How Does God Respond to Prayer?
A Reformed Response to the Openness Position

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The controversial debate of Open Theism raises many issues critical to every Christian’s faith. Openness proponents claim to be presenting a newer, more biblically accurate picture of God’s nature. They believe that the God of the Bible has been hardened and obscured by tradition. In contrast to the Reformed view, Open theists elevate the concept of God as love, emphasizing his desire to take risks in a “give and take” relationship with his people. The God they describe is dynamic: he moves through time, experiencing with us our joys and our pain. Since God desires a real relationship with his people, he chooses to limit his knowledge of the future. Together, God and his people move through time determining what the future will be. This portrait of God is fascinating and appears to be supported by many proof-texts. Yet is this an accurate account of how Scripture describes God’s full-orbed glory? The God of Open Theism stands in drastic opposition to the Reformed understanding of God. This theology undermines the God who many of us trust, follow, honor, and obey. Open Theism in many ways is antithetical to the Reformed faith, and yet it claims to be an evangelical movement. Under this pretense, Open Theism has permeated many Christian circles and therefore poses a threat to the Church.

The implications of Open theology are far reaching. This picture of God can greatly weaken a believer’s confidence in God’s omniscience and power. If God does not know the future, how can we trust him to take care of us? How can we have confidence in facing the future and leaving everything in his hands? Open Theism also tempts Christians to trust their own weak insights and abilities above God’s Word. If God’s power and influence are so greatly lessened, why should we bother to pray to him? Such questions need to be addressed by proponents of Open theology. Christians must be willing to critically think through these issues in order to
align their beliefs with God’s Word. God calls his people to exercise their faith intelligently, so we must strive to do so.

Many Christians have underestimated the impact of Open Theism. They dismiss it as an unlikely threat to the Church. Yet Open theists have raised crucial questions, backed with several proof texts that should be considered. Open theologians point to key Scriptural controversies that the Church has neglected to review, such as questions concerning the dynamism of God. This issue is often neglected in the Church and needs to be answered in light of Scripture. This is crucial to our understanding of who God is and what life in his presence is all about. Sadly, the only rebuttals from the Reformed community attempt to dismiss the genuine threat of Open Theism. A superficial treatment of the Open movement does an injustice to these brothers in Christ and a disservice to other Reformed Christians. On such fragile issues, it is of utmost importance that our debate and criticism be done in a godly and accurate manner. A truthful representation of the issue from each side is crucial to gain a better understanding of the God we serve.

Although there are many important questions in the debate of Open Theism, in this paper I will focus on the issue of prayer. In prayer, the very way in which we communicate with God, our theology is displayed in our practice. Prayer shows our true mindset of who God is, how we relate to him, and how he reacts to us. Prayer also reveals what we believe our responsibility to be, and what privileges we think we have in our relationship to God. Often the question is raised, “Why pray? What good will prayer do?” The way we deal with these issues reveals part of the very heart of our theology. The answer to these questions displays a lot about our knowledge of God and His written Word to us. Open theists believe that their doctrine of prayer is one of the most attractive features of their theological system. They also claim to be giving the Christian

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community a new and more important reason to pray. Therefore, let us take a closer look at this aspect of Open Theism.

In this paper, I will first outline key points of the Open position. Secondly, I will give a detailed description of the Openness understanding of what happens when we pray. Specifically, how do our prayers affect God? Thirdly, I will critique the Open position by showing its biblical weaknesses, philosophical difficulties, and the consequential doctrines its adherents are forced to accept as a result of their assumptions. I will then present a Reformed understanding of what happens when we pray, supporting the claim that this explanation offers a more biblical description of prayer. In conclusion, it will be clear that our prayers must be consistent with all of Scripture, by showing the fullness of God’s glory.

**Introduction to Open Theism**

To have a fuller comprehension of the Openness view of prayer, it would be valuable to have a grasp of certain key doctrines. Therefore, I will touch on the Open doctrines concerning whom God is, how he relates to us, and the practical implications of this position. Fundamental to the Open model is the claim to present an uncommon and fresh perspective on who God is and how he desires to be in relationship with us. Open Theism claims to “reflect faithfully the spirit of the biblical message.”2 Scholars of Open Theism, such as John Sanders, William Hasker, Gregory Boyd, and Clark Pinnock, are adamant that their theology alone frees Scripture from the prejudice of ancient philosophies and stagnant traditionalism.

Instead of being influenced by tradition, Open theists claim to define God’s character based solely on Scripture. Unlike austere traditional definitions of God, the framework of Open Theism is based on the understanding that God is love. The entire Open framework depends
upon God’s fundamental essence as love and bases this argument on I John 4:8. God’s love governs all aspects of his character and determines his nature. Love determines how God relates to his people and is the guiding principle for all his actions. This principle affects all of God’s attributes, as Open theologian Keith Ward states, even “His omnipotence is limited by love.” Therefore, Christians should not trust in God’s power to save us, but in his love, since love determines God’s actions. This is just one instance of how the Openness framework is affected by its understanding of God as love.

God’s genuine love makes possible a real connection with his people. God loves his people so much he is moving through time with them, experiencing what they experience. God’s desire to have a “give and take” relationship with us entails his willingness to take great risks for our sake. One such risk is God’s decision to limit his knowledge of the future. In this way God can move through time with us, having instantaneous reactions to what we experience. Another risk God takes is giving us significant libertarian free will. By doing so God chooses not to influence us so that our relationship with him can be based solely on our decisions. These risks are real, but God will take the chance so that he can have a sincere relationship with us. God desires to have a true, responsive relationship with us, to bring us into the fellowship of the Trinity. For this reason, God will forfeit his foreknowledge, power, and sovereignty.

Since God has decided to limit his knowledge of the future and his power over us, he does open himself up occasionally to make mistakes. This is a necessary risk that God is willing to take for our sake. God’s limitation preserves our freedom. Not everything God anticipates comes to pass. Even though God knows the past and the present perfectly, sometimes his

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speculation concerning the future is wrong: therefore, God occasionally gives us faulty guidance. When God does make a mistake about the future, he readjusts his plans according to how the present has unfolded. God is very resourceful and amply prepared to deal with whatever new situation may arise. Open theists trust that God’s dynamic nature can respond to any circumstance, and they also believe that in Romans 8:28 God promises to try really hard to do all things for our good.  

God makes such a great effort and takes many risks so that he may have a genuine “give and take” relationship with us. Central to Open Theism is its unique understanding of our relationship to God: in this model, God loves us enough to limit himself and to give us true freedom, in the form of libertarian free will. In this way, we are free to choose God if that is what we desire, and we are free to reject him if we so wish. If we choose to love God, it is voluntary and not coerced. Only with our true freedom can we love God truly, without any manipulation. God also confers to us the status of co-laborers with him. Together, God and his people decide what will happen in the open future. Through our prayers and decisions we interact with God and he responds to us. To a large degree, our free choices determine the future. God is our responsive partner. In fact, “we are God’s covenant partners. God depends on us... which is tremendously motivating.” Only in this model can God and his people truly interact and have a sincere relationship.

