

# Is Divine Providence Risky? A Dialogue Between John Calvin and John Sanders

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## Abstract

This study presents John Calvin and John Sanders as an example of the ongoing debate on the nature of divine control and human freedom. Given the time gap between Calvin and Sanders, the study uses a dialogical hermeneutics methodology. The former upheld a “no risk” while the latter propagates a “risky” conception of providence. However, the concept of providence as “risk” or “no risk” is not distinctively biblical. It has not been conceived in such a manner. Despite this, providence can be both risky and risk-free. Seemingly, the notion of divine providence constitutes a paradox, namely: as an omniscient creator, God controls everything, yet humans are free. For humans to be free, their future contingent actions must not be foreknown, because whatsoever God foreknows happens necessarily. Since both Scripture and human history show that humans are free, it follows, therefore, that God

does not know all future contingent actions. In that case, divine providence is risky. This explains why God changes and repents of his earlier decisions. However, this study argues that this paradox may be softened if divine ignorance is understood from a contextual point of view. Further, libertarianism, as advocated by Sanders, is overemphasized. Lastly, divine mutability and relenting denied by Calvin are part of divine sovereignty, without which there can be no forgiveness of sin.

## 1. Introduction

Given the problem of evil, the nature of how divine control relates to human freedom is an age-old debate among philosophers and theologians. The issue continues to be particularly pressing as it relates to the

### Keywords

creation, providence, risk-taking, foreknowledge, divine repentance

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problems of evil and suffering. Due to dissatisfaction with the explanations provided for these problems, some have come to doubt the existence of a good, loving, and powerful God. In contrast, others seek a redefinition of the classical conception of God. About three decades ago, open theism, which also refers to itself as freewill theism, took the debate to a further dimension. In this new dimension, divine relationality, openness, vulnerability, divine self-limitation, and divine risk-taking are upheld because of God's love and respect for human freedom. One of the proponents of the Openness of God is John Sanders. The risk-taker model of divine providence is espoused in his *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, first published in 1998 with a second edition issued in 2007.

In this book, Sanders engages Calvin extensively in his understanding of divine providence, divine immutability, divine accommodation, and divine repentance. The open model critiques the Augustinian-Calvinist model claiming that it is corrupt with the virus of Greek philosophy (Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger 1994, 8–9). This study is limited to Calvin and Sanders as an example of the intense interactions between the Augustinian-Calvinistic model of God and the Open model. This study is not comparative nor an assessment. The study aims to situate Calvin and Sanders in the global debate on divine sovereignty and human freedom to illustrate the continued persistence of the discussion in philosophy and theology. I will do this through dialogical hermeneutics. In doing so, I will allow the literature belonging to Calvin and Sanders to freely flow without interruption in an imaginary way as if to say Calvin and Sanders were currently responding to each other. In the end, I will point out a few areas of concern from both.

## 2. Understanding Risk

### 2.1 What is risk?

In this section, I will examine the meaning of the term “risk,” give a few examples of risk-taking attitudes, point out a few theories of risk, and point out which among them applies to the current study. The term “risk” has been understood from the following points of view:

- Risk is an unwanted event that may or may not occur.
- Risk is the cause of an unwanted event that may or may not occur.
- Risk is the probability of an unwanted event that may or may not occur.
- Risk is the statistical expectation value of unwanted events which may or may not occur.
- Risk is the fact that a decision is made under conditions of known probabilities (Hansson 2018).

The fourth proposition is asserted based on statistical expectations, meaning based on the cloud of witnesses either from experiences or deductions, there is a tendency of an unwanted outcome. The third and fourth propositions see “risk” from a probable point of view. This means that “risk” may be defined as an unwanted event that, given its probable nature, may occur or may not occur based on statistical analysis. The basis for this hypothetical conclusion is a lack of accurate knowledge with absolute material certainty of the occurrence of such an event.

A few examples of risk-taking attitudes may include the following: 1) It is proven that smokers are liable to die young as a result of the effect of smoking. However, suppose one combines smoking and addiction to

cocaine, regular partying, and drinking lots of liquor despite knowing its medical implication; in that case, such a person has “risked” her life by herself willingly and knowingly; 2) There are also types or levels of risk that may not be determined entirely from the onset. For instance, take the example of someone who ventures into the business of producing a new product that is not yet known and produces the same in a large amount. Of course, the producer knows this is a new brand that is not yet known. She is also aware that it might be sellable and it might not. However, from a positive note, after a careful examination with the view that there could be a 50+% chance of success, the producer may go ahead with mass production of such brand, hoping that the result will turn out to be positive (Helm 1994, 40).

