

# WHY SIMPLE FOREKNOWLEDGE OFFERS NO MORE PROVIDENTIAL CONTROL THAN THE OPENNESS OF GOD

John Sanders

This paper examines the question of whether the theory of simply foreknowledge (SF) provides God with greater providential control than does the theory of present knowledge (PK). It is claimed by the proponents of SF that a deity lacking such knowledge would not be able to provide the sort of providential aid commonly thought by theists to be given by God. To see whether this is the case I first distinguish two different versions of how God's foreknowledge is accessed according to simple foreknowledge. These two versions are then utilized to examine seven different areas of divine providence to assess the utility of simple foreknowledge. I conclude that SF affords no greater providential control than PK.

Does a God with simple foreknowledge (SF) possess greater providential control than a God with present knowledge (PK)? It is claimed by the proponents of SF that a deity lacking such knowledge would not be able to provide the sort of providential aid commonly thought by theists to be given by God. To see whether this is the case I first distinguish two different versions regarding how God's foreknowledge is accessed according to simple foreknowledge. These two versions are then utilized to examine seven separate areas of divine providence to assess the utility of simple foreknowledge. I conclude that SF affords no greater providential control than PK.

## *Introduction*

According to the theory of simple foreknowledge God has direct vision of all future events. God does not cause all these events to happen, nor is his knowledge inferred from what has happened in the past. Rather, God has direct noninferential apprehension of the future. The foreknowledge God has of what creatures with libertarian freedom will do is *dependent* on, and logically subsequent to, what the creatures actually decide to do.<sup>1</sup> That is, what the creatures decide affects what God knows the future to be. "Once" God decided to create this world then God apprehended all that would ever happen—right down to the movements of quarks—in this world.

For the openness of God model, God has only present knowledge of



what free creatures do and only possesses “foreknowledge” of the specific actions he determines to do in the future. God knows all that has happened and all that is happening—right down to the movements of quarks—and may infer or believe that certain things will occur in the future. But God does not *know* the future actions of free creatures. Moreover, even how and if some of the divine intentions will be actualized are not known in a hard sense since they depend upon God’s reaction to human decisions.<sup>2</sup> In the openness model God is understood to be responsive to the creatures he made. There is a give-and-take dynamic between God and his creation.

Some people are attracted to the element of divine responsiveness in the openness model but find two significant problems with the openness theory. First, they understand the nature of biblical prophecy to imply that God has foreknowledge of the future. If God has SF then, it is claimed, he can predict the future through his prophets. Second, they believe the open God model implies too much divine risk in providence such that God cannot guarantee the end from the beginning. A God lacking omniprescience cannot meet the challenges of the future. David Hunt claims that “divine control will be hamstrung and God’s purposes jeopardized if events can ever catch Him by *surprise*, or find Him *unprepared*, or force Him to *react* after the fact to patch things up....the kind of providential control expected of a theistic God is possible only on the assumption of foreknowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Both of these problems are overcome, it is claimed, if God possesses SF.

Theologian Jack Cottrell maintains that SF is a key element in God’s providential control over the world. He says,

Because it is by this means that God can allow man to be truly free in his choices, even free to resist his own special influences, and at the same time work out his own purposes infallibly. For if God foreknows all the choices that every person will make, he can make his own plans accordingly, fitting his purposes around these foreknown decisions and actions....Acts 2:23 is a perfect illustration of the way God works through his foreknowledge....On the one hand, God had predetermined that Jesus would die as a propitiation for the sins of the world; this was his own unconditional plan for saving the world. On the other hand, the details of *how* this would be accomplished were planned in relation to God’s foreknowledge of the historical situation and of the character and choices of men such as Judas.<sup>4</sup>

These are strong claims for the providential benefits of SF. Before examining the validity of these claims, I think it important to distinguish two different versions of how God’s foreknowledge is accessed. SF is commonly explained as God “seeing the whole at once” and thus, knowing all that will happen. In this way God atemporally *learns* all at once everything that his free creatures will do. For example, God pre-visions before the creation of the world my birth, sibling rivalries, marriage, adoption of children, writing this paper, etc. What God pre-

visioned, moreover, included all the details leading up to and surrounding all these events—right down to the number of hairs on my head at any given moment. This vision of God happens all at once and even though he knows things will occur in sequence God does not acquire the knowledge in sequence. God simply sees the whole at once. I shall coin the term “Complete Simple Foreknowledge” (CSF) for this version of SF.