Although God has given us libertarian freedom, which he values and protects, God has reserved the right to intervene in extreme circumstances. Since God gave us our freedom, he can interpose if necessary. If God intervenes, he does so by using his persuasive love and noncoercive influence. Situations such as these arise when it is absolutely vital for God to

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achieve his goals.\(^8\) However, God rarely needs to intervene since he is infinitely creative in his response to us.

God strives to work within what the circumstances present, without influencing our wills. His desire for a dynamic relationship leads him to limit his power and his knowledge of the future. He moves through time with us so that together we can create the future. Open theists believe this special relationship is motivating and has many practical benefits. An illustration of such is their explanation of suffering. Open theologians believe that, in contrast to traditional opinions, they have a much more comforting answer for those who are suffering. Simply put, suffering occurs because God did not know it would happen. Even if God may have had a pretty good idea that a certain event might happen, he wouldn’t want to interfere and override our libertarian free will. For these reasons, God is just as surprised as the victim is and is just as saddened by the suffering. Another helpful outworking of their theology is a new motivation to pray. Open theists believe they have even more incentive to pray because prayer can actually change God’s mind. Since the future is open, and we are co-laborers with God, our prayers are effective in the deep sense that they can change what will happen.

**Openness Position on Prayer**

The belief that our prayers are so effective that they actually change God’s mind is intriguing. Open theists think this issue is one of the most attractive features of their theology.\(^9\) Clark Pinnock, a leader in the Open movement, wrote: “in prayer the practicality of the Open view of God shines.”\(^10\) Open theists think their depiction of prayer is a truer, more accurate

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\(^7\) Pinnock, Clark H. *Most Moved Mover*, 150.
\(^8\) Ibid., 163.
\(^10\) Ibid., 171.
portrayal of the broadly evangelical picture of prayer. According to them, only the Open framework can accurately describe what most people believe happens in prayer. As Christians, our understanding of prayer is crucial to our relationship with God, and since it is one of Open theism’s most appealing doctrines, the debate surrounding the concept of prayer will be the focus of this paper. To grasp the Openness doctrine of prayer it will be helpful to see what Scriptural passages they emphasize, examine what they think God can do in response to our prayers, and how exactly they believe our prayers can affect him.

The Open model of prayer is based on certain key Scriptural passages that seem to emphasize their position. One such key Scripture is Exodus 32 in which Moses’ prayer to God has a dramatic effect. The context of the passage depicts the Israelites’ worship of a golden calf and Moses’ plea to God not to destroy his idolatrous people. Exodus 32:11-14 reads,

But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "O Lord ," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.' " Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Open theists interpret this passage as a clear example of prayer changing God’s mind and consequently his plans. Moses didn’t agree with God and, because of his special relationship and forceful presentation, Moses caused God to change his mind. Moses believed it was possible to change the divine word, and that belief caused him to argue with God. God valued Moses’ opinion and would have had to either persuade Moses he was right or concede to Moses’ request.

Patrick Miller, a proponent of the Open position, uses this Scriptural example as a didactic tool to explain how Christians should pray. Miller notes that Moses did not acquiesce in
God’s presence, he did not even pray “thy will be done.” Instead, Moses boldly presented an argument that directly contradicts God’s specific revealed will. Miller believes that this passage shows us it is God’s divine will that we should call on and argue with him. God wants to have dialogue with his people, he desires a genuine divine-human partnership. God is impacted by his people, and through prayer we have a relationship of reciprocity.

Another passage on prayer that is often emphasized by Open theologians is found in II Kings 20:1-6. They believe this account shows how prayer changes God’s revealed will.

The prophet Isaiah son of Amos went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life.

Later, the prophet Jeremiah references this event by saying, “Did not Hezekiah fear the Lord and seek his favor? And did not the Lord relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them?” Gregory Boyd interprets this situation as Hezekiah persuading God, in a give-and-take communication. Since God was moving through time with Hezekiah, he could not have foreknown Hezekiah’s petition. But when Hezekiah prayed, God responded to his prayer and changed his decree. Hezekiah’s prayer was effectual in a powerful way, it changed what would have been the course of events. Boyd explains that our prayers are effective in this same way. We too can change God’s mind through prayer.

13 Jeremiah 26:19.
God’s Role in Open Prayer

Christians should feel empowered and boldly pray like Hezekiah and Moses. By looking at his example we see how our prayers can affect God’s mind, as we work together with God to decide the open future. Truly, this is an inspiring reason to pray. With proof texts like Exodus 32 Open theologians offer motivation to pray and provide a strong explanation for what happens when we pray. Based on this and other passages on prayer, Open theologians deduce how God can respond to prayer. God’s response to prayer and involvement in the world is extensively governed by his limited intervention. A few significant ramifications of limited sovereignty in the doctrine of prayer include God’s movement through time, the unknown future, and the mutability of God’s mind.

One of the effects of God’s loving decision to limit his sovereignty is his desire to be in time with us.\(^{15}\) God wants to be close to us, to experience what we go through when it is happening. God also wants to be in time with us so that he can respond to our prayers temporally.\(^{16}\) God is personal; therefore he is with us, experiencing the sequence of time as we do. By moving through time with us God can feel joy, pain, surprise and regret when we do.\(^{17}\) This creates an authentic conversation in our prayer lives that could not exist if God foreknew our prayers or the future.

God also loves us enough to choose to limit his knowledge of the future. God longed to have prayer be truly dynamic, so he chose not to know what events or prayers would occur in the future. Only if the future is completely open could prayer significantly impact God as he decides


\(^{17}\) Boyd, Gregory A. *God of the Possible*, 131.
what will happen. God created a world with an unsettled future by choosing to make a world in which it would be impossible to know the future. Since God chose not to create a future, the future does not exist.\textsuperscript{18} God and his people converse through prayer in order to create the future together. God limits his knowledge of the future so that he will seek to know our thoughts as we pray to him.\textsuperscript{19}

Since God values our opinions and our prayers, we have a significant impact on him and can change his mind. God loves us so much that our prayers are capable of altering his decisions and will for the future. Our prayers can alter God’s original plan or something that he may have initially declared to be his will.\textsuperscript{20} One Open theist, Terence Fretheim, describes how prayer changes God’s mind: “human prayer (in this case intercession) is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people, and the world. God may well adjust modes and directions (though not ultimate goals) in view of human responsiveness.”\textsuperscript{21} In the Openness view God loves us so much that he makes our prayers important enough to change his mind. Sanders explains our ability to change God’s mind through prayer in this way: “We may prevail with God because God genuinely takes our desires into account. Yet God may also prevail with us, getting us to change our minds and pursue a course of action that we did not initially think best.”\textsuperscript{22}

God grants so much power to our prayers that sometimes, if we fail to pray, God will change his mind and withhold certain blessings he was going to give. Sometimes God even abandons his plans because we don’t pray. By withholding blessings God hopes to encourage us to pray more. In this way, God shows the high premium he places on our prayers. God greatly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[18] Ibid., 16.
\item[19] Ibid., 131.
\item[20] Ibid., 97.
\end{footnotes}
values our petitions and allows them to influence his mind. It’s God’s choice to limit his sovereignty by granting us significant freedom, so we can cooperate with God to create the future.