## 2.2 Theories of risk-taking

There are several theories of risk depending on the context. However, since the current study is not directly connected to financial management, risk in that aspect will not be dealt with here. Risk, as understood above, focuses more on epistemology. However, the two examples of risk above may involve “moral” and utilitarian risks. Besides these, there is also the sociological/socio-cultural theory of risk. The moral theory of risk argues that a risky decision may be taken based on moral grounds in an in-deterministic context. Also, there is a distinction between *wilful* risk and *imposed* risk. If God takes a risk, it cannot be an *imposed* risk; otherwise, it will mean that he is not free. In the case of the smoker above, she has the choice to wilfully subject herself to the risk that comes with smoking and addiction to alcohol and other hard drugs. It will be a different thing altogether to subject her to tobacco and a state of addiction un-wilfully.

On the one hand, the utilitarian theory looks at the benefit of the outcome of the said risk (Hansson 2018). On the other hand, the sociological/cultural theory examines the risk involved in society, ranging

from industrialization, science/medicine, and governance. Lastly, the epistemological theory of risk, which seems more relevant to the current study, is interested in the relationship between time and the future and our ability to know it. Since our decisions that have futuristic implications are made today, it follows that our inability to understand their outcome with material certainty means that we take risk not minding whether the outcome turns out negatively, or at best, positively. Another crucial aspect of the epistemological theory of risk is the relationship between the less knowledgeable and the more knowledgeable. In such a relation, the less knowledgeable will doubt the outcome of a decision presented by the knowledgeable. The knowledgeable may also decide given their sufficient knowledge, but the end may be negative (Chicken and Tarma 1998, 9).

The definition of risk above presupposes that risk is based on insufficient knowledge of the expected outcome of an event. This outcome may be positive or negative. However, if “risk-taking” is based on the limited knowledge of the nature of the future, does it also apply to God since he is omniscient? It is generally agreed that God is all-knowing and knows more than anyone can ever know. However, the extent of God’s knowledge has always been a subject of debate. Sanders (2007a, 15) argues that “open theism affirms what I call dynamic omniscience. This means that God knows the past and present with exhaustive definite knowledge and knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open).” *Dynamic omniscience* to Sanders is synonymous with current omniscience. God only knows what exists now and does not know that which is not (206).

Helm (1994, 39–40) also argues that divine providence may be conceived both from the perspectives of “risk” and “no risk.” He clarifies that there are different ways risk may be understood. This involves a lack of knowledge of the outcome of our decisions, especially when there is a definite expectation. However, there is another perception of risk, which

involves lesser risk. This is a situation where one is merely expecting a general outcome. No preference is involved. Helm concedes that the language of Scripture presupposes divine ignorance, divine mutability, divine self-limitation, and, in fact, divine risk-taking in governing creation. However, Helm hesitates in accepting this notion of the divine being. He argues that it will result “in a theological reductionism in which God is distilled to human proportions” (52). Helm argues that the best way to avoid this distillation is to say that divine ignorance, divine self-limitation, and divine mutability as deduced from the Bible are anthropomorphic. This is because God desires that humans should respond to him; and so, therefore, he must appear as one who is responsive, acting in space and time in his response to humans. After all, they are in space and time. Helm (1994, 53–55) argues that the “risky” view of divine providence has its supposed benefits: human freedom is exalted. However, does Scripture teach the freedom advocated for in this model?

### **3. Calvin and Sanders on Divine Providence Involving Risk or no Risk**

In this section, I will interact with Calvin and Sanders on whether divine providence involves risk-taking or not. To understand how both arrive at their conceptions of divine providence, I will examine how both conceive the doctrine of creation, divine providence, human suffering, divine foreknowledge, and divine repentance.

#### *3.1 Creation*

To understand the nature of divine providence in both Calvin and Sanders is first to locate their doctrine of creation. For Calvin, since God is the creator of the universe, he cannot do otherwise than to uphold his creation

perpetually. Writing on Calvin’s theology, Hesselink (2006, 85) states that one of Calvin’s contributions to theology is his appreciation for creation. Hesselink noted that Calvin argues that the revelation of God in the Church and especially in Christ should not deter us from seeing the glory of God revealed in the creation. Because God wrapped himself in the creation, he perpetually upholds it.

Calvin (1960, 1.2.1) asserts that the orderliness in the creation is a pointer to God’s constant involvement in it. This involvement reveals God as the fountain of every good. Because God founded the creation by his might, regulates it by his wisdom and goodness, including mercy and judgement, “no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which He is not the cause.”<sup>1</sup>

For Calvin, creation and providence cannot be separated. Conceiving God as a one-time creator who finished the work of creation and abandoned it adds no value to the doctrine of creation, and it would be profane to think in this manner. Instead, Calvin argues that we should conceive the doctrine of creation so that God’s presence is continually felt in the creation as it was in the beginning. Calvin (1960, 1.16.1) sees it as an act of impiety to assert that God finished the work of creation on the seventh day and abandoned it.

