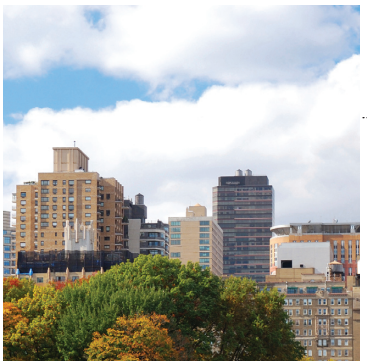
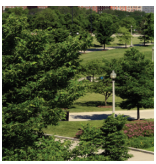
Providence & Prayer



How Does God Work in the World?



Terrance Tiessen

Providence & Prayer

How Does God Work in the World?

Terrance Tiessen

InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515
World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
E-mail: email@ivpress.com

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at <www.intervarsity.org>.

Design: Cindy Kiple
Image: © rabbit75_/iStockphoto
© Jeremy Edwards/iStockphoto

ISBN 978-0-8308-7660-0 (digital)
ISBN 978-0-8308-1578-4 (print)

To my parents,
Fred and Ella Tiessen,
who first taught me to pray
to the God who takes care of me and all his creatures.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Most of the research and writing of the first draft of this book was done during a sabbatical from Providence Theological Seminary, and I am grateful to the school's administrators for giving me that time, without which a project of this size could not be done. My research was greatly facilitated by the assistance of a number of libraries in Oxford: the Bodleian, the Theology Faculty and Wycliffe Hall, which graciously gave me space to work as a visiting scholar throughout my time in Oxford. My wife, Gail, has been patient throughout the lengthy process, particularly through the times along the way when I have thought out loud about these complex issues. Her listening ear has been an important part of the process by which I have worked through my assessment of the various models of providence and prayer that already exist and have formulated my own.

A class of seminary students gave me an additional opportunity to hear myself think and to get some response as they worked through my manuscript in a seminar dealing with the theology of revelation and of God. Two people reviewed my earlier draft at the request of InterVarsity Press, and I am grateful for their helpful comments and further stimulus. I do not know the identity of the one who substantially agreed with me, but the other was John Sanders, whose own work on the doctrine of providence is now the definitive published statement of the openness model. John's model is very different from mine, but I consider it a highly coherent presentation, given the different stance that he takes on a few key issues. I do not expect to convince John of the greater merits of my own proposal, but it has been helpful to think through his challenge to it. He has given me permission to identify him when I interact with his comments, but I have tried to be sensitive to his observation that these were not made with quite the same pre-

cision that he uses when writing for publication.

Speaking of publication, I am grateful to my IVP editor, Dan Reid, for having seen merit in my work and given it a careful reading. He offered very helpful suggestions for its improvement, particularly in regard to ways in which the rather difficult material can be made more useful to readers who are interested in the subject but who have not read widely in the theological and philosophical literature that uses terms that are not part of the average person's vocabulary. Needless to say, there are limits to what anyone else can do with a manuscript written by another person, and so I take responsibility for any shortcomings even while I express gratitude to these who have helped bring the work to its final stage.

Each day that I entered the Bodleian Library, I was greeted by the motto on the glass doors at the entrance, *Dominus illuminatio mea.* That the Lord would enlighten me has been my constant prayer as I have wrestled with these complex issues in an effort to understand the ways of God in the world and the role that he has given to us in prayer. I am grateful for all the help that God has given me. Although I have been very conscious of his assistance at many points, there are doubtless even more ways in which God has provided than even I realize. I identify with Paul's observation: "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). It is my prayer that God will use this book to lead others further in their knowledge of God and his ways and of God's will concerning our participation in his work by prayer.

Abbreviations

AJTP	*American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*
APQ	*American Philosophical Quarterly*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CC	*Christian Century*
CD	*Church Dogmatics*
CH	*Church History*
Col	*Colloquim*
CSR	*Christian Scholar's Review*
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
CTNSB	*Bulletin of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ExpTim	*The Expository Times*
FP	*Faith and Philosophy*
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IJPR	*International Journal for Philosophy and Religion*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JRHealth	*Journal of Religion and Health*
MQR	*The Mennonite Quarterly Review*
Ph	*Philosophy*
PhRev	*Philosophical Review*
RefRev	*Reformed Review*
RelS	*Religious Studies*
RevExp	*Review and Expositor*
SCB	*Science and Christian Belief*
ST	*The Summa Theologica*
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TToday	*Theology Today*
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*
VE	*Vox Evangelica*
WesleyTJ	*Wesley Theological Journal*
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

1

Introduction

At a church breakfast on an Easter morning in Oxford, people sitting at our table asked what I was doing on my sabbatical. When I told them about my work on this book, we naturally got talking about prayer. Two people at the table told me of how they regularly pray for parking spaces when they go into London, where parking spots are very difficult to find, and how God provides them. I asked one of them what God would have to do to answer her prayer, and she looked a bit stunned. "I don't know," she said. "Do you think I need to pray?"

My answer was and still is yes. We *should* define our understanding concerning the nature of God's action in the world and pray accordingly. In fact, my desire to research and write this book grew out of my discovery that the way my students prayed was often not consistent with the doctrine of providence that they confessed. They often ask God to do things that he cannot do, given the way he has chosen to relate to the world that he has created, as they understand the situation. Actually, the inconsistency in the theology of my students gets even more complicated. I teach a survey of systematic theology in two semesters. One of the subjects we study in the first semester is the providence of God, that is, God's care for and action in the world that he has created. In the second semester the subject of salvation is on the agenda. At the conclusion of each of the major sections of

theology I ask my students to write a personal confession of faith: their own detailed doctrinal statement. I am regularly fascinated (and a bit frustrated) to find a conflict between the truth that students confess regarding providence and their beliefs regarding salvation.

Usually when inconsistency occurs between statements of faith formulated by my students, it is because they have a model of *providence* that understands God to be very much in control of the details of their lives but a model of *salvation* that assumes that the outcome rests with the "free choice" of individuals. I recall, for instance, a day when some students had a car accident on their way to the school's day of prayer. The injured students were prayed for frequently during that day, and almost always the prayers indicated a belief that God had been completely in control when the accident occurred. It would not have happened if God had not "permitted" it to do so. From my experience in class, I knew that most (or all) of those who prayed would have confessed a doctrine of meticulous providence that was consistent with their prayer. However, when they speak about salvation, their model of the respective roles of God and human beings is different than when they speak of providence. Yet their practice of prayer in regard to salvation is often more consistent with their doctrine of providence than with their doctrine of salvation. This incoherence within their theological framework and between that theoretical framework and their practice of prayer troubles me.

In my context students tend to believe that Christ died for everyone and that the final population of heaven is determined by human decisions. They affirm this because of a strong, frequently intuited, commitment to radical human freedom. They believe in what is often called "libertarian freedom," which may be simply defined as the power to have chosen to do something other than what one actually chose to do in a particular situation. (The glossary at the back of the book should be helpful when you encounter terms like this and have forgotten how they were defined.) But when these students pray for the unsaved, they frequently assume that God can do things to bring about the salvation of people, which it is not possible for God to do if those people have the sort of freedom that these intercessors believe to be the case.