The Believer’s Role in Prayer

In conclusion regarding God’s response to prayer, I will now discuss what humanity’s role in prayer is. Clark Pinnock’s work *The Most Moved Mover* describes our relationship to God as: “Yahweh also takes on partners who affect him and agents who go face-to-face with him in dynamic, not controlled relationships.” It is in this relationship that we communicate with God, and through prayer, “Humanity’s status is lifted to the high level of partnership with God. Both have voice and the two are bound together in relationship.” God wants us to be empowered, therefore he grants us the ability to affect him. Gregory Boyd states, “This is the power of petitionary prayer… God displays his beautiful sovereignty by deciding not to always unilaterally decide matters. He enlists our input…. Prayer is a dialogue, and like the great heroes of the faith we can impact God in a profound way. Moses did not acquiesce in God’s presence, so why should we?  

We should boldly come before the throne, knowing that God waits to hear from us, to learn our thoughts, and possibly to adjust his plans. What our free will and power do in prayer are evident in our dialogue with God and in what happens when we intercede for others. Our prayers are the means by which God solicits our fellowship. In prayer God is not asking for our wisdom, but rather asking us to enter into a loving relationship with him. We are his co-laborers,

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23 Pinnock, Clark A. *Most Moved Mover*, 35.
24 Ibid., 45.
25 Boyd, Gregory A. *God of the Possible*, 96.
therefore our prayers are really meaningful and have the power to affect and change God’s mind and even his plans. God responds to our prayers, and in a strictly limited sense, he can be changed from without. Open theists point out that since God is willing to change in response to our prayers, he occasionally will give us something we pray for even if it is not in our best interests. Indeed, our prayers can do mighty things. These possibilities show how our prayers can influence God to an extreme degree.

The effect of our prayers is even more evident in the field of intercession. Occasionally, others do not receive certain blessings because we fail to intercede on their behalf. God risks the possibility that he may have to withhold a blessing if an individual fails to make intercession for someone else. God values community, and he fosters relationships by blessing us when we pray for one another, and conversely by withholding from us when we do not pray for one another. Even though God does value community, and our prayers do significantly impact him, we must also remember that God cannot answer our prayers if they limit another person’s significant freedom. God’s influence over others is limited, but hopefully our prayers may have some impact. God does in some extreme circumstances exercise his right to unilaterally intervene.

Although it may be unclear precisely what our prayers of intercession accomplish, prayer essentially “brings God back into the picture” by initiating divine activity that would not have occurred had we not prayed. Ultimately Open theists believe that prayer is effective because in it “we grant God permission to influence our non-cognitive states of mind or share with us those cognitive insights concerning ourselves and others that will help us better live out our Christian

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commitment in this world.” 30 As we have seen, this concept of prayer is explained in light of God’s limited sovereignty and man’s significant freedom. Our prayers have the power to change God’s mind and he genuinely responds to us, not knowing what the future holds. Through prayer we labor with God to determine what the future will be.

An Example of a Consistent Open Prayer

To help bring together this depiction of the Openness position on prayer, I will conclude this section with an example of an Open prayer. Although not an Open theist, Terrance Tiessen in his work *Providence and Prayer*, provides an accurate representation of what a consistent Open theologian would pray like. He writes,

Loving Father, we know that you are a powerful God but that even you are not able to do everything that you would like to do because you have chosen to involve us in significant ways in the world. You want us to love you and to serve you willingly. We are frightened right now because we realize that Richard and his friends are in grave danger. The men who have taken them don’t care about their lives; they only want to get the benefits they need for their cause. We have no guarantees that things will turn out well for Richard. They did not turn out perfectly for your own Son when he was nailed to a cross as an innocent man, although you made that great evil the means of immense good. Things have not turned out well for many of your children. On the other hand, we can also think of times when those who followed you have been in danger and have come through it. We know that evil wins sometimes, Lord, even though you do not want it to. You can bring good out of evil in the long run, but that does not negate the seriousness of the evil itself. On the other hand, we believe that it makes a difference when we pray, that there are ways in which you will work because we have prayed, which you would not otherwise have worked. And so we are serious now and our request that you act in this situation.

We are assuming, Lord that the best thing for the missionaries would be to escape unharmed, and so we are praying that you will do what you can to bring that about. We don’t fully understand the ways in which you work. We know that you can dramatically change the hearts and minds of their captors. We also know that you can give Richard and the other missionaries a keen eye for ways in which they can convince the men to let them go or even to escape. We know that you could even do something supernaturally miraculous, but we know that doesn’t happen often, and we aren’t sure what the limits are in that regard. However you choose to do it, Father, we are asking you to protect them and rescue them.

In all of this, Lord, we realize that what is most important is the relationship that Richard and his friends, and also their abductors, have with you. I ask that the missionaries will be very conscious of your presence with them and that their captors will experience in them a strength and peace and love that is unusual and attractive. It would be wonderful if this troubling experience could be a means by which your Spirit could work in grace in the lives of those who are currently living in ignorance or rebellion against you. Help us too, Father, to think of things we could be doing to help in this situation. We ask these things because you have invited us to bring our requests to you, and we give you praise for your own love and goodness even when things go differently than you want them to. In Jesus’ name, Amen.\(^{31}\)

**Reformed Critique of Open Prayer**

Based on this understanding of the Openness picture of what prayer does, I will now critique the inherent biblical weaknesses, a few philosophical worries, and the consequential picture of a God of lesser glory. Although Open theists may appear to offer a marvelous account of the power of prayer, their position needs to be reevaluated in light of Scripture. Presently I will examine their selective use of Scripture, naïve hermeneutics, and their presuppositional biases that produce unacceptable exegesis.\(^{32}\)

In critiquing the Open view of prayer from a theological perspective, it is important to note the selective use of Scripture. Although Open theists profess to be restoring prominent biblical metaphors for prayer, they offer no text that privileges their specific examples above others. The limitations they place on God and the freedom given to man in the Open prayer are inconsistent with the message of Scripture on the whole. This limited use of a few certain passages of Scripture will leave them unable to explain many themes evident in Scripture. For example, their central doctrine concerning God’s choice to limit himself is inconsistent with the theme of divine prophecy, God’s unchanging nature, and large portions of Scripture that describe God’s determinate nature. Perhaps this is why Open theists are unable to give a specific text to


defend their claim that God chose to limit his power and omniscience.

Open theists choose proof texts to emphasize and then interpret them on the basis of a literal or common sense reading. Although John Sanders would agree that all Scripture is anthropomorphic, he would maintain that a literal reading of the text does not entail it to be analogical. In other words, the case of Moses’ prayer affecting God, although explained in human terms, is not an analogy. The same principle applies to Hezekiah’s petition. Open theists believe that descriptions of God relenting are literal accounts of God’s thoughts and feelings. One Open theist, Richard Rice believes that passages such as Exodus 32 must be taken at face value for several reasons. First, because these passages appear frequently in Scripture as descriptions of God. Numerous references to God relenting or changing cannot be discounted as merely poetical inventions. God repents in a variety of situations and mostly in direct response to individual’s prayers. Second, the context seems to necessitate that these descriptions be understood in a defining manner, namely that this is what it means for God to be God. With these proof texts, Open theists affirm God’s character requires him to change his immediate intentions in response to our petitions. Rice asserts that Reformed commentators must go to great lengths in order to reinterpret these straightforward assertions of God’s mutability. In the Open model, these descriptions of God are not figures of speech or analogies, but faithful portrayals of God’s inner character. Open theists believe that these passages concerning God’s relenting, “bring a coherence to a range of biblical thinking about God; they provide a hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole.”