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<sup>1</sup> Another translation, by Beveridge (1863, 1.2.1), states thus: “My meaning is: we must be persuaded not only that as he [God] once found the world, so he sustains it by his boundless power, governs it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, in particular, rules the human race with justice and judgement, bears with them in mercy, shields them by his protection; but also that not a particle of light, or wisdom, or justice, or power, or rectitude, or genuine truth, will anywhere be found, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause; in this way we must learn to expect and ask all things from him, and thankfully ascribe to him whatever we receive.” I have adopted Battles’s translation for the purpose of this study.

Calvin argues that God is actively involved in what goes on in this life. He explicates that even those who are not pious are compelled to look up to God after gazing at the artistic nature of creation. Even though they may not live piously, they cannot deny that God exists by merely gazing at the theatre of creation. However, natural revelation without faith will not ascribe the glory for the work of creation to God, to whom glory belongs properly. “[F]aith has its own peculiar way of assigning the whole credit for Creation to God” (1960, 1.16.1).

However, Sanders (2007a, 43) believes that creation is open and ongoing. God left some aspects of the creation open for humans to actualize the divine project. According to Sanders, God made it so that creation is not closed, nor does everything depend on God. Humans, in particular, contribute significantly to the divine project. Sanders argues that although God established the structures within which the creatures will operate, he does not limit them. He allows them room for self-development. God is willing to share power with humans. He sovereignly decides that not everything works the way he wants. Some fundamental aspects of creation are left open to humans to execute as co-creators with God. Sanders explains that the privilege given to humanity to play crucial roles at the dawn of creation shows that God did not close the work of creation. There were things he left open for his human associates to complete.

In granting the creation and humans the ability to procreate, God creates a world in which he does not alone bring about new states of affairs. God has willingly restricted himself from being the sole governor of the creation. He has also opened the possibility to include new things that were formerly not in the creation plan. The openness of the creation implies that God’s absolute divine sovereignty has been relinquished. Because of this openness, creation may prevail against God (Sanders 2010, 142–143).

Because creation is open and ongoing, God exposed himself to the possibility of failure in the divine project. Not everything will turn out as he expects. The open nature of creation and the general nature of divine sovereignty determines the nature of providence as involving risk-taking (Sanders 2007a, 225).

Even though Calvin does not use the term “risk,” reading through Calvin’s struggles in life reveals that he was conscious of risk even amidst divine guidance. He uses “danger” instead of risk. His life as he sees it was under the divine providential governance of God. Despite this awareness, Calvin notices that life is full of “deaths” and “dangers.” He exclaims that we are “surrounded by [a] thousand deaths” every day beginning at birth. There are stumbling blocks, wild beasts, snakes, pits, and swords everywhere. He argues that: “If you step onto a ship, you are already one step away from death. If you climb onto a horse, your foot only needs to slip and your life is in danger. Just walk through the city streets one time, and there are as many dangers as there are many roof tiles on the houses. If you or your friend are carrying a weapon, injury lies in wait” (Herman 2009, 36).

### *3.2 Providence and suffering*

The foremost tension of divine control is its nature. Does God control everything, many things, or a few things? Does he unilaterally control every detail of what happens or works in collaboration with humans? In examining the difficulty Calvin faces with respect to the nature of divine providence in his writings, Gerrish (2011, 11) states that Calvin construed that everything is under the providence of God. However, because of the difficulty involved in reconciling divine sovereignty and human responsibility without contradicting Scripture or making God morally culpable for human actions, Calvin concedes that the plans of God are sometimes hidden from our basic understanding. This conclusion leads



to another unique subject of discussion, namely, the hiddenness of God. Deducing from Deuteronomy 29:29, some things are kept secret while some are not. The former ones belong to God, while the latter ones belong to humans. Because some things are kept secret, their occurrence may look accidental. Gerrish argues that Calvin explicates that nothing is accidental, as shown in the Bible. Not only this, the Bible is clear and emphatic that God does not idly watch what goes on in this life, and he does not just know events as they will happen in advance, nor does he merely allow them. On the contrary, God is deeply involved in everything. Gerrish (2011, 11) states that Calvin denies that human life is determined by fate.

God controls every detail of what occurs unilaterally and with humans. God is the primary cause, and humans are the secondary causes. Calvin infers that because we are receivers and beneficiaries of God's goodness, we should also receive adversity and afflictions with thanksgiving. He argues that the apostle Paul taught that God's divine plan had destined those who are called his children to conform to the image of Christ. Conforming to the image of Christ includes sharing in his sufferings, so that just as Christ went through the cross into heavenly glory, we too might be glorified after overcoming our tribulations (1960, 3.8.1).

According to Calvin (1960, 1.16.9), God's providence governs individuals, has a particular way of relating to humans, and "regulates natural occurrences." Calvin sees an apparent enigma in conceiving divine providence from the human point of view. This enigma is primarily demonstrated in our engagement with what may be regarded as prudentially governed by God. Some situations do not appear to us in that manner but, most often, in the manner of fortune or luck. From the foregoing, the true cause of everything is hidden from us.