As a systematic theologian, I have a keen interest in coherence. I believe that people's beliefs should be internally consistent (i.e., that they should agree with themselves!) and that their actions should be consistent with their theology. To facilitate this coherence or consistency I did this study

and wrote this book. I have set out to identify some of the common ways in which God's involvement in the world has been understood and to discern what sort of petitionary prayer is appropriate to each of these concepts or models of providence. The focus of this work is, therefore, on the providence of God and prayer, particularly petitionary prayer. I will speak of God's involvement in the world generally, in nature, history and the details of our lives, rather than focusing on the more specific aspect of salvation. It is my hope, however, that this discussion will help readers to clarify their general understanding of God's relationship to the world and his action in it, and then to be consistent in regard to all areas of God's work, including the very important work of salvation. Of course, the two are often related. When listening to people's testimony regarding the process by which they came to faith in Christ, we often hear references to minor events in their lives in which they believe God was involved as part of his drawing them to himself.

The Doctrine of Providence

It would be unwise to give too detailed a definition of providence at this point, since the nature of God's providence varies somewhat from one model to another. On the other hand, we need to have an idea of what we are looking for in searching for models of divine providence. In general terms we will think of providence as God's activity of preserving and governing the whole of creation.

Issues Arising in a Study of Providence

In 1963 Langdon Gilkey noted "the curious fact that today this concept of Providence is notable mainly in its absence from theological discussion."[1] He found this surprising because both Reformation and liberal theologians possessed "carefully elaborated and very significant conceptions of Providence," and because "the question most frequently asked in contemporary theological discussion—What is the meaning, if any, of history?—might seem to call for an equally strong view of God's providential rule over historical events."[2]

From Gilkey's perspective the doctrine of providence was secure in natural theology from Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century through the mid-nineteenth century,[3] since everything in nature was seen as designed for a purpose, particularly for the good of humanity. But, he suggests, the Darwinian hypothesis demolished this view by portraying the fittingness of

things as self-explanatory, rather than attributing it to an external designer, since real causes were viewed as random, impersonal and mechanical. Charles Cashdollar notes that by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, "For all intents and purposes the orthodox theory of divine providence was dead in academic circles. With it was buried the debate over its practical implications." It is no longer discussed in theological journals after the 1890s.[4] However, Gilkey observes that the doctrine soon recovered, as some sort of aim or purpose was identified in the progress that was being assumed. Therefore, post-Darwinian theology was once more "Providence-centred."[5] The fundamental concept of progress was rendered "unintelligible and meaningless" by the two world wars, and Gilkey then notes a "universal feeling that *no* purpose, direction, or meaning of any sort could be seen in the general passage of historical events."[6]

In the years following the second world war, Gilkey found passing references to providence, a recognition that God rules general events in some way and can bring good out of evil. But "of all the major classical doctrines of theology, Providence is the single one which has not been reinterpreted and revitalized by contemporary theology but which has, on the contrary, been generally ignored and in some cases even repudiated."[7] As recently as May 1999 a reviewer of works on history observed: "Once, the word *providence* efficiently communicated the idea that God loved us, ruled time to its minute details, and was himself a historical agent. That time is gone, however, and the word has rusted up through misuse beyond utility."[8]

Gilkey's challenge to develop a doctrine of providence has since been taken up by a number of theologians whose work we will meet in the chapters that follow, including Gilkey himself.[9] Both theologians and philosophers of religion have given much attention to the thorny issues that arise when we attempt to understand God's action in the world. It is hoped that the term *providence* can once more become useful.

Among the questions to which answers have been attempted and that will be a large part of our quest in this book are the following: What is the nature of divine causation? Should we even talk of God as a "cause" and, if not, what sort of language is appropriate to describe the nature of the divine involvement in the natural world and human history? What is the nature of God's omnipotence? No Christian theologian denies that God is omnipotent, but there is no consensus as to what that means in the practical terms of God's acts in the world.

In particular, how is God's omnipotence affected by his creation of other

agents with intentions and actions of their own? How free, then, are these respective agents, God and his creatures, and how is *freedom* to be defined? Is it possible for both God and human beings to be "free," or are restraints placed upon one by the other? If God has given humans freedom to be agents in the world, what does this do to his own omnipotence? Alternately, if God's omnipotence makes him able to achieve his will on all occasions, then what is the nature of human "freedom"? The ancient question of the relationship between "divine sovereignty" and "human freedom" comes quickly to our attention when we speak of God's providence. Does God take risks, or does he have everything so completely within his control that no risk is entailed?

The matter is further complicated by the role God's knowledge plays in his providence, particularly his knowledge of the future. Once again, no Christian theologian denies that God is "omniscient." But assuming that God knows everything, how are we to understand what can be known? Is the future "some thing" to be known, or does it in fact not exist until it "comes to be" as the present? If the future is, by definition, unknowable, then the omniscience of God is in no way limited if he does not know the future, but is that the case? Of special significance, related to the issues of freedom, can the future acts of free agents be foreknown? Does foreknowledge "cause" or necessitate events? If they are foreknown, are they certain and, if so, then in what sense are they free? But what is the relationship of an eternal God to time? Is God temporal, a being about whom we can say that he knows events *before* they happen? Or is his eternity timeless, so that *pre*science or *fore*knowledge are just metaphorical ways of speaking of God's knowledge that actually say nothing about the relationship of what God knows "eternally" to what happens "in time"?

The issues are certainly "mind-boggling." Some who have an interest in prayer and in understanding how it "works" and how they should pray, may already be getting disturbed or even annoyed at the complexity of the discussion. Are these not philosophical questions that the Bible does not answer? Why not just interpret the Scriptures and answer the questions of God's acts and the effect of our requests upon his intentions and deeds from the Bible? I am an evangelical, an heir of the Protestant Reformation, and so I believe that the Bible is our "only rule of faith and practice." On the other hand, a look at the history of theology at the time of the Reformation and in the years that followed quickly alerts us to a sometimes puzzling fact. The Scriptures speak plainly on the core matters of the Christian

faith stated in the Apostles' Creed and confessed by Christians of all branches of the Christian Church. Beyond those basic truths that we all affirm, disagreements concerning Scripture arise quickly. The questions we have just raised immediately throw us into the deep end regarding the first affirmation of the Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." What does "almighty" mean when affirmed concerning God? And what does God do as Creator? Did he create the world, with all its "natural laws," able to sustain itself and run indefinitely, like a well-made clock, without further intervention? Or is he continually "creating" what exists and occurs in the world, or just *how* is he now involved? Does God act only in general ways through the order he has established, or does he act "specially," meeting particular needs of individuals or groups in ways the normal course of his activity would not do? Are all such actions to be considered miraculous or is a miracle an extraordinary form of divine action, even given the category of special providence?

The difficulty we confront when we begin to talk about God and his action in the world is that we may find ourselves affirming statements derived from Scripture that are logically incoherent. They contradict one another—or at least they appear to do so. People commonly speak of God's sovereign control of all the events of their lives but then speak of themselves and others as acting freely and responsibly. They speak of God's comprehensive, eternal foreknowledge of the future, but they also speak and act as though we can now do something to affect that future. Not everyone agrees whether or not these are consistent ways of speaking, and we must give the matter the attention necessary either to demonstrate their coherence or to revise our statements. We may discover that Scripture did not say what we earlier thought it had said. We may reach points where we simply affirm mystery and live as though two things are both true even though we cannot logically see how that could be so. I admit that God is beyond our *complete* comprehension. If we fully understood him, he would not be God, or we would be too! On the other hand, I am very reluctant to give up and appeal to "mystery" too quickly. The mind-stretching philosophical and theological work is necessary if we are to practice our faith intelligently as God wishes us to do.