Unfortunately, CSF has a difficult time explaining how God can intervene in what he foresees will happen. The problem arises because of the fact that what God previsions is what will *actually* occur. Divine foreknowledge, by definition, is always correct. If what will actually happen is, for example, the holocaust, then God knows it is going to happen and cannot prevent it from happening since his foreknowledge is never mistaken. Furthermore, if what God has foreseen is the *entire* human history *at once*, then the difficulty is to somehow allow for God’s intervention into that history since, presumably, his prevision did not include his own actions.<sup>5</sup> For example, if God sees Abraham’s birth, life and death all at once then how does God interject the test of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) into Abraham’s life? How does God see God’s own actions in Abraham’s life which would alter Abraham’s life and consequently change God’s foreknowledge? Even more seriously, if God sees all of human history and the sin involved in it, but not his own actions, then this foreknowledge does not include any redemption from sin and God cannot save the creatures he is about to create. Hunt is correct that a God “with total foreknowledge...is equipped to make maximally informed decisions—but there is nothing left to be decided.”<sup>6</sup> In this state of affairs there is no room for any providential activity if God sees the whole at once.<sup>7</sup> This raises the specter of deism which is unacceptable for orthodox theists.

Not surprisingly some believers in SF have sought a different explanation of God’s direct apprehension of the future, one that allows for God to act providentially. In this version God timelessly accesses the future *in sequence* or *incrementally*.<sup>8</sup> That is, not in a temporal sequence, but in what might be called an explanatory order.<sup>9</sup> God sort of atemporally rolls the tape of the future up to a certain point and then stops it in order to interject his own actions into the tape and then rolls the tape further to see what his creatures will do in response to his actions. Then God again decides what he will do and then rolls the tape further. Hence, there is a logical sequence or order of dependence in the way God comes to access his foreknowledge. In this version God still learns the future, atemporally of course, but he learns it in sequence. As a result God can weave his own actions into the flow of human history. I shall coin the term “Incremental Simple Foreknowledge” (ISF) to designate this view.

Does the theory of SF provide better support for the doctrine of providence than the openness model? I propose to examine seven different, but related, aspects of the doctrine of providence to see what benefits, if any, SF has over PK.

*Providential Uses of SF**1. Creation and Sin*

Some people believe that a God with SF could have prevented the free creatures from committing evil. Since God did not prevent sin from happening, God is ultimately responsible. John Hick takes this line when he says it is "hard to clear God from ultimate responsibility for the existence of sin, in view of the fact that He chose to create a being whom He foresaw would, if He created him, freely sin."<sup>10</sup> Lorenzo McCabe, a nineteenth century Methodist theologian who wrote two lengthy treatments on foreknowledge, said that "a being who the Creator foreknew would be disobedient should not be created....How easy for omnipotence to prevent the existence of those who, as his omniscience foresaw, would choose to be disobedient."<sup>11</sup> Cottrell gives the background for this sort of providential control when he says, "It is *foreknowledge* that enables God to maintain complete control of his world despite the freedom of his creatures. God *knows* the future; it is not open or indefinite for him. This gives God the genuine option of either permitting or preventing men's planned choices, and prevention is the ultimate control."<sup>12</sup>

But can a God with CSF prevent sinners from being born or prevent certain evil choices? No, for the simple reason that if what God *foreknows* is the *actual* world then God foreknows the births, lives and deaths of actual sinners. Once God has foreknowledge he cannot change what will happen for that would make his foreknowledge incorrect. If God foreknows (has actual knowledge) that Adam will freely choose to mistrust God, then God cannot intervene to prevent Adam from this mistrust. Hence, God can see the evil coming before he creates the world but is powerless to prevent it. William Hasker is correct when he says,

[I]t is clear that God's foreknowledge cannot be used either to *bring about* the occurrence of a foreknown event or to *prevent* such an event from occurring. For what God foreknows is *not* certain antecedents which, unless interfered with in some way, will *lead to* the occurrence of the event; rather, it is *the event itself* that is foreknown as occurring, and it is contradictory to suppose that an event is *known* to occur but then also is *prevented* from occurring. In the logical order of dependence of events, one might say, by the "time" God knows something will happen, it is "too late" either to *bring about* its happening or to *prevent* it from happening.<sup>13</sup>

The proponent of SF may appeal to Incremental Simple Foreknowledge (ISF) in an attempt to rescue providential control. Thus, God roles the tape forward and learns (prior to creation) that Adam is succumbing to temptation—but does not role the tape far enough to see whether he actually sins or not. At this point God may press the pause button on his remote and decide to intervene in order to buttress Adam's flagging trust. Will God's efforts be successful? To find out God roles the tape forward to see how Adam will respond.<sup>14</sup> If Adam

chooses to continue to trust God then the temptation is overcome. If he fails to trust God then sin enters the world. Regardless, once God sees the actual future choice of the creature he is powerless to prevent it. Prior to the actual choice being made God can seek to persuade Adam to trust God, but once God knows that Adam will fail to trust God then it is too late for God to prevent the sin.