Calvin (1960, 1.16.2) extrapolates that "there is no such thing as a fortune or chance." As taught in the Scriptures, he argues that divine

providence expressly shows that providence does not involve fortune or fate despite some events and happenings appearing fortuitous. Whatever happens, there is always an underlying divine providential finger of God. This understanding is contrary to what was obtainable in traditional ancient religions. To clarify, Calvin illustrates that if there were two people and one fell into the hands of robbers, or got into an accident, but the other escaped these calamities, "Carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered [Matt 10:30] will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan."

In our context, the man mentioned above will be regarded as being "unlucky." Calvin denies that it should be so. Instead, it should be understood from the point of divine providence in which God, by his secret plan, governs the universe, including both goodness and adversities. Calvin rejects the idea of general providence where God's providential control is restricted to the overall plan and positive outcome of the divine project without considering every detail in the process. In dealing with the extent of providence, Calvin states that inanimate objects are governed by God's secret decree so that nothing happens unless God willingly and knowingly decrees its occurrence. He (1960, 1.16.3–7) further states that arguing for a general providence is an error, and it makes no sense to state that divine providence is selective.

Contrary to Calvin, while commenting on the exact text mentioned above, Sanders (2007a, 114) argues that the knowledge of the hair on our heads, the exhortation not to worry about food and clothing, is not an indication of meticulous providence. Instead, it is a call to trust in God, who knows all our worries. It means since God cares for the sparrows and the hairs on our heads, he cares about everything that concerns us. Therefore,

providence does not mean protection from evil, but that nothing can separate us from God's care.

Sanders states that the word "control" is used in a determinative sense in our day-to-day impersonal relations, and the act of control may not turn out otherwise. That is, what is being controlled may not act contrary to the dictate of the one in control. He argues that the word has two meanings: control and accountability. According to general sovereignty, when it is stated that God is in control, he is in the sense that he is accountable for creating this *kind* of world and the nature of the strategy he adopted in executing it. From the review of the biblical divine *pan-causality* texts, Sanders clarifies that God is not in the business of controlling everything that takes place. As seen in Calvin above, the notion of divine pan-causality argues that God controls everything, including inanimate objects, fortunes and adversity, and the like. Some of these texts include Exodus 4:11, where God says he gives the ability to speak, to make deaf and dumb, including blindness and sight. According to Isaiah 45:7, light, darkness, prosperity, and disaster are all from the Lord. In Isaiah 29:16, God is the potter, and creation, including humans, is clay. In Jeremiah 18:6, the potter and clay analogy is re-enacted. Amos 3:6 notes that peace or blessings and calamity come from nowhere except God. Lamentations 3:38 notes that both calamity and good come from the Most High. According to Proverbs 16:9, humans may plan, but only God establishes their plans. Proverbs 21:1 states that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, and he directs it as he wishes. However, Sanders (2007a, 227–228) argues that these texts do not really mean that God controls everything. They mean that God is in control because God and he alone, is solely responsible for commencing the divine project and determining the game's rules "under which it operates." "Within the rules of the game God makes room for indeterminacy or chance. Though God

sustains everything in existence he does not determine the results of all actions or events even at the subatomic level."

The tension that arises from the conclusion that God controls everything is the logical deduction of what follows: he is culpable for immoral human acts. This explains why Sanders and other philosophers reject the notion that God controls everything. William Hasker (2004, 131–132), another open theist, argues there is no way God will not be morally culpable for immoral human actions if he controls everything. To illustrate, Hasker differentiates between the transfer of responsibility (TR) and the non-transfer of responsibility (NTR). In TR, Hasker states the following:

If agent A deliberately and knowingly places agent B in a situation where B unavoidably performs some morally wrong act, the moral responsibility for the act is transferred from B to A, *provided that* the morally wrong act results exclusively from A's actions and is not the result of an evil disposition in B which preceded A's actions. (Hasker 2004, 131–132)

By applying this understanding to the concept of divine control, God is morally responsible for human actions.

Contrarily, Calvin holds that God is not the author of sin because of meticulous providence and his knowledge of future contingencies. Calvin (1960, 1.17.1) asserts that three things should be noted to arrive at the true concept of divine providence. First, he argues that divine providence must be considered in relation to the past and the future. Secondly, the providence of God is the "determinative principle" governing all things, so that at times it works through intermediaries, but sometimes it works without them. Even, in some cases, it works against intermediaries. "Finally, it strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human

race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely.”

Calvin (1960, 1.17.3) argues further that “God’s providence does not relieve us from responsibility.” To eliminate all prospects of carelessness and folly, Calvin states that “*God’s providence does not excuse us from due prudence*” (1.17.5; italics in original). As much as providence does not excuse our lack of prudence in the same manner, our wickedness cannot be justified due to providence. We cannot claim that because everything is under providence, therefore it must follow that God is morally culpable for our evil. Calvin argues that “*God’s providence does not exculpate our wickedness*” (1.17.6; italics in original). This is so because there is “*No disregard of intermediate causes!*” (1.17.9; italics in original).