But their interpretation of Exodus 32 and II Kings 20:1-6 neglects to consider what Scripture as a whole teaches. This specific text should be interpreted in light of God’s revealed

33 Pinnock, Clark, et al. The Openness of God, 35.
nature, the petitioner’s place in redemptive history, and biblical teaching on prayer. Facts such as God’s unchanging character must illumine our reading of Exodus 32 and II Kings 20:1-6. A few passages that explicitly state this continual theme of Scripture include Malachi 3:6 and Numbers 23:19. In Malachi, the Lord’s prophet is chastising God’s people for their rebellion. Even as he is predicting the coming judgment of Israel, he reminds them that God is faithful to his promises and that “I the Lord do not change.”\(^{35}\) In Numbers, Balaam is told directly by the Lord “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind.”\(^{36}\) These passages and many others create a universal doctrine of God that is based on who God is as God. His actions are derived from who and what he is.\(^{37}\)

To make an understanding of Moses’ prayer more consistent with the rest of Scripture it is important to consider Moses’ role in God’s redemptive plan. Since Moses’ prayer was under the old Mosaic covenant, it was effective through Christ’s mediation. Moses, as a type of Christ, made intercession for God’s people. His mediating prayer foreshadowed Christ’s mediation for us as our great high priest.\(^{38}\) As Cornelius Van Til pointed out,

> Moses’ intercessory prayer was calculated to teach Israel that their very existence could be tolerated only upon the ground of Jehovah’s mediatorial work. Back of this mediatorial work was the great name of Jehovah himself. It is because he wants to preserve his own name that he will answer the mediatorial prayers of Moses.\(^{39}\)

Even as Moses pictured Christ, Christ was interceding for his prayer. Christ ever lives to intercede for his people, and this is true in Moses’ case as well.\(^{40}\) His prayer was effective because he was united to Christ. As always, prayer is effective because Christ brings it before the

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\(^{35}\) Malachi 3:6.  
\(^{36}\) Numbers 23:19.  
\(^{37}\) Erickson, Millard J. *God the Father Almighty*, 106.  
\(^{38}\) Hebrews 4:14-15; 7-9; Romans 3:23-26.  
\(^{40}\) Hebrews 7:24-25.
throne of God in power.41

Yet, if God is unchanging in his nature how is the reader to understand Exodus 32:14, “then the Lord relented”? Moses’ prayer should be understood as a plea for mercy based on God’s own character and his own glory. Moses was pleading against God’s immediate revealed decision. But Moses’ petition was based on God’s eternal character with a concern for God’s greater glory before men. Moses was committed to God’s sovereignty and desired whatever would show God worthy of honor. Moses was not petitioning God to act against his divine nature, but was pleading for undeserved grace and mercy.42 Moses’ prayer was effective because it was part of God’s secret will. God ordained his prayer and, as with all prayers, promised to respond to it. Moses’ prayer was powerful only because it was made through Christ’s intercession in accordance with God’s will. As God had ordained, Moses prayed and God responded by answering his prayer. Moses’ prayer changed the situation that would have been one of God’s judgment. God changes what would have been his action in the situation in response to Moses’ prayer. God ordained this prayer and therefore it was not a change in the divine will, plan, or volition.43

Many of the same principles can be applied to our understanding of Hezekiah’s prayer. In Hezekiah’s situation God declared he would send judgment, provided the situation remained the same. But the situation started to change because Hezekiah prayed earnestly. God responded to that changed situation by answering the prayer. It is interesting to note how the prophet Isaiah recalls the result of Hezekiah’s prayer. In Isaiah 38:1-6 the prophet recounts how Hezekiah’s prayer changed events and yet in Isaiah 46:9b-10 the writer tells us, “Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I

41 I Timothy 2:5; John 14:6.
make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” The prophet gives the reader the perspective that God simultaneously orders all that will happen and responds to our prayers.

This Reformed interpretation is distinct from the Open model for a variety of reasons. A large contributor to the distinctiveness of the Open position is the underlying presupposition. Open theists unabashedly read the text presupposing a “common sense view of the human will.” They profess that the basic starting point of their theology is significant freedom.44 Significant freedom, otherwise known as the libertarian view of freedom, asserts that individuals are only free in a situation if they have the option to act and not act. Open theists describe this as the common sense view of freedom held by almost everyone. This concept of freedom, traditionally held by Arminians, has been used in the past to argue against divine foreordination. Open Theism merely takes the Arminian position one step further. They conclude that God cannot know our future actions because if he did, then they would not be free acts. Their common sense understanding of what freedom entails is brought to Scripture as a hermeneutical presupposition. But no passage in Scripture describes us as having indeterminist freedom.45 Instead of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, Open theists have infused the text with their own ideas.46 Their preconceived understanding of freedom distorts what Scripture teaches on foreordination, predestination, and foreknowledge. Open theists beg the question in their hermeneutics by establishing their interpretation to be true by assuming their presupposition is true. Although every argument is based on certain presuppositions, Open theists fail to acknowledge and defend their assumptions. This weakness is even greater because of the Openness claim to be presenting

44 Pinnock, Clark, et.al. The Openness of God, 7.
46 Erickson, Millard J. God the Father Almighty, 81.
a new theology. As the novel view, Open theism has the burden of proving why all past interpretations of Scripture have been wrong. Although history is fallible, Open theists must explain why the functioning historical doctrines of prayer are incorrect.

As we have seen, Open Theism selects only some specific passages on prayer and then interprets them from a faulty hermeneutic, presupposing libertarian freedom. Besides these hermeneutical weaknesses in the Open doctrine of prayer, there are also a few philosophical worries. In many of their books and articles, Open theists often create a caricature of the traditional viewpoint and beg the question of indeterminst libertarian freedom. These two philosophical fallacies create a weak foundation on which Open theists base their arguments. The Openness criticism of the Reformed doctrine on prayer is based on a misrepresentation of the actual position. Clark Pinnock describes the Reformed picture of God responding to prayer as “God as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of being, as an all-determining irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks.”47 In discussing God’s foreordination, one extreme Open theist, John Boykin, believes “For God to force us along with him would be ‘psychic rape.’”48 Language such as this is emotive and used to manipulate the reader’s opinion concerning Reformed doctrine of prayer. John Sanders even concedes his own caricature, “This is not the whole picture within conservatism, however, for its hymnody and piety often speak of God’s genuine relationship and response to us. It is even common to find clergy and laity alike asserting that petitionary prayer can change God’s mind.”49 Open theists’ unfair portrayals create a false description that is easy to discredit. Their arguments, based on misrepresentations, commit the fallacy of a straw man. By making a caricature of Reformed doctrine, Open theists

47 Pinnock, Clark, et al. The Openness of God, 103.
attempt to sway the readers’ opinion to their side.

Another philosophical weakness in the Openness view of prayer is their unfounded assumption of libertarian freedom. They assume this “common sense understanding” of freedom without giving an argument for it. Without defending their position, Open theists give biased, inadequate descriptions of other possible explanations of freedom. Assuming libertarian freedom without giving an explanation is the fallacy of begging the question. Instead of first considering what Scripture describes freedom to be, Open theists allow their incompatibilist presuppositions to determine their understanding of the text. Upholding these presuppositions without any accurate explanation is being intellectually dishonest. Other definitions of freedom must be truthfully depicted so that the most accurate reflection of the biblical model may be found.\(^{50}\) This could be accomplished by presenting all the major views on freedom as impartially as possible. Then a thorough study of Scripture could be conducted in order to grasp what model of freedom is the most biblical.