Petitionary Prayer

There is more to prayer than asking God for things. On the other hand, petition occupies a large part of the average person's prayer time, and

when people wonder how prayer "works," it is petition that they are generally contemplating. We wonder what we can ask God to do? Can we ask him to heal the sick, to provide good weather (rain or sun, or protection from a hurricane headed toward us), to favorably influence a prospective employer to whom we have sent an application, to assure that someone we love is not injured in a plane crash that we know has occurred? Petitionary prayer includes requests both for ourselves and for others (intercession), and this raises its own set of particular questions about human wills and God's goodness. If God wills what is good for people, why would he not wish (or be able) to do something that is good for others unless we asked him to? Even given their ability to reject God's good intentions for them, why does God wait for others to intercede before trying to help them? When we come to God in prayer, we inevitably wonder why we should make requests, if God already knows what we need and wills to give us what is good for us. Do we pray simply to acknowledge our dependence upon God or to prepare ourselves to receive with a proper attitude what he is going to give us anyway, or does God actually do some things in response to prayer that he would not otherwise do? How do we know what to pray for? Is prayer more effective depending on the number of people who make a particular request and, if so, why? The issues of providence, God's power, God's knowledge and the comprehensiveness of his will, all have an impact on our practice of petitionary prayer.

We could profitably pursue the same questions with regard to praise, but our focus is deliberately on petition. To some extent, however, this also offers perspectives on thanksgiving. There should be a consistency between the things we believe we can ask God for and the things for which we thank him. Much of what we conclude about God's nature and action as it grounds our petitions will therefore also inform our prayers of thanksgiving.

Reflection on our practice may reveal strange inconsistencies in this regard, however, as happened in the revision of the Church of England's prayer book. In 1928 the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* included a prayer for seasonable weather. By contrast, the *Alternate Service Book* of 1980 could only offer "a retrospective harvest collect expressing hearty thanks 'for your fatherly goodness and care in giving us the fruits of the earth in their season.'"[10] Observing this change, John Polkinghorne aptly notes that it seems peculiar to thank God "for what we have not had the confidence to ask for beforehand," but that "there is this deeply felt reli-

gious need to give thanks."[11]

How we understand God's action in the world will determine how and when and why and for what we pray. It will also inform us about when thanksgiving is in order and to whom. It is my prayer that this book will assist others in developing their own understanding of God and his action, and that it will encourage habits of prayer consistent with their own doctrine of providence. Whether and how God might answer such a prayer is itself the subject matter of this book!

Theological Models

What is a theological model? I will often refer to "models of providence and prayer," and so a word should be said about what we mean by *model*. Frederick Ferré has defined a model as "that which provides epistemological vividness or immediacy to a theory by offering as an interpretation of the abstract or unfamiliar theory-structure something that both fits the logical form of the theory and is well known."[12] In somewhat similar terms, Sallie McFague suggests that "a model is a metaphor with 'staying power.' A model is a metaphor that has gained sufficient stability and scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation."[13] Ferré suggests that "a model simplifies the data at hand 'to a form in which the mind can grasp them.'"[14]

The nature of God's action as it relates to human action, and particularly to our prayer, is an immense and complex subject. Theologians study God's revelation and attempt to represent the truth about these important matters in a coherent way that enables others to grasp it. We could speak of each of the alternative understandings that we will present as theories. They do theorize concerning the action of God and the role of prayer. But each of these theological positions pulls together a number of theories (about causation, time, knowledge, freedom, power, agency, etc.) and forms a coherent representation that we are calling a model. Ferré suggests that theological theories cannot be developed without reference to the metaphysical model with which theology works.[15] We might argue that the conceptualization of God's providence includes so much about God and the nature of reality that it could be considered our metaphysical model. We will not make so large a claim, however, and suggest rather that these models also function as theories within the picture that constitutes our metaphysical model. They are part of the larger picture that constitutes our overarching concept of reality. The work we do in sharpening our under-

standing on this very important matter will contribute significantly to the development of that big picture, the "key theological model."[16]

Having asserted earlier that we believe it to be possible and worthwhile to construct a conceptual model of God's providence and our prayer, we do well to remind ourselves of Ferré's warning. There is some risk involved in the development of models that attempt to present coherently the various aspects of truth concerning a subject such as divine providence and human prayer. Models permit simplification "by requiring their users to 'see the phenomena only through a medium.'"[17] A model is not the same as what it models: it "filters the acts." None of these models, including my own proposal, is adequate to fully represent the transcendent God in whom we live and move and have our being and who acts in our world, in us, and along with us. Yet while being aware of the limitations of our theological formulations, we affirm their necessity and their value. It is with such warnings in mind that Paul Helm has argued that our theological reflection produces models rather than theories of God's relationship to his creation. We must not draw false inferences from the data that our models summarize. Unlike the enquiries of the natural sciences, "the resulting doctrine is not capable of answering our 'how?' questions" or our "why" questions. We know *that* God willed it but not *why*.[18]

How do we construct our theological model? In a sense this book is itself a case study in the way that a given theological position is developed so that it has inner coherence and fits within one's overall theology. We who are theological heirs of the Protestant Reformation frequently insist that Scripture is our sole authority, that we do theology *sola Scriptura*. Of course, it is never quite so simple in the actual doing of theology. The Reformers also asserted the perspicacity or clarity of Scripture, and we might expect therefore that Christian (or at least Protestant) theologians would be agreed about what Scripture teaches. In fact, as this book demonstrates, there are wide and very significant differences of opinion about what is the truth about many subjects, including the nature and extent of God's action in the world and of our corresponding responsibility.

Wesleyan theologians frequently speak of a quadrilateral in the construction of statements of Christian belief and practice. Scripture has a uniquely authoritative position, but it is complemented by three other factors: reason, tradition and experience. We encounter the complex interplay of these factors when we begin to formulate a biblical understanding of God's providence. We cannot simply read a theology of divine providence off the bib-

lical page, although the teaching of Scripture is unique in its authoritative role. But, we cannot avoid philosophical questions concerning God's relationship to time, the possibility of knowledge of the future (actual and possible) and the nature of freedom (both God's and ours). Our system of theology—that is, our coherent formulation of the truth concerning God and his relationships to the world—will be no better than our biblical exegesis. But it will also depend upon good philosophy, the valid use of the principles of rationality, a knowledge of the thinking of great and godly minds who have gone before us in the history of the church and careful reflection upon our own experience in the world.

The models presented in this book do not differ from one another because they use different Scriptures as their authority. But they reach a different understanding of the teaching of Scripture through a complex process that includes all of the factors we have mentioned. Theological models differ because they assume the truth of different philosophical theories, because they disagree about the rules of rational coherence or even the possibility and value of it in speaking about God, because the experience of the proponents of these models is only comprehensible on these terms, and possibly because of the "location" of the proponents both historically and ecclesiastically.