It must be remembered that a God with SF (either CFS or ISF) does not have middle knowledge and so cannot "try out" alternative scenarios in order to ascertain which one will achieve his objective in preventing Adam from sinning.<sup>15</sup> A God with SF knows what will occur in the actual world once he decides to create this world. But God does not know before he decides to create this particular world what sorts of decisions and actions a world containing individuals with libertarian freedom will freely choose to do if created. Consequently, a God with SF is no less a risk taker than a God with PK, for he could only gamble that a desirable state of affairs would actually come about. Hence, God is open to being surprised or disappointed by what he discovers will come about. Thus, a God with SF might "luck out" in that his free creatures never, in fact, decide to sin. But in this case there is no providential advantage for a God with SF over a God with PK. In fact, the way God providentially interacts with the world would be explained the same way in both models.

## 2. Election

What of all those God foreknew would never exercise saving faith in him and thus are not part of the elect of salvation? Can God decide not to create them? James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill, thought so. "Think of a being," he says, "who would make a hell, who would create the race with the infallible foreknowledge that the majority of them were to be consigned to horrible and everlasting torment."<sup>16</sup> Mill believed this a serious objection to the existence of the Christian God.

Although this charge may carry some weight against theological determinism it does not apply to SF because it misunderstands the nature of foreknowledge. Early church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Origen set forth a view of election, much later taken up by Arminius, which sought to use SF without divine determinism.<sup>17</sup> In their view God uses his foreknowledge to see which individuals will freely come to faith in Christ and God then decides to elect these people for eternal salvation. Hence, God's election is dependent on, and logically subsequent to, the choice of the creatures even though God's election of them is temporally prior to creation. God atemporally *responds* to the free choices of his creatures.<sup>18</sup>

A God with SF takes risks in creating a world with libertarian freedom since it was possible, before God decided to create and had no foreknowledge of the actual world, that no single human being would love God. This is as true for the theory of SF as for PK. Even with SF God gains no more providential control over who is saved than a God with PK. Hence, even a God with SF could, once he decided to create, have learned through his foreknowledge that no humans would ever freely

come to love him in response to his love for them. As it has, in fact, turned out the actual world does, I believe, contain a number of people who respond in faith to the divine love. But, it must be remembered, this is not due to any providential use of his foreknowledge. One could say that God “lucked out,” or one could say that God was confident and courageous enough to create a world where this tragic possibility existed but thankfully did not obtain.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps God had enough confidence in his ability to love the creatures and in his planned incarnation into human history that the risk was, from the divine point of view, worth taking if not minimal.

### 3. *Guidance and Protection*

It is often assumed that a God with SF would be in a maximally informed position to offer guidance and protection to those who petition him in prayer. For instance, say Mandie asks God whether she should marry Matthew or Jim, believing that God knows what is best for her and will advise her accordingly. In fact, Mandie may believe, with C. S. Lewis,<sup>20</sup> that a God with CSF knew of her prayer beforehand and so has prearranged things (perhaps even prior to her birth) in such a way that her request will be providentially answered. Mandie initiates her request in good faith believing that since God knows the future he can help her. She believes, for instance, that God knows whether Jim will be loving or abusive towards her. Perhaps God knows that Jim will turn out to be a drug dealer and quite abusive while Matthew will be a very loving person.<sup>21</sup> Mandie believes that God would, in this case, give her the guidance to marry Matthew. The problem is that if God *knows* that she will actually marry Jim and be quite unhappy, then it is useless for God to give her the guidance to marry Matthew. It would be incoherent to claim that God, knowing the actual future and on the basis of this knowledge, changes it so that it will *not* be the actual future. Of course, God might foreknow that Jim will be a wonderful husband for Mandie. Even so, it is not because God brought it about. A God who already knows the future cannot answer such prayers.

Furthermore, a God with CSF not only knows the “big” decisions Mandie will make, such as whom she will marry, but all the “little” ones leading up to and surrounding them as well. Hence, God knows all the details of her life as well as that of Jim’s. If God sees that Mandie will be a very impatient person in the future God cannot act to bring it about that she become more patient than he foreknew. That is, God cannot work to improve her character so that it falsifies his knowledge of what he knew her character would be like. If God acts at all in her life it will, presumably, make an impact on her and so change her if ever so slightly. But if God foreknows that such changes will never come about in her life then God is prohibited, by his foreknowledge, from acting in her life to improve her character.