Sanders rejects Calvin’s assertion that divine meticulous providence does not render human freedom ineffective. Sanders (2007a, 235) states that, based on the wealth of scriptural passages that support human freedom, another view of human freedom aside from the compatibilist perspective has emerged. This view affirms that “an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.” The most common line of reasoning in schematizing this view, Sanders argues, must include: (1) we can have a genuine love relationship with one another; (2) we are expected to be rational in our thoughts; and (3) we are morally responsible both for our good and evil actions.

Because of the nature of humans, “God has sovereignly established a type of world in which God sets up general structures or an overall framework for meaning and allows the creatures significant input into exactly how things will turn out” (Sanders 2007a, 225–226). God made it this way for the sake of a genuine relationship based on freedom. Both good and bad things take place within this general structure.

Contrary to this conclusion by Sanders, Calvin (1960, 1.17.11–12) argues that such an opinion does not bring joy or confidence in God. Arguing against the futility of general providence, Calvin rhetorically asked, “For, of what use is it to join Epicurus in acknowledging some God who has cast off the care of the world, and only delights Himself in ease? What avails it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?” (1.2.3).

In that way, Calvin means that everyone is created by God for a purpose and he sovereignly guides each person to achieve such a purpose. However, Sanders (2008, 298) denies that God has a list containing what every person should do or be in life; some of the things that occur either come by chance or as we trust God to give us wisdom daily to become what he wants us to be. Even in this, God only wants us explicitly to be like Jesus in this life as we love God and one another.

Sanders (2007a, 42) argues that it is God who decides how he governs the creation and what sorts of conditions and relationships he has established. He chooses to exercise general rather than meticulous providence. No one can deduce what kind of sovereignty God has adopted in handling the divine project from their notion of God or from the nature of creation.

When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences. (Sanders 2007a, 272)



### 3.3 Divine foreknowledge

Both Calvin and Sanders hold that God is omniscient. However, the dividing line is what constitutes divine omniscience and how much God must know. Also, whether God's knowledge has implications for the nature of divine control or not is another issue. Further, because of the infallibility of God's knowledge, what he knows will surely come to pass. In that case, humans will not be free. A few passages in the Bible portray God as being deficient in knowledge. To tackle the above difficulties, Sanders (2007a, 15) elucidates that open theism holds a *dynamic view of omniscience* because God exhaustively knows the past and present but knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). In *dynamic omniscience*, God only knows what exists now (207). Sanders (2007a, 14) clarifies that "the free will tradition affirms that God takes risks even if God knew before the creation that humans would sin. This is made clear by how divine foreknowledge is explained."

Sanders (2007b, 39) uses the "if" and "perhaps" passages (Jer 26:2–3, Ezek 12:1–3, and Jer 7:5) of the Bible for this purpose. Besides, the destruction of Tyre and Nineveh, which did not come to pass, indicates that predictive prophecies are conditional. As far as Sanders is concerned, divine foreknowledge has no providential relevance. In his reply to Wood (*The Eternal Now and Theological Suicide*), Sanders argues that it is contradictory to assert that God knows an event will come to pass and also to assert that God prevents that event from coming to pass. It does not make sense. Since God already knows that it will happen, how can he stop it from happening? Sanders argues that since whatever God knows will happen, and he believes it will, how can God hold a false belief? He argues that it is logically impossible for God to know with material certainty that an event will indeed happen and that God at the same time will prevent that event from happening.

It does God no good to have either simple foreknowledge or the eternal now because God cannot change what God knows for a fact will happen. God cannot use knowledge of what we call the future to guide us in the best ways, or to prevent horrible events from happening or to give predictions about the future to the prophets. (Sanders 2010, 78–79)

For the sake of freedom, Sanders (2007b, 35) argues that God could have created a world in which everything is exhaustively known and controlled from A to Z. However, because God is wise, he has chosen to govern creation through general providence. God adopted a general and flexible strategy by allowing space for humans to operate and for God to demonstrate his inventiveness in working with uncertainties. By so doing, God adjusts and adapts the divine plan to his human associates to take into account what they will contribute to the divine project. In doing that, God has what it takes to handle every eventuality in working toward the project's ultimate goal. God sometimes unilaterally decides how to accomplish these goals. However, in most cases, he does that through human cooperation, and the end is decided by God and humans.

That God only knows some things but does not know others raises a few questions and objections. However, as noted above, the extent of divine knowledge divides not only Sanders and Calvin, but also philosophers and theologians generally. Contrary to Sanders's notion of divine ignorance, Calvin (1554, 162), in his commentary on Genesis 22:12, debunks the idea that God does not know contingent acts. He construes that instead of saying God came to learn a new fact concerning Abraham, it should be understood the other way round. Abraham is the one who came to know that God is a provider as a result of the exercise of taking Isaac to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. The theory of accommodation in which God reduces himself

to a lowly and finite level is played here. Humans lack the cognitive apparatus to interact with God at the level of his *Godness*, especially after the Fall. Therefore, for God to relate with humans, he willingly lowered himself. In this case, he speaks as if he is just coming to know that Abraham fears him. God has always known that Abraham fears him.