It will also become apparent as we work our way toward a personal understanding of God and his work in the world that this cannot be achieved through analysis of a few key passages of Scripture. Each of the models has particular texts that capture the essence or shape of the model. But arguing the merits of these particular texts against another collection of texts is rarely fruitful. In my experience in doing theology and helping others to do it, I have found that one arrives at one's own understanding or model of God and his work in the world through a general impression drawn from the entire text of Scripture. Each model finds texts in Scripture that appear to pose a difficulty to the model. These cannot simply be dismissed, but they are read within the framework that emerges from the overall thrust of the biblical narrative. Admittedly, once one has become convinced of a particular overall framework in the biblical narrative (a "system" of theology), it is very difficult to see texts in a way that would call for radical revision of the overall model. This is a truth that postmodernist theologians have emphasized, although they tend to overstate it to the point of relativism. However, I do not assume that there is no value in examining alternate theological models and reevaluating our own. Periodi-

cally I have had little paradigm shifts in areas of my own theology—"eureka" moments when the shape of truth on a particular topic suddenly looks different than it did before. I am not permanently committed to my own model of providence and prayer against all objections or alternate proposals. It is the way the truth of Scripture looks to me now, and I welcome opportunities to dialogue with others for whom the reading of the narrative of Scripture produces a different framework of understanding the big picture.

At times this whole project may seem too complex, and readers will be tempted toward agnosticism ("we simply cannot know how God acts in the world"), to despair ("this is beyond me") or to dismissal of the theological project ("I simply believe the Bible; I don't do theology"). None of these routes is fruitful. We need to pray, we want to pray, and because we want to pray effectively, we need to struggle through to an understanding of God's action in the world that will ground our practice of prayer and all other aspects of our life. All of us live according to a model of the world that includes God and everything else (often called a "worldview"). Sometimes we operate on different models at different times, and this causes confusion in our lives and in the perception of others who are watching us and possibly learning from us.

The Scope and Plan of This Study

This is primarily a book about the doctrine of providence. In treatises on providence, three practical issues generally emerge: prayer, miracles and the existence of evil. About the third I plan to say nothing specifically. Of course, the models of providence that will be presented here will all have ramifications for our understanding of evil in the world cared for by a good and powerful God. But we will not spell out those implications. Nor are miracles a major point of attention, though they will come into the picture more often because our understanding of God's miraculous work (the mention of which makes many modern theologians nervous) will inform our prayer in situations where we need God to act in special ways, outside of his normal ways of acting, in order to address our need.

The literature on prayer is immense, including many books about how to pray in order to get answers to prayer. People want to know how to be successful when they pray. This is not primarily a book about how to pray effectively, but it builds a foundation for addressing that critical issue. It comes at the matter from a different perspective than books about prayer

usually do. We will not provide a list of the conditions of answered prayer or the hindrances to it. Our focus is narrower but more fundamental. Most books on prayer recognize faith as an important element in prayer that succeeds, but what are we to believe when we bring our requests to God? What is God able to do and what can we expect him to do? It would obviously be futile for us to be asking God to do things that he *cannot* do because they are impossible in the nature of things as God has constituted them. It would likewise not be reasonable to ask God to do what he *will* not do because of limitations prescribed by his nature or established by his will. Yet many of the prayers Christians commonly pray are ruled out by some of the models of providence at which we will look. On the other hand, it is possible that some of us pray too timidly because we do not adequately understand the way God works in his creation. Such unnecessary timidity also needs to be corrected.

This is not an encyclopedia of models of providence. There are, no doubt, other ways in which God's action has been explained by Christian theologians. There are also many others who have written about providence and prayer whose positions illustrate or slightly modify the models we have chosen. I have identified what I take to be the models that are major contenders for the acceptance of Christian people or which have been seriously proposed by Christian theologians. Within these models I have attempted to develop the views of key representative figures whose work gives us an understanding of the model and its implications. To avoid overly lengthy footnotes, I have resisted the temptation to identify all the authors I have encountered who represent a particular point. In many instances, more references could be cited than have been. Readers are sure to find that some of their favorite theologians do not appear. This will give them an opportunity, however, to look once more at those whose work they particularly appreciate to see where they fall within this spectrum of models and how their work offers helpful critique of the various perspectives here presented.

In the first section of the book we will look at major alternatives regarding the understanding of God's providence and see how each of these affects the practice of petitionary prayer. In the second section I will make a proposal describing my own understanding of the teaching of Scripture concerning God's providence and our prayer requests.

In presenting the models that I have identified for study, I will move from the one that perceives the least involvement of God in the details of history to the one that puts the outcome of events most strongly in the

hands of God. Therefore, they could be considered on a spectrum that correlates divine and human agency, with the first model giving maximum effect to human agency and the last giving least significance to the action of humans within history. A distinction is sometimes made between "risk" and "no-risk" models of providence, depending on whether God has taken a personal risk in creating other personal beings and giving them the ability to choose and act within the world that he created. Of the ten models presented in part one, the first six are models of "risk providence," but the extent of the risk diminishes as we proceed from one model to the next. The last four models, and my own proposal, are forms of "no-risk providence," but they too differ in regard to the extent and manner of God's control of the details of history.

I have chosen a simple handle to identify each model. I will use either a term that captures its emphasis or that is commonly used by its proponents, or the name of a key representative of the model with whom the model is frequently associated. This risks oversimplification, but I have followed this course in order to facilitate cross-reference to the various models without having to use a lengthy description of the one to which we refer.

Each of the models in the first part will be presented without critical comment except where representatives of one model critique another in arguing for the plausibility of their own. I will describe the positions as fairly as I can and allow readers to do their own assessment of the merits and shortcomings of each one. In the second part I will not attempt a critique of each of the other models. I will make a positive presentation of my own model, indicating points at which it rejects and points at which it incorporates features that have earlier been proposed. My own model is not completely original or innovative. I would be suspicious of it if it were. But it is different from any I have encountered in my reading, by virtue of the particular way in which it puts together an understanding of agency, freedom, time, knowledge and power to formulate a model of God's providence and a practice of prayer.

I have joked about writing a book in which I present a variety of options and then give the "right answer." It is funny because it sounds presumptuous. On the other hand, it is obvious that I do see my own proposal as the one that fulfills the demands of Scripture, experience and reason most satisfactorily. Readers will have to determine whether they share this judgment. I look forward to growth in my own understanding through interaction with thoughtful readers of this book. Even for me, this is not

expected to be the last word on the subject. Given the great complexity of this subject, I sympathize with Ian Barbour's experience that "one never finishes a book—one simply abandons it eventually."[19] But this is how the matter looks to me right now, and I hope that the time spent spelling out my own view and the perspectives of many others will aid readers to refine their own theology and improve their own spiritual practice.

A Case Study: Fred Henderson's Kidnapped Son

Fred Henderson was thankful that it was Wednesday when he received the distressing phone call from the office of the mission with whom his son worked.[20] There was a church prayer meeting that night, and Fred keenly felt the need of the prayers of others in the congregation. He had been informed by the director of the mission that his son Richard was one of three missionaries who had been abducted that day by a group of men who were now demanding ransom and seeking political concessions before the missionaries would be released. The mission had made it a policy never to pay ransom, in order to protect their missionaries who would otherwise be placed at constant risk. Mission leaders were attempting to negotiate with the captors, but this particular group had a reputation for being ruthless, so the situation did not look good. The larger conflict between the rebels and the government was especially difficult for the mission to address.