Perhaps we can again salvage SF from such dreadful conclusions by appealing to ISF. In this way God only accesses his foreknowledge up to the point where Mandie invokes God for guidance as to whom she should marry—but does not yet know whom she will actually marry. At

this juncture God is free to advise her, but his advice is limited to what he actually knows at present and what God surmises regarding the sorts of husbands Matthew and Jim might become. Remember, at this point in the tape God does not yet *know* the full development of their character traits. God may have very good beliefs about such matters which are virtually (always?) correct. Yet, if this is the case then the advice a God with ISF is able to give Mandie is no different from the advice a God with PK is able to give.

The same is true concerning prayers for protection. If God knows that I will be seriously injured in an auto accident on this particular trip, then no prayer for “travelling mercies” can alter this situation. Consequently, prayers for protection would be useless and any divine interventions prohibited. Only if God does not yet know the outcome of my journey can a prayer for safe traveling be coherent within the model of SF.<sup>22</sup> If God decides to act in response to my prayer it cannot be based on his foreknowledge. Hence, this situation is no different from asking a God with PK for safety in traveling.

#### 4. *Divine Repentance and Alternative Plans in the Divine-Human Dialogue*

It is commonly thought that a God with CSF cannot “change his mind” and will have no need of resorting to alternative plans in his interactions with humans. The biblical texts speaking of divine repentance or alternative plans are taken to be simple anthropomorphisms. Thus one’s view of foreknowledge deeply impacts the way one reads the biblical text. The story of Exodus 32 is a good case in point. In this story Moses has been up on the mountain for quite some time receiving the covenant from God. The people of Israel fashion and worship a golden calf which arouses the divine anger against their idolatry. God tells Moses to leave him alone so that he may destroy the people and begin his plan of human redemption over again—this time starting with Moses. Moses, however, does not agree with this “plan B” and so does not leave God alone. Instead, he intercedes for the people giving God three reasons why he should not carry out his threat. In response God “changed his mind (Hebrew *Nacham*) about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (32:14, *NRSV*).

How does the theory of CSF interpret such texts? Throughout history many philosophers have thought that since God knew the future it was literally impossible for God to change his mind or *respond* to his creatures in any way.<sup>23</sup> Hence, Exodus 32:14 and the numerous other texts referring to divine repentance and alternative plans were interpreted to mean that from the *human* perspective God changed his mind, but God always knew he was not going to do what was threatened. Why, then, would God issue such threats? Some have suggested it is to teach Moses just how much Moses cared for the people of Israel.

More problematic are texts such as 1 Samuel 2:30 where God revokes a promise made to the priest Eli and his household. “Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares: ‘I promised that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever’; but now the LORD declares: ‘Far be it from me; for those who honor me I will honor,

and those who despise me shall be treated with contempt.” God had made what appeared to be an unconditional promise to Eli for a perpetual priesthood; now, however, God responds to the sin of Eli’s sons by reneging on that promise. But if God always knew that he would never fulfill that promise then it is a serious question whether God made the promise with integrity.

ISF affords a way out of this problem. By employing ISF, we can understand the text to mean that God genuinely intended to fulfill the promise because he did not know, “when” he made the promise, the future sins of Eli’s sons. Once God “looked ahead” into the future then he learned of their sins and could then revoke the promise without being accused of mendacity. This interpretation of SF allows for God to change his mind, resort to a “plan B” and truly be responsive to his creatures. A big plus for this view is that we are allowed to read the biblical texts in a more straightforward way—as God entering into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures. Again, however, we see that such an interpretation is identical to how the openness model would explain such texts.

#### 5. *Can God be Mistaken?*

Many people have thought that the divine perfection ruled out any possibility of God being wrong in any judgment. If God has knowledge rather than beliefs about the future then, of course, he cannot be mistaken about anything. Boethius said that “God sees everything in advance and cannot be deceived in any way.”<sup>24</sup> Augustine agreed saying, “Whoever says that anything can happen otherwise than as God has foreknown it, is attempting to destroy the divine foreknowledge with the most insensate impiety.”<sup>25</sup> Francis Beckwith has recently argued that a God with PK would base prophetic utterances not on his knowledge of the future but, rather, on his exhaustive knowledge of the past and present. He rejects this notion because “this means that it is within the realm of possibility that God could make a mistake about the future.”<sup>26</sup> If God can be mistaken about what will happen in the future then divine prophecies may be in doubt.

These thinkers seem to affirm CSF where God accesses his knowledge of the future “all at once.” In this version it is correct that God could never be mistaken about the future. But the major objection to this version, as was mentioned above, is that it seems to render problematic any divine intervention into the history God foresees. Before leaving CSF it may be instructive to see how it would interpret a biblical text where one of God’s predictions is called into question.