To Calvin (1960, 3.21.5),

[w]hen we attribute prescience to God, we mean that all things always were, and ever continue [perpetually remain], under his eyes, [so] that to his knowledge there is no past or future, but all things are present, and indeed so present, that it is not merely the idea of them that is before Him...but that He truly sees and contemplates them as actually under His immediate inspection. This prescience extends to the whole circuit of the world, and to all creatures.

In dealing with the same passage, Sanders (2007a, 50–51) contends that there would be no need for the test if God knew its outcome. But because he did not know the outcome beforehand, he genuinely learned something: Abraham feared him. Sanders argues that “God’s intention is not the death of Isaac but the testing of Abraham’s faith (22:1). The test is genuine, not a fake... God’s statement, ‘now I know,’ raises serious theological problems regarding the divine immutability and foreknowledge.”

#### **4. Divine Repentance**

Another essential issue in divine control is the biblical notion of divine repentance. If God governs everything because he is the creator and knows everything, as argued by Calvin, why does he have to repent? A few scholars, for instance Peels (2016, 294–295), hold that God can repent. Peels argues that S finds out that  $\Sigma$  is bad or less than ideal at a time.  $\Sigma$  should have

not been actualized in the first place. Because  $\Sigma$  is not ideal, it follows that it was not necessary. And since it is not essential, S, at a different time, will seek to undo  $\Sigma$  because it is less beneficial. Peels extrapolates that divine repentance is biblical, and serious exegetical studies reveal that such passages that have been read to mean that God does not repent (Num 23:9, 1 Sam 15:29, and Jas 1:17) do not deny divine repentance. Instead, these passages deny that God can lie.

Sanders (2007a, 73) argues that because the creation is open and God exercises general providence, he is ignorant of future contingencies. As a result, God sometimes regrets his earlier decisions to the extent that he “repents” of such decisions. But how can God repent? To repent means to turn from an earlier decision that was not right. In the modern understanding of the word, it will mean God committed some wrong actions and, therefore, repents of such actions. However, Sanders argues that “A better approach is to see all of these expressions [divine ignorance and repentance] as metaphorical abstract concepts based upon our physical experiences.”

Contrary to Sanders, Calvin (1960, 1.17.12) states that “divine repentance” is anthropopathic and falls under the theory of accommodation. This is because God cannot repent since he does not hastily make decisions he will later regret. Repentance to Calvin is the mode of speaking that describes God in human terms because of the ontological distinctions between God and humans. Due to this distinction, God “accommodates” himself so that we can understand him. However, divine accommodation does not present God as he is in himself, but “as He seems to us” (1.17.12). Calvin argues that the references to God having mouth, ears, and other human descriptions in the Bible are not the true nature of God.

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in

speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness. (Calvin 1960, 1.13.1)

In his response to Calvin, Sanders (2007a, 30, 72–73) argues that one will need to ask Calvin how he got the right knowledge of God even beyond what is revealed in the Scriptures. He wonders how Calvin knows that God was accommodating himself in the test of Abraham and the other scriptural passages cited where he is said to change, repent, or not. How does he know that God is accommodating himself as a nurse lisps to a young child? He argues that one must know the nurse’s everyday speech to distinguish between her normal speech and lisping. It logically follows that if the Scripture is God’s babytalk, we will need to know God’s normal speech. Sanders rhetorically asked, where does Calvin get such knowledge from, by a special revelation? And if he claims that it is not based on special revelation, then where does he get his criterion which determines that the texts that argued that God would not change his mind refer to how God *is*, while those texts that show that God will change his mind demonstrate how God *appears* to us? Sanders concludes that Calvin and other classical theologians read the Bible through a “theological control belief of an immutable and wholly unconditioned deity” (2007a, 74–75, 158).

## 5. Critical Observations

The interaction between Calvin and Sanders is fascinating. It shows the nature of every Christian philosopher and theologian’s struggle to reconcile apparent paradoxes in the Scriptures while formulating Christian doctrines. A few things to note from this interaction include the following.

### 5.1 Libertarianism

Helm (2008, 242) argues that the Augustinian-Calvinistic model of God accepts libertarianism.<sup>2</sup> It upholds both libertarianism and compatibilism. Compatibilism coheres with divine decrees and the biblical notion of grace, while libertarianism is not entirely out of place. However, what constitutes libertarianism is the dividing line. Another crucial issue to understanding human freedom in Sanders’s view is whether libertarianism is taught in the Bible. It seems this notion is at variance with the Scriptures. For instance, Acts 4:27–28 seems to teach that Pontius Pilate, Herod, the Gentiles, and the Israelites did exactly what God intended them to do (see also Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 3:17–19). Other passages of the Bible also support this notion. For instance, Proverbs 21:1—“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (cf. Ezra 1:1; 6:22; Dan 4:34–35)—implies that God predestines all human decisions. It will inevitably follow that humans are not free as understood in the libertarian sense of freedom (Talbot 2003, 80–81).

