

**Introduction – Read and Report: *Four Views on Divine Providence***  
**Edited by Stanley N. Gundry & Dennis W. Jowers**  
**By Brian A Schulz**

**Introduction**

Dennis Jowers on behalf of series editor Stanley Gundry tackles the subject of Divine Providence with the help of four authors; Paul Kjoss Helseth espousing Determinism, William Lane Craig promoting Molinism, Ronald Highfield explaining control through liberation, and Gregory A. Boyd championing open theism. Jowers explains the challenge and necessity of engaging in this debate:

As we established at the outset of this introduction, none of these views possesses indisputable scriptural warrant. To arrive at a responsible position on the questions of what God controls and how he controls it, one must weigh a great deal of evidence, and scrutinize the frequently intricate arguments employed for and against different models of divine providence. This is unquestionably and arduous task.<sup>1</sup>

This “arduous task” is an increasingly important one in today’s world. Jowers offers a powerful explanation why Christians must have answers to some very difficult questions regarding God’s providence, “Contemporary Christians, nonetheless, must expend the labor necessary to attain a scripturally and rationally adequate account of providence.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say in light of death, illness, tragedy, hunger, pain, and poverty that the Christian must be able to explain how a good God can allow such things to exist. He wraps the introduction up with this thought, “One cannot credibly present the Gospel in today’s culture, it seems, without supplying defensible answers to such questions.”<sup>3</sup> It is therefore the goal of this review to briefly explain the four positions archived in this work and then to briefly postulate which view coalesces with the truth of scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> Page 23.

<sup>2</sup> Page 23.

<sup>3</sup> Page 23.

## **Synopsis & Evaluation of the Four Views of Providence**

### ***God Causes All Things; Determinism***

The first view which Jowers engages is the deterministic view explained by Paul Kjos Helseth titled “God Causes All Things.” The section of this chapter that best sums up this position explains determinism from a birds-eye view:

What this suggests, then, is that the doctrine of divine omnicausality merits a fresh appraisal because it encourages us to think about the meaning of the world and everything in it in overtly theocentric, as opposed to covertly anthropocentric, terms. It reminds us, in other words, that no aspect of created reality can be understood rightly outside of the context of the Creator’s good, sovereign, and sustaining will, for without that will, absolutely nothing would exist, and nothing would transpire.<sup>4</sup>

Key words in the above quote such as; nothing, everything, and all make it abundantly clear that the determinist clearly believes that God causes all things through divine decree. This understanding is prevalent in the reformed tradition. However there are many who disagree with this system. One such person is William Lane Craig. In his response to Helseth, Craig offers a five point breakdown/summary of the case against determinism:

1. Universal, divine, causal determinism cannot offer a coherent interpretation of scripture.
2. Universal causal determinism cannot be rationally affirmed.
3. Universal causal determinism makes God the author of sin and denies human responsibility.
4. Universal, divine determinism nullifies human agency. Humans cannot be real agents.
5. Universal, divine determinism makes reality into a farce. The whole world becomes a vain and empty spectacle.<sup>5</sup>

### ***God Directs All Things; Molinism***

This view utilizes a mechanism called middle knowledge in order to accomplish the task of explaining God’s providence. Middle knowledge relies on the “If/Then” paradigm. Louis De Molina termed these the counterfactuals of freedom. In order to explain this idea one must go

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<sup>4</sup> Pages 48-49.

<sup>5</sup> Pages 59-62.

back to the time before creation. God in His omniscience knows all the possible contingencies of a given world. So then, God has knowledge of every possible world to infinity. Of all these possible worlds which He has full knowledge of, He chooses to create this universe from all the available choices. It is in way that God knows all the events of this universe and world which includes created free-will being which still allows for His plan to be worked out according to His will and preserving the free will of man. Craig sums up this system with great coherence:

Via his middle knowledge, then, God can have complete knowledge of both conditional future contingents and absolute future contingents. Such knowledge gives him sweeping sovereignty over the affairs of men. Yet such an account of God's knowledge is wholly compatible with human freedom, since the circumstances envisioned in counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are nondetermining and, hence, freedom preserving. It is because of these advantages that I (Craig) comment a Molinist account of divine providence for serious consideration.<sup>6</sup>

Of course since there are four views of providence in this work, there are 3 conflicting views which don't agree with Craig and the Molinist position. For example, Gregory A. Boyd argues that Molinism struggles with the concept of evil and atrocities in the world. He explains:

The Molinist must accept that each and every particular evil was specifically permitted by God for a specific good reason. While it is perhaps not ideal, the Molinist must accept that each and every one of the unthinkable atrocities that has ever befallen a human throughout history had God's specific stamp of approval.<sup>7</sup>

### ***God Controls by Liberating***

In this view espoused by Ron Highfield the word "mystery" seems to rise to the forefront. In looking for a solid synopsis in the text of his defense one could not easily be found. However, in the words of his adversary on this subject, Paul Kjoss Helseth, takes up the task of summing of Highfield's position. Helseth writes, "He (Highfield) believes that "no-risk" views of providence are difficult for many of our contemporaries to take seriously because we live in a culture that

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<sup>6</sup> Pages 99-100.