The narrative of Moses’ dialogue with God at the burning bush is fascinating because Moses suggests the possibility that God might be mistaken. In Exodus chapter three God seeks to enlist Moses in the divine service. Moses is reluctant, however, and gives God five reasons why he is not the right man for the job. In 3:16-22 God instructs Moses to gather the elders of Israel together and inform them of their impending liberation. Moreover, God explicitly says (v. 18) that the leaders will believe Moses. Perhaps Moses’ understanding of divine foreknowledge was



inadequate for he replies to God, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me?" (4:1). God responds by giving Moses a "sign" to perform before the elders—his rod turns into a serpent. God then declares that the purpose of this sign is "so that they may believe that the LORD...has appeared to you." (4:5). God then gives Moses a second sign—his skin becomes cancerous and is then healed (4:6-7). Amazingly, God then says, "If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you" (4:8-9) then here is a third sign.

According to CSF Moses' question is ridiculous for God knows precisely what will happen in the future and if God says it then that is the way it is going to be. Moses' understanding of divine foreknowledge is erroneous (a genuine possibility). The passage should be interpreted to mean that God condescended to Moses' frailty and "played along" with him in order to give Moses greater confidence to undertake his mission. God knew they would believe but perhaps God also knew that they would only believe on the witness of the signs and so it is important for Moses to make this sort of request. The question remains, however, whether this interpretation does full justice to the statements "if they will not believe you."<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, if we go with ISF where God accesses his knowledge of the future incrementally then we arrive at the astonishing conclusion that God could indeed be mistaken about the future. For in this view God does not know, at the time he is speaking with Moses, whether or not the elders will actually believe Moses. God may have a very good idea of their predisposition to believe but the possibility remains that God could be mistaken. Hence, on this view Moses' question is quite appropriate and so are the signs given to Moses. Furthermore, the language of the biblical text retains its *prima facie* integrity. Yet, it must be acknowledged that this interpretation is in full agreement with a PK reading of the text.

But this raises the *possibility* that some of God's predictions may be mistaken. Beckwith argues that the "test of a prophet" in Deuteronomy 18:22 expressly rules out such a possibility: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken."<sup>28</sup> If God says something will come to pass and it does not then the divine faithfulness and trustworthiness of the prophets is called into question. The biblical writers wrestled with this issue, particularly regarding the divine repentance. In this regard, philosopher J. R. Lucas and biblical scholar Terence Fretheim agree that these are, indeed, "failed" prophecies precisely because God is the sort of God who changes his mind in response to prayers and contrition.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Jonah includes this idea in his creedal statement: Yahweh is a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent (Hebrew *Nacham*) from punishing" (4:2). Both ISF and openness of God models are logically consistent with the notion of divine repentance and God being "mistaken". Of course, in a strict sense God would only be mistaken if he said a certain event would happen for sure and it did not come about. So long as God's

“failed” predictions are understood in the sense of, “God believed this would happen but it did not,” then there may be no mistake here at all.

#### 6. *Predictive Prophecy*

It is commonly thought that one of the strongest values of a God with SF is that he can know the actual future and so is able to inform his prophets beforehand what precisely will happen. This is thought to give evidence of divine revelation, accreditation to the prophet and, perhaps, influence the hearers of the prophecy to live their lives in accordance with the divine will.

Biblical texts where God is said to “declare the end from the beginning” (Isaiah 46:10) or specific predictions of events which then came about (e. g. Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial in Luke 22:31-4) are usually given as evidence that God has SF. Such texts can, of course, be explained by the other views of divine omniscience and do not necessitate SF as an interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

There is a logical difficulty which makes this particular understanding of predictive prophecy problematic with both CSF and ISF. As has already been shown CSF cannot be used as the means by which God predicts the future for the simple reason that, if God sees history “all at once” and, presumably, his actions were not foreseen, then God never foresees any prophets making predictions given by God.

Moreover, it is probably clear by now why ISF cannot be used to predict (in the strong sense) the future. It must be remembered that explaining SF as a logical sequence implies that God does not know precisely what is going to happen after the event he is foreseeing. If God learns as he previsioned the future then it becomes impossible for God to interject something based on his knowledge of the future into the chemistry of past events which would alter his knowledge of what actually occurred in the past. For instance, if God foresees the whole of Jesus’ life, he has not yet (logically speaking) foreseen the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D. Once God previsioned the events of 70 A.D. it is “too late” for God to go back and reveal through Jesus a prediction about this event during the life of Jesus for God never foresaw Jesus uttering such a prediction.