**Consequential Open Picture of God**

The presupposition of libertarian freedom has an immense impact on Open theology. Since they do not give a proper explanation for their assumptions of libertarian free will, Open theists commit the fallacy of begging the question. This fallacy, as well as a caricature of the Reformed position, are philosophical weaknesses within Open theology. The Open model is also damaged by hermeneutical failings. Open theists chose specific passages to support a literal hermeneutic that presupposes libertarian freedom. The outworking of this faulty hermeneutic and philosophical weakness is a picture of a God with diminished grandeur. The consequential


doctrine of God is a radical departure from Evangelical theology. This distinction is clearly evident in the Open doctrine of prayer. Quoting from *The Openness of God*: “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.”

To critique how the Open picture of God affects prayer, I will discuss the Open doctrine of omniscience and power. The Openness understanding of omniscience includes such matters as the possibility of new divine knowledge, the instruction individuals can give God, and the chance that God could be mistaken. The second issue, the doctrine of limited divine power, leads to a weakened version of God’s ability to answer prayer.

Open Theism holds that God’s love guided him to limit his knowledge of the future. God desired to have a dynamic relationship with his people. To do so, he chose to create a world in which he would move through time with us, not knowing what the future may hold. As we move through time with God, a crucial aspect of the dynamic relationship is dialogical prayer. The debate within the Openness’ camp is whether or not our prayers tell God something he does not know. John Sanders argues that although God does know all future possibilities, he does not know which possible events will become actual. Therefore, when we pray, God *learns* which possibility we actually decided to advocate.

As we move through time with God, he gains new knowledge from our actual decisions. For example, when Moses prayed for deliverance God learned new information. God learned that the possibility of Moses interceding would be an actuality. Based on this new knowledge, God chose to change his original plan and deliver the Israelites.

Followers of Open Theism are led to believe that God learns our thoughts when we pray

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52 John Sanders, email to author, January 15, 2002.
and adjusts his plans accordingly. Yet, even within the bounds of Open Theism, God still knows
the past and the present completely and perfectly.53 Therefore, wouldn’t God’s present
knowledge contain which possibility we have actualized, whether or not we prayed about it? 54
But dialogical prayer is suppose to be a conversation in which we tell God our thoughts, he
learns our opinions, and possibly changes his mind. However, even within Open theology this
type of human conversational “give and take” is impossible. A God of limited omniscience
would still know our present decisions perfectly, even if we did not pray about them. Although
Open theists desperately want to emphasize this picture of bi-directional prayer, they cannot
because God still knows the present perfectly. Open theists could still believe prayer changes
God’s plan, but they cannot consistently think that in prayer God learns something new. In the
end, the Openness attempt to create a new or greater incentive to pray is unachievable even in the
framework of limited omniscience.

In their portrayal of a genuine “give and take” relationship, Open theists claim that prayer
influences God and sometimes changes his mind or plan. Since God desires fellowship through
prayer, he offers to reward us as his colaborers by allowing our petitions to truly impact him.
John Sanders explains that through prayer God learns our opinions and we help him in the
process of decision making. Sanders writes: “God may be leaning towards doing X but has not
fully decided, so our input becomes part of the decision making process.”55 Prayer is most
effective if it includes a forceful presentation made by someone who has a special relationship
with God. In Exodus 32 Moses, who was growing in godliness, presented a sound argument for
how God should deal with the Israelites. Since God respected Moses and was thankful for his
fellowship, God changed his revealed will.

53 Boyd, Gregory A. *God of the Possible*, 152.
Since God values prayer so highly, occasionally he will grant a request, even if it is not in the individual’s best interest.56 This possibility should make every Christian more conscientious in their petitions. However, God only rarely responds to prayer by giving something we should not have. In fact, God does not always change his mind in response to prayer. Although we do not know specifically, there are some situations in which God will not intervene to answer prayer. We may be unsure what God will or will not do, but we should continue to bring our requests before God since we know he values our fellowship and love. Sadly, an Open theist could continue to obediently petition God but see no change. Since he does not know the specific parameters of God’s involvement he could endlessly pray for something God will never answer. Due to the strong emphasis placed on the power to change God’s mind, an Open theist could quickly begin to question his or her relationship with God if their prayers continue to be unanswered.

The Open belief that prayer influences God and even has the power to change his mind is astonishing to most Christians. But how can this doctrine of prayer coexist with the manner in which Scripture describes God’s nature? The prophet Isaiah passionately declares, “Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?”57 Open theists have several biblical passages and themes to explain. For example, why would a God who knows the present and the past perfectly, who is good and all powerful should change his plans based on our petitions that are weak, selfish and sinful? Why would it be better for God to change his actions in the world based on what he learns from our prayers? Do we want a God who knows all wisdom and purity, who is

the perfect Judge, to base his decisions on our petitions? Even if God values our prayers, wouldn’t God be a fool to change his plan because of our inferior suggestions? Surely these are weighty questions to be answered, but these issues are the consequences of the Openness claims of man’s influence and power over God. At the heart of the Open doctrine of prayer is the concept that the relationship between God and man is a mutual contract.58

As we continue to see how a God of limited omniscience affects the doctrine of prayer, the final consequence is the belief that God can be mistaken.59 Citing Jeremiah 3:7; 32:35 and I Samuel 15:11,35, Open theists argue that God can be wrong in his response to prayer and even in the guidance he gives as we pray. Since God only knows the possibilities for the future, sometimes his predications of what will actually happen are incorrect. As frightening as this possibility seems, Open theists emphasize that we must trust in God’s love, not his omniscience. Yet this doctrine leaves a God who is sufficiently wise, not perfectly wise, to answer our prayers.

Such a diminished view of God robs the believer of unquestioning confidence and faith. If God is not all wise, then how can we be sure he really knows anything better than we do? The possibility that God could be mistaken in his answer to prayer could easily lead Christians to wonder why they should even bother to pray. If God can make mistakes just like us, why should we follow his opinions and not ours? By limiting God’s knowledge of the future Open theists have made God subordinate to man, and this does not give the Christian any new inspiration to pray.