According to Edwards (2000, 4), although it is believed that an external determinant causes the will, and its subsequent action is causally determined, careful observation reveals the contrary. The cause of an action does not lie externally to the doer of the action. It is within; it is “motive.” He clarifies, “By motive I mean the whole of that which moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition, whether that be one thing singly, or many things conjunctly.” It means everyone is a slave to one thing or the other. Sanders’s (2007a, 235) assertion that “an agent is free with respect to a

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<sup>2</sup> Adherence to the philosophical doctrine of compatibilism has recently come under critical assessment by a few defenders of classical theism (CT). It seems it may lose relevance in the near future. Paul Helm and Richard Muller have reservations about using the term in the Augustinian-Calvinistic understanding of the divine-human relationship. See Muller (2019).

given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action" will likely not be tenable in the light of the foregoing.

Caneday (1999, 148) argues that Sanders misinterprets Calvin and other classical theologians. He argues that while addressing God's exhaustive divine sovereignty, classical theologians also struggle to maintain that creatures, whether human, angelic or demonic, have significant freedom, responsibility, and free choices. These classical theologians claim that both divine sovereignty and human freedom are true, and both propositions must be affirmed. Caneday further argues that Sanders is inconsistent in interpreting anthropomorphism, as he accused earlier theologians of reading the Bible through specific lenses while doing the same; rejecting Calvin's notion of secondary causes while utilizing the same in his interpretation of predictive prophecies (149, 153, 157).

The enormous challenge for Calvin here is his attempt to prevent God from becoming the ultimate author of sin. To not make God culpable, Calvin tries to distinguish between God and intermediaries. By doing this, Calvin comes right behind Aquinas and Aristotle in applying causality to the doctrine of providence. He believes that by distinguishing between primary and secondary causes, the tension of divine control and human freedom will be eradicated (1994, 179). Yet, the point at which intermediaries or God determine the outcome of an event is not something to be quickly pointed out. It seems the Bible teaches *cooperationism*, where humans cooperate with God in governing creation rather than libertarianism or determinism.

## 5.2 *The nature of divine providence*

Sanders (2007a, 43) argues that creation is open and ongoing. This is contrary to Calvin's opinion. According to Calvin (1960, 1.16.1), God constantly preserves, sustains, and nourishes what he completed and

perfected in six days. However, I think Sanders's argument that the creation is "open" and "ongoing" to allow space for us to contribute and for God to demonstrate his ingenious nature and inventiveness in handling the divine project looks appealing. But, it becomes problematic when Sanders argues that God did adopt a general strategy in governing creation and that God accepts our contributions and adapts the divine plan to what we supply. Suppose God adapts the divine plan to human inputs and takes responsibility for the divine project's overall outcome. In that case, it must follow that he is responsible for the evil we as his associates will bring into the divine project.

Sanders's insistence that there are no blueprints for the divine project may not be a good option. Since God does not have blueprints or a list for the divine project, it follows that there are no specific means for bringing the divine project into fruition. Thus, it follows that the means of getting to the climax of the divine project does not matter. Sanders's open and ongoing nature of creation could be problematic when overstretched. It seems that understanding the nature of creation and our role as *stewards* will be jeopardized if it turns out that there are no maximum divine plans and blueprints for the project. Creation will groan excessively when there are no blueprints, as our different opinions will rather mishandle creation for our selfish gains. But, if there is some level of direction, we will be held accountable if such directions or blueprints are overlooked.

The notion of divine control traditionally understood as meticulous is "roomy" to contain meticulous and general providence, including determinism and libertarianism (Crisp 2019, 23). The Bible reveals that God governs some events meticulously, ensuring that every detail goes as he wishes. For instance, the making of Saul and David kings of Israel, the Ark of the covenant, the incarnation of the Lord, among many others.

However, there are instances where he does not insist on detail. The casting of lots in the Old Testament may apply to this understanding.

We may not deny that divine providence involves some level of risk. This is because no matter the level of our faith in God as humans, since we do not know the future with absolute material certainty, we often wonder whether we are on the right track or not. However, where and how divine providence involves some level of risk begs for an answer. Though Scripture did not state that Abraham doubted God, the exhortation to Abraham “walk before me faithfully and be blameless” in Genesis 17:2, after mating with Sarah’s slave girl, is an indication that Abraham was having a trying moment. The possibility of questioning God’s promise at this time could be high. The terms “risk” or “no-risk” have not existed in the Church’s vocabulary of providence from the beginning. The Church did not need to think of providence in such a manner. What the Church has been wrestling with is the reconciliation of the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Lastly, since Sanders (2007a, 73) insists that God repents, yet he does not change for the best nor for the worst, one will easily notice that this conclusion has numerous shortcomings. That God repents or relents of his earlier decisions or plans is part of Yahweh’s nature, as seen in Exodus 34 and Joel 2:3–14. It is an essential ingredient in the nature of Yahweh, without which there will be no forgiveness of sin. However, the Bible also shows that Yahweh does not relent (Frame 2001, 164–165).