That evening Fred described the situation of Richard and the two other missionaries to the group gathered for prayer. As you will soon discover, the people at the meeting were remarkably diverse in their theological perspectives, and this was evident as they prayed for Richard and his colleagues. At the end of each model, I have introduced a member of Fred's congregation who holds that particular model of providence and have constructed the type of petition that they could appropriately pray, given their understanding of God's relationship to and action in the world.

How to Read This Book

The subject of providence is very complex, particularly because of the philosophical questions it raises. I am aware that this is a difficult book for this reason. In order to help you grasp the various models, the differences between them, and their distinctive approach to the issues of providence and prayer, I have provided a few helps along the way.

Each model begins with a brief *synopsis*. This will orient you to the gen-

eral shape of the model before you head into the details. Near the back of the book you will find a *glossary*. I have tried to define technical terms the first time you meet them in this book, but you may not remember those definitions when you encounter a new term again. If you read a term and are not sure of its meaning, the glossary will be your best place to go first.

You have just read the *case study* of the abduction of Richard Henderson and his colleagues. At the conclusion of each model a member of Fred's church will reflect on this situation from within the framework of the model of providence just presented. This will include memories of discussion with other members of the church who hold different models. The person will also think about the situation in regard to the prayer that would be appropriate and will offer a prayer. An interesting way to get started on this book would be to proceed through the models now, simply reading the case study at the end of each model. It would quickly familiarize you with the gradual modifications being made as features of the model change. You should also find these case studies a helpful review of the main points of each model when you have completed the reading of the more nuanced and carefully reasoned presentation that makes up the bulk of each chapter.

Finally, I draw your attention to the *chart* that appears as an appendix. It lays out the position taken by each model on a number of critical issues. This should make a very helpful point of reference as you try to recall what a previous model did with a particular issue. Examining the chart, you will also be able to see the features that change as the models move along the spectrum of increasing degrees of divine control. On the chart I have placed my own *middle knowledge Calvinist proposal* to the left of the *Calvinist model* to reflect its appropriate position on the spectrum. In the arrangement of the text, however, it comes last, as a new proposal.

Part 1

Ten Models of Providence & Prayer

2

The Semi-Deist Model

In the semi-deist model of providence, God has created a world that is governed by laws of physical and moral order. He has created intelligent, libertarianly free and morally responsible creatures, and he sustains their existence. They are expected to act wisely, in accordance with the rules of the established order. God will not intervene to protect people from either their own improper behavior or from that of others. If he were to do so on behalf of some people, he would be responsible for allowing others to experience evil without his intervention. This is a charge against which semi-deists wish to protect God. The model does not consider God inactive; it simply asserts that the entire history of the universe as it unfolds is one big act on God's part. Within that act of God, his creatures operate, and they bear complete responsibility for their actions.

Semi-deists recognize that petitionary prayer to God is a common and perhaps natural practice of human beings. Indeed, Jesus himself taught us to address petitions to God. They urge us, however, to interpret the language of petition differently than is commonly done. When we make requests to God, we are not asking him to intervene in our particular situation and change either events or people. We are acknowledging God's existence, and we are expressing our intention to be actively engaged in deeds that will further the general harmony of the world and its people, thereby doing the

"will" of God. Praying individually and corporately are ways of strengthening our own resolution to be constructively engaged in solving the problems of the world that have arisen from behavior contrary to the divinely established order.

Where was God when Richard Henderson was abducted and what can he be expected or asked to do now that it has happened? In our first model we meet theologians who doubt that God was or will be involved in the situation. They come to this conclusion because of the difficulties we face if we assume that God is directly involved in the details of our daily lives and the progress of human history.

If God Is Praised for the Good Things That Happen, He Must Be Blamed for the Bad Ones

An American airliner was hijacked to Beirut by Shiite Muslims, and all but one of the people taken hostage came away from the incident safely. After their liberation the pilot spoke for the hostages and expressed thankfulness for the way the Lord had taken good care of them. Maurice Wiles finds this kind of response "a source of profound embarrassment to many a reflective Christian," and he asks, "Where was [God's] care for the hostages when one of them was murdered and his corpse thrown out on to the tarmac?"[1] Wiles further recalls that "a service of thanksgiving was held in St. Paul's to mark the ending of the Falklands War; but there was no agreement about what it was appropriate to thank God for."[2] The service caused Wiles to wonder whether God had taken the British side in war. It is on moral grounds, rather than scientific ones, that Wiles feels compelled to believe that God's providential involvement in the ongoing history of the world is severely limited. His concern has been neatly summed up in the following conundrum: "If God can influence the course of events, then a God who is willing to cure colds and provide parking spaces but is not willing to prevent Auschwitz and Hiroshima is morally repugnant. Since Hiroshima and Auschwitz did occur, one must infer that God cannot (or has a policy never to) influence the course of worldly events."[3] If God prevented a person from boarding a plane that later crashes, by having them infected with measles or tying them up in a traffic jam, "might not a more infectious strain or an even solider logjam of cars have saved others as well? Or if only one were to be prevented from reaching the plane in time, why not the pilot so that the plane could not fly at all? One person's providence is another person's downfall."[4]

Deism

The model that we are considering in this chapter has sometimes been called "deistic," in reference to a theology that was common in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.[5] Deism is often portrayed by the mechanistic image of God as a watchmaker who makes the cosmos with all its "pieces" along with the laws that govern their operation, winds it up and then lets it run without further interference. This is a model of God's work that has virtually no concept of providence, as we have described it. It pictures God as one who "creates individual things with causal efficacy such that they produce events in the world apart from any divine causal action except the conservation of the individual 'natural agents' in existence."[6] Under the influence of Newtonian physics a model of God as divine Mechanic became common.[7] In a survey of cosmic religiosity at the end of the twentieth century, Georges De Schrijver notes that "the 17th-Century clockwork model is slowly being replaced by the paradigm of the world as a living organism."[8] De Schrijver suggests that "the present landscape of cosmology is populated mainly by neo-deists and neo-spinozists."

On the "neo-deist" front, an interesting analysis is offered by Stephen Bilynskyj.[9] He develops a taxonomy of three views of God's causal relationship to "second causes," that is, to agents other than God that also have a role in bringing about a particular event. The first view excludes any genuine causality within the created world; God is the only one acting, and he alone brings about all that happens so that the apparent agency of others is an illusion. In the second view, which Bilynskyj identifies as the deistic one, second causes are included but in a manner that raises doubts about the legitimacy of calling God a "cause" of any particular effect. The third perspective views God and the creature as working together (concurrence) in a "joint causality." Bilynskyj's preference is this third option, which he discusses in reference to the work of Thomas Aquinas and Luis de Molina, whose perspectives will come up later in our study, in the Thomist and Molinist models. Bilynskyj defines concurrence as "a general decision on God's part to conserve the world moment by moment *along with* all the changes in its arrangement produced by the causal activity of things in the world."[10] In this way both God and the creature can be called causes in any particular event, but it is the creature that determines the specific outcome, while God provides the creature with what it needs to bring about what it does. Bilynskyj contends that his account of God's "moment by moment participation" in the operation of the world through this "general decision

to sustain the world's existence in each new arrangement as it is produced" is "not simply a return to the Deistic view." However, he is obviously not sure that his denial is persuasive, for he adds: "Perhaps my account simply reduces concurrence to a refinement of the Deistic view, but if that is the case, it is nonetheless a needed refinement and a corrective to the Deistic view as usually stated."[11]

We are now in a situation where theologians are reluctant to accept the designation "Deist," but as De Schrijver notes, there is a continuing appeal in the position that absolves God of the effects occurring in our history. In this chapter we will look more closely at the models proposed by two theologians of our own time who present us with descriptions of divine providence that greatly minimize the detailed action of God in human affairs: Gordon Kaufman and Maurice Wiles. Out of respect for their own denial that their theology is deistic but in recognition of the way in which it is perceived by others, I have designated this model "semi-deistic."

