then Molinism is the only game in town."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, middle knowledge offers intriguing possibilities for resolving tensions in other important arenas such as explaining the mode of divine inspiration of Scripture with human authorship,<sup>17</sup> and a means for affirming both divine election and libertarian freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Yet one problem of providence remains unsolved, what might be called "divine spontaneity." Except for the Openness Model that does address it,

<sup>14</sup> For example see my *Wasting Time With God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), chapter 8, "Partnership: Asking the God Who Answers."

<sup>15</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 377.

<sup>16</sup> William Hasker, "Response to Thomas Flint," *Philosophical Studies* 60 (1990): 117-18.

<sup>17</sup> William Lane Craig, "Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God (2 Peter 1.21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration," *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, 1 (1999): 45-82.

<sup>18</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Only-Wise God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 145-51.

the three other models claim that God, prior to creation, knew exactly how history would unfold, down to the smallest detail. The Molinist and Middle Knowledge Calvinist models affirm the possibility of impetratory prayer. But for the models, God's responsiveness to prayers occurs only *prior* to the establishment of God's eternal plan. Since the plan is already set and since God already knows what will happen with certainty, is there any wiggle room for God to be spontaneous at the present moment of any event? Episodes of divine spontaneity appear in some instances in the Bible, such as, in God's encounter with Ezekiel. God asked the prophet to perform an acted parable, including cooking his barley cake with human dung as fuel (Ezekiel 4:9-13). But Ezekiel protested with disgust. Accordingly, God permitted him to use human dung instead (Ezekiel 4:14-15). The account reflects an "at the moment" adjustment by God. Only the Openness Model makes room for genuine divine spontaneity, yet I am unwilling to pay the steep price as Openness advocates have by eliminating God's certain knowledge of the future. Perhaps further work on the matter of divine spontaneity will yield a more amenable solution and a more substantive one than the traditional explanation of anthropomorphism.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, each model of providence has certain weaknesses that opponents highlight. The Calvinist model excludes the possibility of impetratory prayer (i.e., James 4:2). Proponents of compatibilism (*Calvinist* and Tiessen's *MK Calvinist* models) have a greater difficulty than models embracing libertarian freedom in explaining how God—who determines every event in history—is not responsible for sin and moral evil, and in explaining how people are genuinely morally responsible. Critics of middle knowledge (of the version particularly associated with libertarian freedom) claim that such knowledge is impossible, that no one—not even God—can know with certainty future free acts of people.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Molinist model—along with other models affirming God's specific eternal plan—cannot account for acts of divine spontaneity recorded in Scripture. Finally, as already mentioned, the major criticism of the Openness Model is leveled against the claim that God cannot foreknow all future events with certainty.

Although Tiessen holds to compatibilism, much of his discussion of God's providence and human freedom would be affirmed by most libertarians

<sup>19</sup> I wonder if some help might come from exploring further the division of labor among the Trinity?

<sup>20</sup> William Lane Craig admits that "while having some biblical support, [the doctrine of middle knowledge] ought to be accepted mainly because of its great theological advantages. It provides a basis for God's foreknowledge of the future free acts of individuals." *The Only-Wise God*, 151. Tiessen agrees, "My belief in God's knowledge of all that could possibly have happened in the future is like Craig's; it rests on the immense usefulness of the concept to understanding God's wise planning and the implementation of his plan in and through the world in which some of his creatures have their own free agency" (320).