If God knows all the details and causal antecedents leading up to event Z and his prediction of event Z based on ISF was not part of this foreknowledge, then ISF is useless for predicting the future. For God to make a prediction of Z prior to the occurrence of Z would, presumably, change the course of history and alter some of the details which God foresees. Let us say that God looks ahead and sees that the Babylonian invasion will happen and then God decides to reveal to Jeremiah that it will occur in the future. At a minimum, Jeremiah will now know something which he did not know when God first previsioned Jeremiah’s life and words. That is, God “now” knows (logically) that he will provide to Jeremiah a prediction of event Z at time A, a future event which neither God nor Jeremiah knew about when God first previsioned time A since it was not part of his original foreknowledge. This would imply a change in the divine foreknowledge rendering the original foreknowl-

edge incorrect.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Rajesh, wishing to make some money, may believe that a God with ISF would be in a position to inform him who will win the next Super Bowl and, if God should inform him, he could place his bet accordingly. Unfortunately, once God has “rolled the tape” up to the point where Rajesh makes his request, God does not yet know who the winner will be. And as God continues to prevision the future he does not foresee his answer to Rajesh until after he previsions which team actually wins the next Super Bowl. By this time, however, it is too late for Rajesh to place his bet and it is “too late” for God to alter the past. This is the converse of the problem raised above in connection to divine guidance and miracles. In those cases the problem was that once God knows what will happen he cannot change it. In this case, once God knows the “past” (as he previsions it sequentially) he cannot change it.

A God with ISF could, however, inform Rajesh which team he *believes* will win the next Super Bowl based upon his exhaustive knowledge of all the details available to his prevision at the time Rajesh makes his request. Of course, such a “prediction” will be no different from the sort of help a God with PK could give him.

### 7. *The Guarantee of the Success of God's plans*

It is felt by some proponents of SF that a key value is its ability to guarantee, from before creation, that God's plans would be successful. David Clark asserts that “foreknowledge could put God in a position to promise, with integrity, at the beginning of history, that good will overcome evil.”<sup>31</sup> Clark believes that a weakness of the openness model is its inability to guarantee that God will ultimately eliminate evil. He claims that a God with PK cannot, while a God with SF can, affirm that God shall conquer evil triumphantly at the end of history while yet granting libertarian freedom by which humans sometimes resist the divine will.<sup>32</sup> He goes on to argue that a God with only PK is not in a position to guarantee, prior to creation, that anyone would come to faith. “Would anyone believe? One could say that God is infinitely resourceful and would have started another line like Seth's or called out another Noah. Yet how could God know that Plan C would work any better than failed Plans A and B? Could God with integrity promise that Seed would overcome Serpent (Genesis 3:15)? Or would it have been more correct for God to say, ‘I hope to do everything I can so that Seed will strike Serpent's heel?’”<sup>33</sup> Clark feels that redemption itself is threatened if God lacks foreknowledge—there is too much risk involved otherwise.

Does either version of simple foreknowledge alleviate the risk of creating creatures with libertarian freedom? It has already been shown that SF does not make creation and providence any less risky than PK. Does SF enable God to promise from the beginning that his redemptive plans will succeed? No, for the claim that God uses SF to predict the future (guarantee success) was shown to fail. Does SF allow God to know which of plans A or B or C will succeed? No, as David Basinger correctly responds: “A God with [SF] does know what will occur in the *actual*

world—including what humans with indeterministic freedom will freely choose to do....But this means, of course, that before God's creative decision was made, he did not know with respect to any creative option containing individuals with indeterministic freedom what such individuals would freely choose to do if actualized. Thus, he, like a God with PK, could only 'gamble' on the fact that a desirable state of affairs would come about."<sup>34</sup>

"Once" God decides to create this world, then a God with SF can "look ahead" to see whether anyone with libertarian freedom will come to faith. But if nobody ever trusts God then what God foreknows is that his plans have failed. If some people do exercise faith in God then God foreknows, from the beginning, that his efforts will meet with success. But the reason for the success is not the divine foreknowledge. Rather, the reason is that humans freely decided to trust God. Moreover, as has been shown, God cannot use this foreknowledge to predict the future and so a God with SF is not in a position to guarantee success from the beginning. Consequently, a God with SF has no more ability to guarantee the success of his plans than does a God with PK.

### *Conclusion*

If this analysis is correct, then SF (either CSF or ISF) affords God no greater providential control in these seven areas than does PK. CSF appears to stymie divine involvement and, though ISF allows for divine responsiveness to his creatures and enables us to read the biblical texts of divine-human dialogue in a more straightforward manner, it results in explanations essentially identical to the openness model. In passing, it should be noted that the problems encountered in constructing a coherent account of the providential use of SF are also problems for the doctrine of divine timeless knowledge. Keith Ward has argued that the appeal to timelessness gives "the illusion of control" but actually does not enhance providence at all.<sup>35</sup> Finally, those who make the common claim that SF is useful for providence have not given a plausible account of how this is so. If the supposed values of SF for providence are illusory, then the reasons for affirming it are greatly reduced. In which case, the "live options" regarding the use of omniscience for providential interaction with creatures with indeterministic freedom are narrowed to either molinism or openness.