Gordon Kaufman: The Whole of Human History Is God's "Master-Act," But Not Everything That Happens Along the Way Is a Sub-Act of God

Gordon Kaufman observes that the concept "act of God" is "central to the biblical understanding of God and his relation to the world (Ex 15:11; Ps 40:5; 107:21; 145:4; Col 1:13)."[12] Echoing the assessment of Langdon Gilkey, Kaufman notes, however, that "the notion of a God who continuously performs deliberate acts in and upon his world, and in and through man's history, has become very problematical for most moderns." This is because we have learned to "conceive nature as an impersonal order or structure."[13] The opponents of miracles appear to have won the day, and few theologians are now "disposed to explain the occurrence of particular events by referring them directly to God's intervention in the natural order."[14] Although many might still grant that miracles are possible in principle, "it is clear that both their practical decisions and actions and their theological theories are controlled by the assumption of the fundamental autonomy of natural order." The result is that talk of a God who "continuously *acts* in and upon nature as its Lord" has become "uncomfortable and difficult" for many.

Some have conceded autonomy to nature but continue to affirm that God acts in human history, but their proposal strikes Kaufman as shallow and untenable. On the one hand, "no one conceives or experiences 'his-

tory' in this kind of sharp isolation from 'nature.' All historical events take place within the context of natural process and order and involve the movements and reordering of physical bodies and material objects of many sorts."[15] In Kaufman's view, "it will not do to speak of God as the agent who made it possible for the Israelites to escape from the Egyptians, if one regards it as simply a fortunate coincidence that a strong east wind was blowing at just the right time to dry up the sea of reeds. The biblical writer's view is coherent and compelling precisely because he is able to say that '*the* LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind' (Ex 14:21)."[16]

Even if a sharp division could be made between nature and history, it would not solve the fundamental problem. Writing in the late 1960s Kaufman found it not surprising that people were asserting that "God is dead." Since agents are experienced and known in and through their acts, if we do not perceive events as genuinely acts of the transcendent God, "the Agent himself has faded away for us into little more than a word inherited from our past." Kaufman identifies three options in our response to the challenge confronted by a doctrine of divine providence. We can grant that "God is dead" and that life can be understood in humanistic and naturalistic ways. We can follow Paul Tillich's route and "reinterpret the notion of God in such a manner that the conception of agent is no longer implied." Or we can reexamine the notion of "act," and this is the approach Kaufman himself pursues.[17]

Kaufman defines an act as "a particular and generally a very specific event brought about by an agent." It is "activity bound together and given a distinct order and structure by the intention of an agent to realize a goal." Viewed in this way, an "act involves an element of creativity not characteristic of lower forms of life than man."[18] It is the accumulation of such creative acts that brings into being what we know as the historical order or as culture. By this definition an act of God would be a deed that God performs, that is, "an event which did not simply 'happen,' but which was what it was because God did it."[19] Kaufman considers this the biblical conception.

Currently both belief and unbelief in the reality of God's acts arise from the shared assumption that an act of God is a "particular miraculous event which God directly causes." Kaufman is convinced that the impasse will not be resolved as long as that conception persists.[20] Modern scientific and historical understanding commonly "presupposes the interrelation and interconnection of all events in an unbroken web." In spite of indetermi-

nacy at the atomic level and "genuine creativity and self-determination on the human level," it is possible to make statistical descriptions that are usually quite precise."[21] It is in this context that the traditional notion of an "act of God" presents a difficulty. It "seems to refer to events which have their source or cause directly or immediately in the divine will and action rather than in the context of preceding and coincident finite events."[22] This makes the events unintelligible to us, and so it is meaningless to talk about such acts.

To break the conceptual logjam, Kaufman proposes that our "customary interpretation of particular relatively restricted events—the crossing of the Red Sea, the dispersing of the hosts of Sennacherib, the virgin birth or resurrection of Jesus—as particular acts of God is too simple." The problem is that "it overlooks the significance of the relation of 'simple acts' to 'master acts.'"[23] Simple acts are "constituent phases of a complex act." They are always secondary and derivative because they are not performed for their own end but as a step toward the master end. It is the "master act" that renders a piece of activity intelligible. Thus the act of a carpenter driving nails is meaningless, but putting boards together to construct a house has meaning. Analogically, when we speak of the "act of God," we should refer first to the "master act," that is, *"the whole course of history,* from its initiation in God's creative activity to its consummation when God ultimately achieves his purposes."[24] God plans "the end from the beginning" (Is 46:10), and he orders his activity through history to the ultimate goal, the final establishment of the kingdom (Mt 25:34). This was epitomized in the appearance of Jesus, who was destined before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20) and brought into history "as a foretaste or anticipation of the final glorious consummation."[25]

On this model God's act is "not a new event that suddenly and without adequate prior conditions rips inexplicably into the fabric of experience, a notion consistent neither within itself nor with the regularity and order which experience must have if it is to be cognizable." Rather, it is the source of the overarching order itself. It is this divine master act "that gives the world the structure which it has and gives natural and historical processes their direction."[26] If we speak of God's act in this way, contends Kaufman, we do not threaten the unity and order of the world as a whole. Such an act, however, is "intrinsically temporal: it is the ordering of a succession of events toward an end."[27]

The particular and more limited acts commonly attributed to God must

not be regarded, on this model, as "more or less spur-of-the-moment decisions in which God does something in history in quite unexpected and inexplicable fashion: they should be understood (quite consistently with the eschatological orientation of much biblical, and all New Testament, thought) as functions of and subordinate steps toward God's ultimate goal."[28] This means that not all acts are subacts of God. It is only those events that move creation further toward the realization of God's purposes that are subacts of God. Finite agents may act contrary to God's purposes and acts, as is evident in the case of Jesus, but "the temporal movement of the whole, including the particular developments of our individual lives, is under God's providential care."[29]

The minimal role that God plays in the ongoing process of human history in Kaufman's scheme causes Benjamin Wirt Farley to wonder "just how free God is to 'act' within it," because Kaufman places so much emphasis on "the unbrokenness of the historical and natural nexus, once the process is begun."[30] Farley asks, "Does he [God] actually do anything following an initial act?" It appears to Farley that "simply to divide one continuous act into subacts does not clarify God's specific involvement in or with each subact. If anything," Farley suggests, "God seems to come across more as the *Master Planner* than as the *Master Actor*."[31] Both God and the human agent appear "subject to a degree of determinism that makes it difficult for either party to 'transcend' the nexus."[32]