As we have seen, the Openness picture of God’s self-limiting authority has restricted God’s omniscience, thus corrupting the doctrine of prayer. Open theists describe a God who does not know the future and gains new knowledge from our prayers. God is influenced by our

58 Helm, Paul. The Providence of God, 150.
petitions to the point of changing his mind, yet he could be mistaken in his answer to our prayers. This concept of God is antithetical to Scripture’s portrayal of God’s complete omniscience and perfect will that was established before the beginning of time. In compromising God’s omniscience, Open theists have limited God’s power to answer prayer. Since Open Theism gives higher status to man’s significant freedom, God became powerless to influence our free will. God can only exert “non-coercive” force and gently persuade us with his love. But God can unilaterally intervene on very rare occasions if his ultimate goals are in danger of being compromised. At the very most, God can only make it more likely for us to choose a certain course of action.60

God’s limited power greatly affects his ability to respond to prayer. I will describe the Openness definition of God’s power, how our prayers can further empower him, and conclude that this image of God leaves him inadequate to answer our prayers. John Sanders describes God’s power as a de facto authority, meaning that God has the “right to issue commands and carry them out only with the consent of those affected.”61 In this way, God’s power is a non-coercive influence. By exercising de facto authority God waits for the acknowledgement of his power by the individual who would be influenced. Sanders does concede that ascribing to God de facto authority entails a high risk, since God’s power would be contingent on our acceptance of it. But Sanders believes that God is willing to take this risk in order to avoid compromising our significant freedom. Since God loves us and wants to establish a covenant relationship with us, he chooses to take the risk of having only de facto authority. Clark Pinnock wrote that God’s power is one of persuasion and it is through his love that he woos and transforms us.62

59 Pinnock, Clark, et.al. The Openness of God, 165.
60 Ibid.,161.
62 Pinnock, Clark, et.al. The Openness of God, 116.
In this picture, God’s power depends upon our willingness to acknowledge him. When we pray and acknowledge God’s influence, we create new opportunities for God to participate in our lives. Through prayer we grant God permission to influence our non-cognitive states of mind and share with us insights that will help us to maintain our commitments. As we pray, the parameters of God’s power are enlarged. In this way we are assured by God’s promise in Romans 8:28 that God “will try as hard as he can to make everything work out for our good.” As Clark Pinnock wrote God is, “not the all determining kind but is an omnicompetent kind.”

If God’s power is so restricted, how do we know that our prayers have the power to change anything? God’s typical exercise of power through persuasion will not necessarily be able to bring about the desired outcome. If God can not warrant his power, we can not know that our prayers will be effective to help others. God is limited by libertarian free will, and consequently there can be no ultimate guarantee that his desires will come to fruition. It is impossible for Open theists to assert God’s limited sovereignty and sustain a sure hope that God’s will can come about. Even their minute qualification that God could unilaterally intervene if his goal is jeopardized is not assuring. This type of intervention would compromise the significant freedom God gave us, and it would violate the basis of our “give and take” relationship. In contrast to this limited doctrine of God, Scripture ascribes to God much more power to answer prayer. Romans 1 and 2 records Paul’s description of God’s great power. Paul expounds upon God’s mighty power to judge the pagans who do not acknowledge him. This text is based upon an understanding of God’s rule over all people, even if they ignore or rebel against his authority. Romans exemplifies the entirety of Scripture that tells of God’s ultimate authority and power. Clearly, God’s word reveals that his power is not ultimately bound by our free will to

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63 Basinger, David and Randall Basinger. Predestination and Free Will, 146.
64 Pinnock, Clark, et. al. The Openness of God, 116.
submit to him.

In summary of how God’s limited power affects prayer, it is evident that God would be unable to answer most petitions that may entail compromising an individual’s free will. If God is unable to answer most prayers, the believer is lead to question the purpose of prayer. If God cannot assure us that His will can be done then why pray to influence his plans? If God only has de facto authority, then why pray for him to change the heart of an unbelieving friend? Open theists cannot be assured that a God of limited sovereignty will be able to accomplish his will or even prevent his plan from being mistaken. Their only hope is that God may be able to persuade others to agree with his desires.

Reformed Model of Prayer

In this critique of the Open doctrine of God, I have pointed out hermeneutical deficiencies and philosophical flaws inherent in the system. The outworking of Open exegesis and fallacies is a portrait of God lacking in omniscience and power. Distorting God’s image in these areas leave God too weak to answer prayer. In contrast, the Evangelical description of what happens when we pray defends the biblical testimony of God’s complete omniscience and full sovereignty. In Scripture we are given confidence that God does respond and use prayer to bring about his perfect and good will. As I present the Reformed position I will first site a very common prayer that can only consistent within Reformed theology. Secondly, I will discuss how Scripture defines God’s sovereignty, specifically concerning the immutability of his will and foreordination. Thirdly, I will consider how man’s role and status makes prayer effective. In conclusion, I will remark on the nature of what prayer can accomplish.

As I begin to make the case for a Reformed doctrine of prayer I would like to mention

65 Pinnock, Clark et.al. The Openness of God, 122.
one frequently used prayer that is only consistent within a Reformed framework. Although Open Theism claims to present the only accurate description of how most evangelicals pray, one of the most common prayers is only consistent within the Reformed model. This frequent prayer concerns those who are not saved. Christians often pray that unbelievers will be changed by God so they may see their sin and their need for a Savior. In these prayers it is often asked, or at the very least assumed, that God can bring about the salvation of those who are rebelling against him. Yet this petition could not be prayed by a consistent Open theist. Such a petition would be asking God to exercise undue influence, which would compromise an individual’s significant freedom. However, Scripture affirms that, “salvation is of the Lord.” 66 The Apostle Paul’s conversion strongly testifies that God can and will override the stubborn heart of an unregenerate to bring them to salvation. 67 This power to change our hearts is often testified to as people recount their conversion experience. Testimonies commonly recount how God radically changed an individual’s life through a series of many events. Not only does this show God’s power to change us, but it also displays his authority over all circumstances and situations.

Reformed Model of God’s Role in Prayer

These common assumptions, that God has the power and the right to change people’s hearts and lives, reflects a belief in God’s specific or meticulous sovereignty. Scripture supports this understanding of God’s power over the entire world. One example of an occasion when this truth is evident is in Nebuchadnezzar’s life. When God chose to humble King Nebuchadnezzar, this great king repented and praised God by saying: “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have

you done?" The psalmist also attributes to God all majesty and power, contrasting Jehovah to the pagan gods of the nations, when he wrote, “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.” Solomon describes God’s true influence over people with the metaphor: “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” Ephesians 1 also describes God’s great sovereignty, and specifically contradicts the Open doctrine that God is influenced and changed by us. Paul describes salvation from the Lord who predestined his people through Christ to be saved. This passage conveys how God deliberates, chooses, and accomplishes all things on the basis of his purpose through the agency of others. Ephesians 1 and the other verses mentioned are only a few of the many verses that express this biblical theme of God’s specific sovereignty.

