

Of Providence

INTRODUCTION

[T]his primary head of faith and religion ... There is no need to heap up Scripture passages establishing this point. They are almost as many as there are pages in the Bible, since nothing is inculcated more frequently, nothing more clearly in the Word of God.¹

DEFINITION OF PROVIDENCE

God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory (WLC 18)

Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind. (Job 12:9)

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand. (Prov.19:21)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father in heaven? (Matt. 10:29)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will' (Eph. 1:11)

5.1 THE NATURE AND UNIVERSAL EXTENT OF PROVIDENCE

The creator continues to sustain and superintend 'all things' he had made – his 'creatures' include both the natural world and all living things. Such sovereign rule 'is all-encompassing and particular; nothing escapes, nor ever has or can; divine providence is both microscopic and macroscopic in its scope'.²

Providence is more than God's preservation of the universe – God's providence acts to 'uphold, direct, dispose and govern' everything. Here the divines opt for the distinction, common in post-Reformation theology, between God's preservation of creation, his concurrent activity in sustaining creation, and his government of it.

Here the divines are probably distancing themselves from those who denied God's sovereignty over all future actions e.g. the Socinians.

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology: First Through Tenth Topics* (P&R, 1992), vi.i.iv, vi.i.v.

² Paul Helm, 'Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism', in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, vol. 2, 104. See also Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Inter Varsity Press, 1993).

APPLICATION

- Let us joyfully acknowledge God's sovereign rule over us: 'to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.'
- 'The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.' Psalm 103:19
- The Providence of God is *Regina mundi*, the queen and governess of the world: it is the eye that sees, and the hand that turns all the wheels in the universe. God is not like an artificer that builds a house, and then leaves it, but like a pilot he steers the ship of the whole creation.³

5.2-3 GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND THE USE OF MEANS

Whilst confessing that God is the ultimate cause of everything, from our perspective, God typically works out his purposes by means of secondary causes:

- Some operate 'necessarily' as instances of what some call the laws of nature
- Some 'freely' as they are brought about by real and significant human choices
- And others 'contingently' as causes which are unforeseen and unpredictable⁴

Note the grammatical error – 5.2 implies that all things come to pass according to second causes, but 5.3 states that God does not always act by second causes.

- In special providence he can work 'without' recourse to second causes – someone may be healed without any of the causes being discernable.
- He may also work 'above' normal means, producing effects far beyond what would be anticipated.
- He can work 'against' normal means by overturning established conventions and doing the very opposite of what was anticipated.

APPLICATION:

- Let us understand the theology of providence before we wrestle with the many issues raised.⁵

³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth, 1983), 84.

⁴ See Helm (1993), pp.69-91.

As with all dogmatics, *disputatio* is subordinate to *exposition*. Dogmatics has a twofold task: an analytic- expository task, in which it attempts orderly conceptual representation of the Christian gospel as it is laid out in the scriptural witnesses; and a polemical-apologetical task in which it explores the justification and value of Christian truth-claims. The latter external orientation is necessary but derivative from the first; it may not without serious damage become the ground of exposition. This is, once again, to prevent the problematization of Christian doctrine in which material dogmatic content is suspended rather than applied to make headway with disputed questions.⁶

5.4 THE FALL, AND THE SINS OF ANGELS AND MEN

His control extends to the ‘first fall, and all other sins of angels and men’ (WLC 19-20). This is *not* a ‘bare permission’, ‘but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them’. This is significant, because the Council of Trent taught that God’s relationship to sin was one of permission.

However, the universality of divine providence over everything that happens in no way compromises the holiness and righteousness of God since God is not ‘the author of sin’ – the ‘sinfulness’ of sin comes from the creature and not from God.

Rather than simply permitting sin, God governs our sin in a ‘manifold dispensation’. In his wise providence he sets limits on the destructive power of sin and uses our misdeeds to accomplish his holy purposes.

The Confession concludes this paragraph by distinguishing between the ways in which God deals with his own children and his treatment of the wicked.

APPLICATION

- Let us not join the world in accusing God of sin
- Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are you ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your holy name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. (Rev. 15:3-5)

⁵ See Richard A. Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Baker Academic, 2017).

⁶ John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I God and the Works of God* (Bloomsbury, 2016), p.130.

5.5 PROVIDENCE AND THE SIN OF BELIEVERS

In this pastorally relevant paragraph, the Confession describes how the providence of God also extends to the dark and difficult experiences in which Christians endure 'manifold temptation'. Notice the careful way in which they express this:

1. This is temporary – not abandonment – it is 'for a season'
2. These dark experiences are fatherly in character as the father chastises 'his own children ... for their former sins'
3. Such providences can be illuminative – they are to reveal 'corruption' so that we may be humbled
4. They are designed to bring about 'dependence'
5. Such periods of temptation give a greater sensitivity to 'future' sin
6. And they add an *et cetera*
7. The proof texts are very interesting, with many illustrations from the OT.

Nevertheless, we shouldn't let awareness of our past sins serve as the principal reason for the call to endure suffering. Scripture supplies a more profound reason for us when it teaches that in adverse circumstances we're being disciplined by the Lord so that we won't be condemned with the world. Therefore in the midst of the bitterness of tribulations, we should recognize the kindness and mercy of our Father toward us. For even in such tribulations, He doesn't cease to promote our salvation.⁷

5.6 PROVIDENCE AND THE SIN OF THE UNGODLY

Here God exercises his judgment in the events of providence. There are certain things that God does to confirm them in their ungodliness, such as blinding their eyes to the truth of his word and hardening the sinner's heart (cf. Isa. 6:9-10; Rom. 11:7-8). Most of what he does to the wicked involves withholding or withdrawing certain things. For instance, he does not give them saving 'grace' or enlighten their minds and hearts to the truth. He withdraws his gifts, whether spiritual or otherwise. He does not deliver them from temptation or protect them from the power of Satan. In a sobering statement the divines point out that God can use the blessings of this life, including the means of grace,

⁷ John Calvin, *A Little Book on the Christian Life* (Reformation Trust, 2017), pp.69-70. This retranslation of a section of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is helpful introduction to a Reformed view of providence and the Christian life.

for the just punishment of the wicked – such things harden their hearts instead of softening them.

APPLICATION

- The sins of the world around us represent the judgement of God on the sins of the world: ‘God gave them up ...’ (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).
- ‘Ah Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets’ (Isa. 10:5-6).

5.7 GOD’S PROVIDENCE AND THE CARE OF THE CHURCH

All of this stands in absolute contrast to the loving care that God provides for his own people. While it is true that his providence extends to all, in ‘a most special manner’ he works all things for the good of the church (Rom. 8:28).

CONCLUSION

- We see the outworking of divine providence in the great narrative sections of Holy Scripture.
- At the end of the book of beginnings we hear the prophetic words of Joseph: As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today (Gen. 50:20)
- At the end of Ruth we see the purpose of the sovereign hand of God: “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:17).
- At the beginning of the gospel of Matthew we read of the many generations of history sovereignly guided by God so that the Son of God in the house of Joseph was a descendent of David, the son of Abraham.

13. Of Divine Providence

We believe that the same God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that he rules and governs them

according to his holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment: nevertheless, God neither is the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed. For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that he orders and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner, even then, when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And, as to what he does surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire into, farther than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God, which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are disciples of Christ, to learn only those things which he has revealed to us in his Word, without transgressing these limits. **This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father;** who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under his power, that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground, without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded, that he so restrains the devil and all our enemies, that without his will and permission, they cannot hurt us. And therefore we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing, but leaves all things to chance. ⁸

⁸ Belgic Confession, Article 13.