My preference is to develop an understanding of divine providence from a PK view of omniscience where God only foreknows what he, himself determines to do. If God is the risk taker which the openness of God view affirms then some serious rethinking is in order concerning how God exercises providence. Nevertheless, according to the openness model God is supremely loving, wise, good, knowledgeable, and powerful. Hence, God can offer us the greatest possible guidance and protection he can given the sort of world he chose to create. This God is able to respond to us, dialogue with us and supply mercy and grace in time of need (Heb 4:16).<sup>36</sup>

## NOTES

1. Indeterministic freedom is assumed throughout this essay.
2. God may intend to perform a certain action at a particular time unless conditions are such that an alternate plan is warranted. There are some things (e. g. the incarnation) which God decrees unilaterally apart from any consideration of human action. Hence, I make a distinction between absolute and conditional decrees by God.
3. David P. Hunt, "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," *Faith and Philosophy* 10, 3 (July, 1993), pp. 394-5.
4. Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 1984), pp. 208-9. It seems that what Cottrell is actually describing is closer to Middle Knowledge than SF.
5. If a God with CSF possesses foreknowledge of his own actions, then the problem is to explain how the foreknowledge can be the *basis* for the actions when it already *includes* the actions. As William Hasker says in his *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 63, "[I]t is impossible that God should use a foreknowledge derived from the actual occurrence of future events to determine his own prior actions in the providential governance of the world." See also note seven below.
6. Hunt, "Divine Providence," p. 408.
7. This problem holds unless, of course, one wishes to say that God sees his own actions in his foreknowledge (which, it seems, SF needs to affirm). God would then know what he is going to do before he makes up his mind and God would be unable to plan, anticipate or decide (see Eleanore Stump and Norman Kretzman, "Eternity" *Journal of Philosophy*, 78, no. 8 [August, 1981]: 446). Unfortunately, this calls the divine freedom and omnipotence into question making God a prisoner of his omniscience (see J. R. Lucas, "Foreknowledge and the Vulnerability of God," in Godfrey Vesey ed., *The Philosophy in Christianity* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 126).
8. William P. Alston suggests this possibility in his "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (Jan. 1985), p. 17; Hunt hints at it in his "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," p. 412; and William Hasker clearly explains it in his *God, Time, and Knowledge*, pp. 57-9.
9. All time related terms used in this discussion are meant in a logical rather than temporal fashion. After all, an atemporal deity does not literally have "fore" knowledge.
10. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, revised ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 69.
11. Lorenzo McCabe, *The Foreknowledge of God* (Cincinnati, OH: Cranston and Stowe, 1887), p. 364. See also his *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1862). Though verbose McCabe's two books contain many of the same arguments being used by contemporary defenders of PK.
12. Cottrell, *God the Ruler*, p. 214. I do not understand how Cottrell can consistently maintain both that the future is closed for God and that God is able to alter that same future.
13. Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, pp. 57-8. Keith Ward makes the same point in his *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (New York, Pilgrim Press, 1982), p. 152.
14. The tape metaphor may, itself, be deceiving since it assumes the future is available to be known. That is, even if God should stop the tape the rest of the future is there to be known and if God knows it is there to be known, then it is difficult to understand how God's actions would change anything.

Consequently, ISF may not be a legitimate alternative to CSF. I owe this observation to a referee of this journal.

15. Although writers such as McCabe and Cottrell do not refer to middle knowledge, at times it seems they have something like it in mind. Actually, I believe many proponents of SF need middle knowledge to warrant their claims. But then, SF will have been forfeited. Interestingly, Arminius affirmed a version of middle knowledge. See *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 1:248 and Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1991), 154-7.

16. Quoted in McCabe, *Foreknowledge of God*, p. 25.

17. See my "Historical Considerations," in Clark Pinnock et. al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 72-75, 91.

18. If God responds in this way, then election is a bilateral choosing and not a unilateral act of God. Moreover, if as God looks ahead in history he does not yet know whether, for instance, Saul will come to faith in Jesus, then it makes sense for God to encourage him towards salvation. But if God already knows that Saul will never come to faith, then what does this make of God's attempts to convert him? Are such attempts genuine? It could be argued that God makes genuine efforts to save those he knows will never actually come to faith, but whatever reasons one adduces for such divine actions, it will not be for the benefit of Saul. McCabe, (*Foreknowledge of God*, p. 353), asks, "Is it possible to conceive of God's putting forth efforts with that burning earnestness which the urgent necessities of the case demand, in order to snatch from everlasting death an endangered moral agent when he is absolutely certain that that agent is going forward to endless perdition?"