Throughout Scripture God is described as the sovereign Lord who has saved a people for himself, through his power and love. God’s sovereignty is manifest in the immutability of his will. God’s will is not changed or revised because it was created under his perfect goodness and unerring wisdom. Herman Bavinck strongly upheld the doctrine of divine immutability, he wrote

The doctrine of God’s immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is unchangeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds this rest in God, in him alone, for only he is pure being and no becoming. Hence, in Scripture God is often called the Rock….

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68 Daniel 4:34-35.
69 Psalm 115:3.
70 Proverbs 16:9.
72 Daniel 4:35; Ephesians 1.
Scripture clearly teaches God’s immutability, which entails his unchanging being, attributes, character, purposes, and promises.⁷⁴

But this biblical truth of God’s changeless will is challenged by Open theists. Their belief that prayer can change God’s mind and his plan is a threat against the biblical understanding of God’s immutability. Open theists defend their belief that prayer changes God’s will, by pointing out a few narrative passages in which God is said to repent, or to change. Reformed theologians argue that these passages express God’s present attitude or intention with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment.⁷⁵ However, if the situation changes, God’s attitude or expression towards it will change as well. God responds with appropriate actions and emotions to different situations. One case of God responding appropriately to the situation is found in Jonah. God declares to Jonah his divine judgment against Nineveh. But when the people repent, the situation is changed, and God responds to their repentance by withholding his judgment. Louis Berkhof describes God’s response as specifically a change in the relations of people to him, not changes in God’s being. The change is in man and man’s relationship to God.⁷⁶

Reformed theologians describe these relational changes as evidence that God is active and dynamic, yet he is stable and his actions are in keeping with his nature, values, and plans.⁷⁷ As in the life of Jonah, God moves from punishment to promise not because he has deviated from his original intention, but because the recipients of the pronouncement have changed. God planned from all eternity that the people of Nineveh would repent and when they did God experienced certain emotions appropriate to the situation. However, the events do not cause God’s emotions. His actions and feelings in the situation are the result of his own plan.

⁷⁴ Psalm 33:11; Matthew 13:35; 25:34; Ephesians 1:4; Exodus 3:14; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Numbers 23:18-20; and so on.
Our prayers do not change God’s will, but God does use our prayers to bring about his mercy. Although it was part of God’s will that Moses’ prayer be answered in Exodus 32, Jeremiah 15 clearly shows that this is not always the case. In Jeremiah the Lord says, "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence!" In this context it was obviously not part of God’s will for prayer to alter his revealed judgment. Whether or not God alters his judgement in response to prayer is based solely on his will. As Jonathan Edwards explained: “The mercy of God is not moved or drawn by anything in the creature; but the spring of God’s benevolence is within himself only; he is self-moving; and whatsoever mercy he bestows, the reason and ground of it is not to be sought for in the creature but in God’s good pleasure.”

It is God’s gracious will to bestow blessings in response to petitionary prayer. Christian prayer presupposes that God is sovereign and his mind and will are immutable. Describing the nature of God’s response to prayer, Jonathan Edwards wrote, “God has been pleased to constitute prayer to be antecedent to the bestowment of mercy; and he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence to prayer, as though he were prevailed upon in prayer.” God does respond to our prayers because he ordained them as part of his immutable will before time began.

The immutability of God’s will is based upon his ordination of all things. God’s will does not change because it is founded on his perfect and complete decree of the future. God knows the future because he has made it certain. The biblical support for this position is overwhelming.

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77 Erickson, Millard. God the Father Almighty, 95-113.
78 Jeremiah 15:1.
80 Ezekiel 36:36-37.
83 Psalm 115:3; Proverbs 16:9, 33; Daniel 4:3-35; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Ephesians 1:11; Philippians 2:12-13; Hebrews 13:21 and so on.
The prophet Isaiah declares that God’s foreknowledge is so essential to the divine nature, that if
God does not know the future he would not be God at all.84 The God of Scripture ordained all
things, even our prayers. He knows what we will pray even before we pray it.85 Our
foreordained prayers are part of God’s immutable will brought to fruition through his perfect
providence.86 According to God’s good pleasure, he ordains that many of his purposes be
achieved through the means of prayer.

God has decreed all things, including the necessary circumstances to bring about his goal.
As God relates to us through the matrix of our desires and beliefs our relationship to him is not
compromised. People are affected by these non-constraining causes to act according to their own
will, desires, or wishes. Although our behavior is causally determined, we are not acting against
our wills. God decrees all things and we are still free because our actions are in harmony with
our own desires. This is evident in how God uses the events and influences in our lives to cause
us to freely desire to pray.87 God initiates our prayers by placing his will in our hearts through
the Spirit, so that we want to work out his decrees. Consequently, our prayers bring forth the
blessings that God has predestined for us.

Reformed theologians believe that God has ordained our prayers as part of his good and
perfect plan. We have seen how, based on Scripture, Reformed theology upholds that God has
complete power and perfect knowledge to answer our prayers. God has ordained prayer to be the
means whereby he blesses his people. In conclusion, we know that God hears our prayers and
responds to them with wisdom and power. To continue, I will discuss what the believer’s role in
prayer entails.

84 Isaiah 41:21-23.
85 Matthew 6:8.
86 Basinger, David and Randall Basinger. Predestination and Free Will, 23.
87 Helm, Paul. The Providence of God, 150.
Reformed Model of the Believer’s Role in Prayer

Beginning with a few examples from Scripture, it is evident how God’s sovereignty and our responsibility to pray coincide. Throughout Scripture God reveals his sovereignty while asking his people to pray. Although it is clear that God rules over the earth, he promises to hear and answer his people’s prayers. Even on occasions when God has already foretold his plans, his people still pray concerning the matter. As recorded in I Kings, God tells Elijah that it will rain, and yet Elijah continues to earnestly pray and ask for rain.88 This narrative is interpreted in James to mean that prayer is not intended to alter God’s will but is used to accomplish it. Like Elijah, Daniel prayed for the accomplishment of God’s revealed will. Daniel prayed that Israel’s captivity would end, even though God had already promised it would.89 Scripture gives many situations in which God’s people pray for things that God has already promised them. Even more commonly, the Bible testifies to God answering specific petitions in situations where God had not revealed his will. In Genesis 32 Moses records how Jacob prayed to God for protection from his brother’s anger. God answered his petition by changing Esau’s heart.90 In Judges 15, Samson was about to die of thirst. He prays for deliverance and God answers his prayer by giving him water.91 Passages such as these provide ample reason to believe that God answers our prayers as part of his foreordained plan. But to explain specifically how our prayer can be effective, it is important to understand the believer’s status in Christ.

Our prayers are effective because we petition God based on Christ’s sacrifice for us. Essential to doctrine of effective prayer is Christ’s work on our behalf. As we pray, Christ’s

88 I Kings 18:42.
89 Daniel 9:2-3; Ezekiel 36:37.
90 Genesis 32.
atonement on our behalf enables us to bring our petitions before God. Christ is our high priest through whom we pray to the Father. Since Christ’s work has removed our sin and given us his merit, our prayers are heard by the Father. Simultaneous with our prayer is Christ intercession for us. When we pray, Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and offers our petition to him. This is “the ministry of the Lord in heaven to interpret our prayers aright and plead the efficacy of his sacrifice as the basis of our coming to God.” Christ’s unceasing intercession gives power to our prayers to make them efficacious. As we pray through Christ, his atonement and intercession allows our prayers to be acceptable to the Father.