<sup>7</sup> Page139.

has been “bewitched” by the notion of creaturely autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> Helseth agrees with Highfield on this subject which seeks to emphasize God’s sovereignty as the highest of highs. Helseth goes on to explain Highfield’s position:

He acknowledges that advocates of no-risk views of providence must concede that “they do not know a way to bring belief in God’s perfect lordship into complete harmony with human freedom.” Those who take Scripture seriously, he argues, must grant that some things are ultimately inscrutable, and for this reason, they must resist the temptation to transform “revealed myster[ies] into... speculative obscurit[ies].”<sup>9</sup>

Helseth is essentially explaining on behalf of Highfield that this “mystery” can’t be explained and just needs to be affirmed. There is Biblical evidence that human free will is indeed a reality and God’s omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty, and providence are also consistent with the Truth. And this view seems to recognize as such but strays from explaining and simply affirming.

Craig, in his opposition, seems to take offense to some of Highfield’s assertions:

But it is hard not to detect here a certain distrust of logical analysis and philosophical reflection, which is both unfortunate and naïve: unfortunate because it would deprive us of the insights such reflection might bring and naïve because such methods are already from the start quietly at work when one does biblical exegesis and theology. While we may not be able to explain how God providentially governs the world, we can at least provide models of such governance that show the logical coherence of the Christian worldview – a project that Highfield admits exceeds the capacity of Reformed theology.<sup>10</sup>

### ***God Limit His Control: Openness Theology***

The open theism view takes an interesting position concerning God’s knowledge. In this view God is likened to the grand chess player of the universe. As one move on the chess board unfolds God through his omnipotence is able to “manage” current events in order to bring about what he wants to bring about. The goal of open theist is also to preserve the idea of created free-

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<sup>8</sup> Page 166.

<sup>9</sup> Page 166.

<sup>10</sup> Page 175.

will beings. Open theists contend that God does not know the future in any shape of form. His foreknowledge is limited in that he simply manages the events as they occur. The idea of God's promises becomes more of a case of "I'll do My best." Boyd sums up this system:

But because it (open theism) ascribes a degree of independent intelligence and say-so agents, the open view also renders intelligible why God not rely primarily on power but also relies on his unfathomable wisdom and his perfect love. God outsmarts and defeats his opponents through self-sacrificial, other-oriented love. This is the love he eternally is and the love that permeates everything he does, including every aspect of his providential rule over creation.<sup>11</sup>

The goal of the open theist is to provide a context for free will creatures to exist in a free will universe where a choice can be made for or against God. This view seeks to move as far away from a deterministic universe where creatures in essence have no free will. In doing so, open theists have taken the plunge into waters which quickly flow in a direction which limits some of the fundamental attributes of God. William Lane Craig offers further details about these limitations in a response to Gregory A. Boyd, "Despite his protestations to the contrary, Gregory Boyd espouses a view that threatens to undermine divine omniscience."<sup>12</sup> Craig goes on to say, "Moreover, he fails to consider the full scope of the evidence. As I explain in my essay, it is impossible to have a biblically sound doctrine of providence on the open view."<sup>13</sup> Providence and Omniscience are two of the primary characteristics of a greatest conceivable being. If any doctrine were to compromise either of these, then it must be scrutinized under the most powerful of lenses.

### **Application: What is the Value of This Work?**

All of these men who worked together to produce this work have succeeded in compiling a very useful tool on the subject of divine providence. As was mentioned in multiple places in

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<sup>11</sup> 208

<sup>12</sup> James K. Beilby and Paul R Eddy, *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001.), 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

the book, the issue of evil and all of its consequences and being able to explain its origin and existence is of utmost importance in light of today's culture. If the Church is going to be able to reach the current generation, the "why" questions must be thoroughly and thoughtfully answered.

One of the valuable things which emanates from each chapter is the overall tone of respect and love that each of these men have one for another. They clearly understand the value of respectful debate which in light of all the ills of social media is a very important method to employ in the current society. This value appears to be absent even in the Church of today. We could learn much from these men as they recognize the good in each other's work and also as they respectfully critique their opponents work. Most of Christianity is too busy infighting over insignificant issues when common ground is fertile and abundant to the detriment of the overall mission of the Church to reach a lost world for the Lord Jesus.

I would recommend this work be read by all those who engage in ministry in this day and age. It is important for each Christian to have a grasp on this important issue which faces the Church today. It is important to know the thought process and values of view points such as the Open view which in my view is quite heretical. In order to avoid the ramifications of such a view it is necessary to understand the way in which this view operates in order to be able to properly refute it. This book provides 3 opposing viewpoints for every chapter and this is a very valuable tool in the hand of the theologian/philosopher.