God Does Not Act in Response to Our Petitions

The subordinate acts of God are "governed largely by his overarching purposes and ultimate objectives, not simply by the immediate needs or the prayerful pleas of his children," in Kaufman's model. "There is no God who 'walks with me and talks with me' in close interpersonal communion, giving his full attention to my complaints, miraculously extracting me from difficulties into which I have gotten myself by invading nature and history with *ad hoc* rescue operations from on high." Kaufman thinks that "Christian piety has too long been nurtured largely on those psalms and other biblical materials which portray God as a kind of genie who will extricate the faithful from the difficulties into which they fall; it is this erratic and fickle God who cannot be reconciled with the modern understanding of the order in nature and history."[33]

So then, should we conclude that petitionary prayer for God to act in specific instances, such as the abduction of Richard Henderson and his col-

leagues, is ruled out by Kaufman's model? He does suggest that we, "both as species and individuals, have a place within those purposes, and *certain of his sub-acts are responsive to our acts*" (emphasis supplied). However, the proposal leads me to believe that our own acts to which God is responding do not significantly include petitions for his aid since his master act seems to rule out precisely those particular responses that would constitute acts done in answer to prayer, which would not otherwise have been done. Kaufman believes that "the place we have is [God's] to determine and assign, not our own; at the very most our lives are but almost infinitesimal constituents in his all-comprehending act, and his responsiveness to the particularities of our activity must be understood as a function and phase of his master act ordering all human and cosmic history."[34]

Maurice Wiles: God Does Not Intervene

Maurice Wiles cites Kaufman's "master act" conception as largely compatible with his own proposal.[35] He describes God as a Creator who has chosen to create a world of free beings who have "a measure of independent power over against himself."[36] We are agents who are capable of effective and responsible action, and we contribute to what happens in our world. Thus when we speak of the action of God, our primary reference should be to its "relation to the world as a whole rather than to particular occurrences within it."[37] We should think of the world as one act that includes the process that is still going on. The only act we must affirm to be God's is the "continuing creation" of the universe. Although it is a complex act, it is still a single act. The master act may be made up of subacts, but Wiles does not follow Kaufman in speaking of God as performing *any* of the subacts that contribute to God's one act of creating our world.[38]

God has a purpose, but it is very general because it must take account of our own actions as they occur. Consequently, when we express confidence in God's ultimate triumph in the world where evil is now so much a part of our experience, "we are not affirming that some fixed target will be reached, let alone that it will be reached by some predetermined date. It is a genuinely unknown future of which we are speaking."[39] We have seen God's love expressed in Christ and are confident that, in spite of the risk God has taken in creating the world, "eventually we will be able to say, as we know we cannot say now, that what *is* is God's will."[40] The work of creation will not come to an end until that will is fulfilled.

Reflecting upon the biblical account of God's action in history, Wiles

wonders how we can "continue to affirm some such version of the Christian story, without having to re-introduce an unacceptable notion of God the absolute controller?"[41] Many of the events described in Scripture as being God's providential activity were brought about through the agency of pagan empires and emperors such as Cyrus, who was God's shepherd to carry out God's purpose, although he did not know God (Is 44:28; 45:4). This raises the question of the link between God and Cyrus. If there were a "hidden manipulation of Cyrus's deliberative processes," then we would have "the all-controlling God who does not respect the freedom of the world he has created."[42] Since this is unacceptable to Wiles, he suggests that we must use "general statements about the kind of world God has created" rather than make claims about "particular, specifiable acts of God in history."[43]

In the crucifixion of Jesus we find "the archetypal example of a conflict between the purposes of God and the self-interest of men and women."[44] But we must not think of the event as involving divine providence "in the sense of a specific divine foreseeing and overruling of events."[45] The significant pattern of links between the life of Christ and what led up to it is apparent to us after the event. They have the character of "retroevidence." But "any prophetic foreseeing of the future can be accounted for by insight into human nature, giving rise by extrapolation to true vision of how things may be in the future." When understood in this way, "no particular divine action is required to account for this aspect of the providential direction of history."[46]

Wiles argues that the self-limitation of God must include the possibility of direct divine intervention but that this direct action has been "sparingly and strangely used."[47] If God does act in direct ways, in miraculous fashion, it strikes Wiles as strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima. Alongside those events the miracles acclaimed in traditional Christian faith seem "trivial by comparison."[48] We are not able to reconstruct the nature of the original happenings that first gave rise to the tradition that these were miracles, but Wiles suggests that whatever was at work, there "does not depend on the reality of miracle as a form of direct divine action."[49] Indeed, in a recent article Wiles contends that miracles "should have no place in Christian theology."[50]

Considering the process by which people come to faith in Christ, Wiles acknowledges that there are many factors impinging on our decision that were not our own doing. These include "the gradual pressure of circum-

stance, the sudden challenge of an unexpected moment of personal crisis, or the attractive presentation of the gospel by friend or preacher." Rather than considering these to be "particular or discrete acts of God," however, Wiles identifies them as "characteristic aspects of a world that in its totality constitutes God's action."[51] As was true with purported miracles, conversion stories are retrospective. They speak of "God's active preparation, call and guidance of the person's life," but they read their stories "forward instead of retrospectively." When this is done, "there is no escape from arbitrary election, implausible disposition of external circumstance and unacceptable manipulation of internal life." We speak this way about God's action because

> our lives are a part of God's personal act in the bringing into existence of the world, a world which includes as a paramount part of its purpose the self-dedication of human lives such as those of a Paul or an Augustine. It is precisely in them that God's act finds part of its fulfilment, not because there are separate distinguishable divine initiatives in relation to them or to particular aspects of them but because the emergence of such lives is what God's one act deliberately seeks to make possible.[52]

The life of Jesus is presented in the New Testament in terms of direct and personal providence, but this too should be understood as retrospective interpretation of experience. This was the way in which the early Christians made "cosmic and personal sense of the life of Jesus and its significance for the world and for them."[53] Neither the incarnation nor the resurrection should, therefore, be treated as unique instances of providential act or miracle. Wiles notes that David Brown has been led to a "wholeheartedly interventionist account of God" precisely by his reflection on these events in the life of Jesus.[54] Brown asserts that if we do not endorse an interventionist view, "then the very idea of an Incarnation will inevitably seem such a startling exception to the uniform pattern of God's relation to the world as to be, quite literally, incredible."[55] Christ's experience would have no analogy to our own and would therefore have no relevance to us.