19. Phillip Yancy and G. K. Chesterton both assert that God was "courageous" in creating this sort of world. See Yancy, "Cosmic Combat," *Christianity Today* 38, no. 14 (Dec. 12, 1994), p. 21.

20. C. S. Lewis, "On Special Providences" in *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 180-7.

21. Some proponents of SF speak as though God had gaps in his foreknowledge. For instance, they sometimes speak as though God knows exactly what sort of person Abe will become while God does not know whether Abe and Mandie actually get married. But if God knows Abe's future character then he would also know whether or not they got married. See, for example, David Hunt, "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," p. 409.

22. I am not here addressing the issue of how libertarian freedom affects what God does or does not do in answer to such prayers. I am only examining how such prayers make sense within the theory of SF.

23. See my "Historical Considerations," in Clark Pinnock et. al., *The Openness of God*, pp. 69-91. For some Medieval Jewish philosophical reflections on the matter see Seymour Feldman, "The Binding of Isaac: A Test-Case of Divine Foreknowledge," in Tamar Rudavsky, *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 105-133.

24. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.3.

25. Augustine, *On Free Will*, 3.2.4.

26. Beckwith, "Limited Omniscience and the Test For a Prophet: A Brief Philosophical Analysis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 3 (Sept. 1993), p. 359.

27. Three times the text says that God gives the signs for the benefit of the leaders of Israel—not for Moses' benefit (at least, not for his benefit alone). Moreover, God says, if they do not believe you. Terence Fretheim discusses

divine uses of "if" in the Hebrew Bible and concludes they are genuine conditionals for God. God's response to Moses' question indicates that not even God knew for sure the people would believe. See his *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 47-9 and *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991), p. 68. In addition, CSF does not allow such divine-human dialogue to take place at all which leads back to the same problem discussed in note number 4 above.

28. It seems that Beckwith reads this verse as a sort of philosophical principle—a timeless truth—removed from its cultural context and insufficiently nuanced with other texts related to the issue. For instance, in the book of Jonah the prophet announces doom upon the city of Ninevah which never comes about. Elijah foretold judgment upon king Ahab which never came to pass (texts which Beckwith does not address). In both stories there is no conditional element in the foretold doom. If Beckwith's understanding of the test of a prophet is correct then both Jonah and Elijah gave false prophecies. I suggest the verse be understood as a guiding rule (rather than a universal principle) which does not override the divine freedom to modify the divine judgments in favor of mercy should God choose to do so.

29. See J. R. Lucas, *The Future* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 222-3, and his "Foreknowledge and the Vulnerability of God," p. 119; Terence Fretheim, "Prayer in the Old Testament," in Paul Sponheim ed., *A Primer on Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 59 and his *The Suffering of God*, pp. 45-59.

30. For instance, PK can interpret these texts as referring to acts that God has decided to perform (which is what Is 46:10 explicitly goes on to say!) and so no foreknowledge is involved. Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial can be explained by proponents of PK as an instance where Jesus knew his disciples and the situation so well that he could make such a statement—though it was most likely a conditional one which could have been falsified. See Pinnock, *The Openness of God* pp. 50-3 and McCabe's two works cited above which deal in depth with this issue. Admittedly, more work needs to be done in explaining these types of texts by the proponents of PK.

Problematic, and commonly overlooked by proponents of SF, are the numerous occasions where biblical predictions either do not come to pass at all (e. g. Jonah and 2 Kings 20) or not in the exact way they were foretold (e. g. Gen 27:27-40 where Jacob's blessing is qualified by Esau's blessing; Gen 37:6-10 where Joseph's parents never bow down to him; and Acts 21:11 where it is predicted, incorrectly, that the Jews will deliver Paul over to the Gentiles). Presumably a God with SF would not err in predicting the future in any details.

31. David K. Clark, "A Response to *The Openness of God*," unpublished paper given at the Evangelical Philosophical Society, November 18, 1994 in Chicago, p. 7.

32. Clark, *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

33. Clark, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

34. David Basinger, "Divine Knowledge and Divine Control: A Response to Gordon and Sadowsky," *Religious Studies*, 26, no. 2 (June, 1990), p. 274.

35. Ward, *Rational Theology*, pp. 162-3. Ward observes that the real issue is the necessity of divine omnipotence for a temporal deity can easily control every present and future situation if he so decides.

36. I would like to thank William Hasker, David Basinger and the referees of this journal for making some helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.