who embrace middle knowledge. "Given our creation as morally responsible creatures, God's [normal] direction of our lives is through commands and through persuasion (both external and internal). God's perfect knowledge of us and of all the circumstances of our lives (including middle knowledge) enables him to accomplish his purposes without coercion and with a minimum of 'interventions'" (331-2). Perhaps if Tiessen could work through the typical misunderstandings of the libertarian view (claiming that decisions and actions are purely "arbitrary" and "random," p. 313), he may realize how close he is to libertarian freedom. Although Tiessen explicitly affirms God's responsiveness to impetratory prayer, his interpretation of James 4:2 is unsatisfactory (344-5). Tiessen affirms God's meticulous sovereignty, but seems to hedge his bets in some places, "There is a definite sense in which we can say that God did not 'want' the abductors to do what they did. On the other hand, we must grant that there is a sense in which God did 'want' it to happen or he would have acted to prevent it" (293). "God is realizing his intention at every point. For various reasons, the first six models assume that there are instances when God will have to act in some way to achieve his general intentions but that in the particular circumstance only the creaturely intention is at work. God will work to bring good out of evil, but the evil itself happens apart from his intention" (295). Can one have it both ways?

Tiessen's survey is a helpful assessment of the various models currently available. The inclusion of middle knowledge into his own version of a Calvinist model affirms the fruitfulness of the concept for the continuing discussion about divine providence, human freedom and impetratory prayer. In fact, Tiessen asserts that both the Redemptive Intervention (simple foreknowledge, traditional Arminianism<sup>21</sup>) and Calvinist models seem to imply that God has middle knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The major proponents of the timeless, simple foreknowledge view were Boethius and Thomas Aquinas. Boethius' treatment was offered as a means to support the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Traditional Arminianism tends to affirm the same position (as evident in the Redemptive Intervention model supported by Jack Cottrell). Yet Jacob Arminius himself was apparently swayed toward his view by Luis Molina's argument for middle knowledge, according to Richard Muller, *God Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991). "Arminius' teaching on the scientia media [middle knowledge], moreover, marks the decisive entrance of this concept into Protestantism" (164). In light of Arminius' reluctance explicitly to cite Molina in his writings, few scholars of that day recognized "its rootage in the Roman Catholic debates of the era nor its appropriation by Arminius" (164). Arminius explained the eternal decree of God as composed of four distinct decrees. Arminian theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop describes Arminius' fourth degree, "God predestines on the basis of divine foreknowledge. He knows who will believe and who will not and predestines accordingly." *Foundation of Wesleyan-Arminian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1967), 54. Yet no discussion of middle knowledge appears in this work. Apparently contemporary Arminianism is unaware that Arminius' own understanding of God's knowledge of the future is captured best by middle knowledge, not by simple foreknowledge.

One way to summarize the options that particularly affirm the possibility of *impetratory prayer* (thus passing over the Calvinist and Barthian models) is by identifying respective answers to the following question:

Is God able to foreknow the libertarian decisions and actions of persons?	
No	Tiessen's <i>Middle Knowledge Calvinist model</i> presents God as having <b>middle knowledge</b> and then ordaining (with responsiveness to believers' petitions) and effectively carrying out his eternal plan by meticulously supervising each detail of history through persons having <b>compatibilist freedom</b> .
	The <i>Openness model</i> affirms that God has only <b>present knowledge</b> and can fairly well predict the future, but cannot with certainty foreknow the future <b>libertarian</b> decisions and acts of persons.
Yes	The <i>Redemptive Intervention model</i> understands that God can see the actual future with <b>simple foreknowledge</b> and knowing the <b>libertarian</b> decisions and actions of persons.
	The <i>Thomist model</i> holds that God <b>timelessly "fore" knows</b> the future (seeing the past, present and future in one eternal "now"), thus knowing a person's <b>libertarian</b> decisions and actions, which are also components of his eternal plan.
	The <i>Molinist model</i> sees God as having <b>middle knowledge</b> with which he designs his eternal plan incorporating within it the <b>libertarian</b> decisions and actions of persons.

<sup>22</sup> "[Jack Cottrell's] depiction of God's prospective planning would seem to indicate middle knowledge" (140). "The Calvinist model implicitly assumes it and will not work without it" (345). Millard Erickson is unwilling to go that far, "The view of compatibilistic foreordination can utilize, but does not require, the doctrine of middle knowledge." *God The Father Almighty*, 207n41. Yet without God's middle knowledge, how is impetratory prayer possible?