Wiles resists the conclusions to which Brown has been led and prefers to draw an analogy between the earlier description of God's work in the life of Paul and God's action in Jesus. "Talk of God's call of Paul before his birth was not to be understood literally as implying some particular act of antenatal preparation or even foreknowledge on the part of God" but as a

"retrospective way of affirming how completely the service of God through mission to the Gentiles had been determinative of Paul's active life." In the case of Jesus, "it would be appropriate to understand in a similar way talk of his preexistence or of his being sent into the world or of the Spirit's overshadowing agency in the arrangement of his birth." We could see these "not as particular divine acts ensuring the birth of the particular person, Jesus, but rather as a retrospective way of expressing the totality of his commitment to and fulfilment of the will of God for the world."[56]

This approach to the incarnation is judged by Wiles to be more widely acceptable than a similar treatment of the resurrection of Jesus would be. But he dare not concede that even the resurrection was a direct act of divine intervention. "One action of so distinctively different a kind would be sufficient to call in question the claim that the absence of divine intervention in relation to so many evils and disasters in the world is because such direct action is logically incompatible with the kind of world that God has chosen to create."[57] Wiles therefore avers that the historical, physical evidence (for example, the empty tomb) is indecisive and that a physical resurrection is not necessary theologically because "the survival of death is not related to what happens to the body of the person who has died."[58] Faith in the vindication of Jesus and the conviction that Jesus lives in the presence of God need not, therefore, have been "derived from some special action of God in the form of supernaturally given appearances of Jesus."[59]

The most likely candidates for special divine action, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, have thus been viewed within, not as distinct from, the model of "the whole continuing creation of the world as God's one act, an act in which he allows radical freedom to his human creation." Having demonstrated to his satisfaction that these events fit within his model, Wiles confidently asserts that there are no "particular divinely initiated acts within the developing history of the world. God's act, like many human acts, is complex." We may rightly speak of particular acts as "specially significant aspects of the divine activity, but not as specific identifiable acts of God."[60]

In the model of God's action that Wiles has proposed, he excludes four kinds of happening or action from what we may legitimately describe as God's action. First among these are the "patterns according to which the physical world operates and which are known to us (in so far as they are known) through the study of the natural sciences."[61] We observe an amazing potential for these patterns to give rise to human life and consciousness,

and this "derives from the fact they owe their existence to God's one act of creation," but even in the stages of emergence of new forms of life, they should not be thought of as acts of God in a distinguishable sense.

The second category of happenings not to be called God's act are "happenings where the normal patterns of observed behaviour do not appear to operate," that is, events that might commonly be called miraculous. There are no exceptional cases that must be attributed to God, though it may not be until a later time (if ever) that we are able to understand how they fit in with the "statistically determined regularities of observed behaviour."[62]

Third, we must exclude from God's act the "actions by human agents, who have no conscious intention to further any believed purpose of God, but which do in fact achieve results that Christians believe to be of great significance for the furtherance of that divine purpose."[63] There is no way to intelligibly relate the intention of God and the human deed, which would justify our calling it an act of God.

Finally, God's act does not include the actions of human agents "who freely intend to further the purposes of God, seek God's grace to enable them to do so, and do in fact achieve their intended goal."[64] Although Wiles speaks of God's action as "continuing creation," given the many restrictions that Wiles has placed on God's action, Timothy Gorringe seems justified in deeming this description "illegitimate as none of the 'subacts' which follow the master act of creation can properly be ascribed to God."[65]

Prayer Is a Means of Increasing Our Awareness That God Is Present with Us, but We Do Not Expect God to Act in Response

The last type of action Maurice Wiles has prohibited us from describing as God's action is one that he recognizes as "most immediately involved in the life of prayer and worship."[66] To a friend who has "stood by me and encouraged me to make my own choice" I may say, "It's all thanks to you! It's all your doing!" This is a "proper use of language in the context of the expression of gratitude" but it "would be misleading if taken literally as a straightforward account of the genesis of my action." It can be a helpful analogy, however, because "so much religious language has its place in a context of thanksgiving."

We can expect problems regarding the relation of prayer to God's action, Wiles contends, "as long as we approach them in terms of the particular occasion of prayer alone, without giving serious attention to the 'complex ancestry' of that occasion."[67] In spite of the promise of Jesus

recorded in Matthew 21:22 we recognize that some requests are inappropriate. Origen, for instance, recognized that it would be improper to ask for the sun to be shifted back to its spring-time place during the heat of summer.[68] We may not request "special divine modification of the physical ordering of the world."

S. G. Hall has frequently encountered the proposal that we should not pray against the perils of bad weather, drought, flood, storm and pestilence but should pray instead for the generosity that we need in order to respond to such adversities.[69] The rationale for such a suggestion is that we cannot expect God to "change the course of events because some people asked him." Similarly, Michael Goulder has argued that "the deflection of an Exocet missile and the deflection of Mrs. Thatcher's judgment would involve equally crude forms of divine intervention," and so both should be abandoned.[70] However, both Hall and Goulder object to prayers for psychological change because they assume that such change involves physical change in the brain circuits and is, therefore, actually a prayer for the same kind of divine intervention as that which is being rejected.

Wiles agrees with Hall and Goulder that prayers for God's grace do not avoid the problem created by petitionary prayer for God to act within the world in order to remedy its problems, but his reasons for rejecting such prayers are different than theirs. "The person who prays for strength may learn that his previous efforts were a hindrance to achievement," Wiles suggests. "But he might have learnt the same lesson to relax and not to strive too hard in a non-religious context; what is involved may be more properly seen not as the replacement of human activity by divine, but rather as the substitution of a more appropriate form of human acting."[71]

> We may picture our prayers as giving rise to knowledge not otherwise accessible to us or as providing strength beyond the limits of our normal psychological capacity. Such pictures spring naturally enough out of the obvious human analogies. A friend enlightens us on issues that fall within the competence of his or her experience but lie outside our own; or he adds his strength to ours and enables us to achieve some feat that we could not have done single-handed.[72]

But Wiles thinks that this picture is too close an analogy to human relationships and that the situation is more complex than this, even in human relationships. We need a broader account, in Wiles's view.

> Prayers to God have their place within a continuing story, and just because they are prayers to *God* they cannot be adequately understood in isolation

> from that full story, however immediate or precise the language in which they are expressed. That story is the story of God's action in the creation of the world. The mysterious phenomenon of human consciousness has arisen in it not by chance, but as a result of the intention that constitutes the world God's act. The capacity to attain, however incompletely, some awareness of that intention is a part of what it is to have been created free beings in God's image. Such recognition, and very partial realization, of God's purpose as the world has seen in the past have been primarily forwarded by those who have used their God-given potential to open themselves to and identify their own goals with what they have grasped of the will of God.[73]

God's intention does not only find expression "spasmodically in the lives of saints occurring at scattered points in human history." It is also expressed institutionally in a Christian vision of the world, "particularly as enshrined in the sacraments of the church," although that is a very incomplete expression. God's action in the world is such that it makes possible "the emergence, both individually and corporately, of a genuinely free human recognition and response to what is God's intention in the creation of the world." It is with this that we associate ourselves in prayer and worship. "Indeed our association of ourselves with it is not merely a means towards its furtherance in other aspects of life (though it is that), but is also itself a part of the fulfilment of that purpose."[74]

Behind our particular experience of grace is "God as the ultimate source of the conditions in which our lives are set; the availability of an awareness of his purpose of love as a source of guidance for our lives; the ways in which that love, having been apprehended and responded to in the past, is accessible to us now in such forms as the writings of the saints and the sacraments of the church." When we come to times of prayer for God's grace, our characters have already been developed in specific ways, "ways partly determined by the extent to which we have opened ourselves to God's grace in the past."[75]

Wiles recognizes that this may seem an unsatisfying description because it portrays prayer "as a means of bringing our lives into relation not so much to God as to some generalized conception of God's will for the world." This ought not to be so, if we remember that God's action was the creation of a world of genuinely free human beings.

> God's purpose is no pre-packaged blueprint to which men and women must conform or be broken. Our human actions affect the way the world develops for good and ill. It is God's will that they should. So God's will for the world