### *5.3 Divine ignorance*

Another challenge for Calvin is whether we should understand passages like Genesis 22 in terms of accommodation; why not think that God accommodates himself all the time? And how does it not follow that we cannot truly know God, but only a human construction of God?

Ware (2002, 195) extrapolates that the open theistic view of divine ignorance, especially future contingencies, has several implications. He argues that divine ignorance jeopardizes faith in God. His character cannot be trusted, and neither his purpose nor work can be guaranteed. Selective nescience connotes that God does not have plans for any of us. This is contrary to Scripture. Open theism strives hard to free God from believing falsely. However, as seen above, Sanders believes that predictive prophecies sometimes do not come true. It follows that God believes falsely that, for instance, Nineveh, Tyre, and the like will be destroyed. Therefore, God’s wisdom is questionable.

Further, the assertion that God foreknows only a few things for the sake of human freedom does not bring the amount of comfort supposed by open theism. It has serious pastoral implications and brings little comfort amid suffering. Such a God may not be worthy of human trust (Wood 2010, 66).

In the binding of Isaac, since Sanders argues that it was at the time of the testing that God knew that Abraham feared him, then God’s knowledge of Abraham’s spirituality was in doubt (Hall and Sanders 2003, 23–24). It means God had doubted Abraham’s relationship with him. However, the track record of God’s relationship with Abraham does not show that God doubted Abraham, even once. Genesis 12 and 15 substantiate this. Other scriptural passages (1 Chr 28: 9; Psa 139) attest that God knows humans’ thoughts and intentions, both present and future. But the insistence that God did not know that Abraham feared him until the test connotes that God does not have present knowledge either. This issue is addressed by Ware (2002) in his article cited above.

For Augustine, God’s knowledge of contingent actions does not imply that God causally determines such actions, thereby rendering them necessary actions. This would entail that such actions cease to be contingent.



However, Augustine (1968, 193) argues that God's knowledge of free actions guarantees that the actions are free and contingent upon human volition for their existence.

#### 5.4 Contextual application

A careful study of God's responses to humans in the Bible reveals that he responds to situations differently and individually. In that case, one is justified to extrapolate that God knows human contingent actions. However, because he did not preordain human free actions, he has also not predetermined his responses to such actions. This explains why he will respond differently based on the *context*. Christ did the same thing during his earthly ministry, especially in healing. At times, he commanded the sickness to leave. On other occasions, he either said "your faith had made you well," or "your sins are forgiven," and the sick person was made well. The disciples wanted to generalize about the man born blind in John 9. Jesus corrected them and stated that it was in that manner *so that the work of God might be displayed in his life*. Here, it is a matter of context. Scripture does not teach us that there are some things that God does not know. However, it is apparent in the Scriptures that God does not respond in the same way to every situation. At times, he allows mercy to prevail over judgment; he will not change at other times. God's approach in dealing with creation is not *monolithic* but is *diversified* based on contexts.

Both Calvin and Sanders are a bit normative in their expressions. For instance, as seen above and substantiated by Caneday, Sanders challenges Calvin and the Augustinian-Calvinistic model of conceiving God, and believes that the open view is better than classical theism in dealing with the problem of evil. What makes it that Calvin is correct while Sanders is not, or vice versa? Since Calvin has gone to be with Lord, my word for Sanders would

be: "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears" (1 Cor 13:9–10 NIV). There is a place for epistemic humility in dealing with complicated Christian philosophy and theology doctrines. This is an issue that each Christian philosopher must consider in their philosophical or theological engagements. Since Christian philosophy and theology are done in the flesh for humans using human languages, it is impossible to assume that one's concept is the best concept. One may be faithful more than the other in some aspects. Of course, I am aware that the way I am applying 1 Corinthians 13 in this context is contested by Calvin (1948, 360–361) in his commentary on this passage. However, it does not change the fact that the reasons we provide for why God permits evil in the world may not necessarily be correct in every situation.

#### 6. Conclusion

The study, from its inception, is hermeneutical in a dialogical manner. The debate on divine sovereignty is complicated and calls for epistemic humility. Because of our limitations, providence is *risky to us but not to God*. Divine providence may involve some level of risk because we do not know the outcome of every decision we make when there is a definite expectation. It also seems that no matter the level of trust and experience one may have, delegating a task confers some level of risk on the one embarking on the delegation. But, I think the appropriate term to use in qualifying how divine providence involves some level of risk as applied to God has not yet been invented.

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