When we pray, Christ mediates for us in Heaven and his Spirit is in our hearts, also making intercession. As we pray, the Spirit intercedes for us and brings God’s will to expression through our groans and yearnings. The Holy Spirit is abiding in our hearts evidence of the indwelling of Christ. He strengthens our weak prayers, by teaching us to pray in accordance with Christ’s will. He fills us in order to make our desires and prayers pleasing to God. The indwelling of the Spirit has a dramatic effect on how we pray. Through the Spirit, we are filled with love for those around us and this sustains our intercession for others. The Spirit gives us patience to help us pray without ceasing. The increasing faith he gives, strengthens our prayers. The Holy Spirit is also a testimony to our status as sons and daughters of God. Through all these manifestations the Holy Spirit communicates the blessings we have in Christ, and we are allowed to approach our Heavenly Father in prayer.

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92 Hebrews 10:17.
93 John 14:6; Romans 5:1-2; 8:43; Revelation 8:3,4; Luke 1:10; Hebrews 7:25; Isaiah 53:12.
97 Ephesians 6:18; Ephesians 5:18; Romans 8:15-16, 26-27.
98 1 Peter 4:7-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; James 5:13-18.
Through the intercession of the Holy Spirit and Christ our prayers are brought before the Father. Prayer is effective because of the status believers have in relationship with God, through Christ’s merit and the Holy Spirit’s presence. Thus, prayer is effective because of the living sympathy that exists through the relationship between the Savior and his people. Our petitions are secured through the intervention of the Spirit, who has placed Christ’s desires in our hearts.\textsuperscript{99} What prayer can accomplish depends upon the believer living in the name of Christ and praying through him.\textsuperscript{100} Abiding in Christ gives us the right and power to pray.

**Reformed Mechanism of Prayer**

In the parameters of the relationship we have with the Godhead, there is the mechanism of what happens when we pray. To understand the details of this mechanism, prayer must be understood as a secondary cause. The efficacy of secondary causes is part of a larger scholarly debate and, for the purposes of this paper, I will work from the Reformed position. As summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the nature of secondary causes is that, “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass…nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”\textsuperscript{101} Petitionary prayer, as a secondary cause is the means by which the settled mind of God effects what he chose to decree. As we pray, our petition is the way in which God carries out his plan. Since God ordains our circumstances to give us the desire to pray. Prayer is the outcome of a whole matrix of providence that God ordains to bring about his desired will.\textsuperscript{102} God has chosen to use the prayers of believers to allow

\textsuperscript{100} James 1:6-8.
his will to be done. He promises to hear and answer prayer, and that if we “ask and it will be
given to you.”\textsuperscript{103} God ordains prayer as the means by which he bestows his blessings. Calvin
described the efficacy of prayer with the metaphor: in prayer we dig up the blessings that the
Lord’s gospel has pointed out.\textsuperscript{104} It is clear that God has specifically chosen, as part of the means
to accomplish His sovereign plan, to use prayer to bring about his will. To put it logically, when
prayer is in accordance with God’s will it is the antecedent condition upon which a
predetermined condition is suspended.\textsuperscript{105}

**Conclusion**

Scripture testifies that prayer is powerful because of Christ’s work and intercession.
Christ has sent his Spirit to conform our desires to God’s sovereign will so that our prayers are
the means by which God brings about his good and perfect plan. God’s word declares his
complete sovereignty, his perfect decree of all things, and his power to answer prayer. Within
our relationship to God, the mechanism of prayer functions because God ordains our prayers as
part of his plan.

To display the clear distinction between the Reformed and Open doctrines of prayer, I
will give a concrete example of a prayer consistent with Reformed theology. The contrast is clear
between the previous example of a consistent Open prayer and this consistent Reformed prayer.
This prayer is an adaptation of Tiessen’s picture of a Reformed prayer.\textsuperscript{106}

Gracious Father, there are many occasions when we do not immediately understand why
you allow evils to come upon your children, and this is one of those times. Like Job we
do not know why this suffering has occurred but we trust in you as our all powerful and
all good God. We are not shaken in our confidence that you have ordained these events

\textsuperscript{103} Matthew 7:7.
\textsuperscript{104} Calvin, John. *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, 3.20.2.
\textsuperscript{105} Kelly, Douglas. *If God Already Knows: Why Pray?*, 70.
\textsuperscript{106} Tiessen, Terrance. *Providence and Prayer*, 270.
for the good of your people. We know that in your perfect and loving plan you have reasons for allowing this difficult set of events to come about. Thank you that we can know that you intend to sanctify us and will preserve all those you love through this trial. We are again driven to You as we realize more deeply the real horror and wrongness of sin in the world. We marvel again that you can love such rebels as we are. How awesome is your ability to turn even truly actions and intentions to do your will and glorify your name. We also trust that you want us to be involved in prayer and perhaps in other ways that to help accomplish your will.

Lord, we pray for Richard and his friends that you will keep them safe and bring them out of their captivity unharmed. We ask that you will comfort and strengthen them and cause their lives to be a powerful witness of their faith in you. We know that you may have allowed them to come into contact with their abductors because of good that you wish to come to these men, even though their own intentions are evil. We ask that you would be gracious to them and bring good out of this for them as well as for the missionaries. Father, please encourage Fred and the family members of the other missionaries, assuring them that you love them and will protect them and that they need not be fearful. Help them to believe in your promises to always be with us and to work everything together so that they may be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Please help all of those who are at work on the situation, giving them wisdom and courage and faith in your care. All this we ask in the name of Jesus, Amen.

This prayer is effective because it is based on a relationship with Christ and was ordained by God. It is a humble prayer to an almighty God. But the Open prayer is a petition to change God’s mind. The Open model of prayer becomes an attempt to force God’s hand by exerting our influence. As we dialogue with God through prayer we create the future together. Although many believers are attracted to this understanding of prayer, it is not in accordance with Scripture. The Openness concept of God compromises what Scripture tells us of his power, knowledge, glory, and wisdom. As Open theists limit God to fit their presuppositions, God becomes unable to answer prayer or guide us through the future.

The Open Model of who God is and what happens when we pray to him is not the portrait of God presented in Scripture. Our doctrine of God and prayer must be considered carefully and we must endeavor to search God’s Word to grasp the full picture of who God is. Scripture reveals that God has ordained all things before the creation of the world. Throughout history,
God has powerfully acted to change individual’s hearts and the course of events. In his word, God promises to use prayer to bring about his good and perfect plan. Even if we are unable to understand the intricate details of what happens when we pray, we can trust in the knowledge that an all-powerful God hears our prayers and will answer them.
In Open Theism:


--- email to author on January 15, 2002.


Schlapfer, Rob.editor. “No Other God: the Rhetoric and Reality.”

http://www.christiancounterculture.com/cc_11026.html


**In the Reformed Tradition:**


**General:**


