

# **The Doctrine of Divine Providence**

## *Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training*

(October, 2007)

### **Introduction:**

The Doctrine of Divine Providence is often misunderstood. Some today see God's activity upon the earth as changing according to every change of circumstance upon the earth. There are some today who are attacking the doctrine of Divine Providence at its very core. For example, Open Theism teaches that God faces the same limitations of foreknowledge that human beings do—that for God the future is “open” and hence not known or foreordained. Reformed theology teaches that God's Providence is the working out in history what God has decreed eternally. Every event in history, every detail of life has been foreordained. Nothing happens by chance but, rather, God is governing His creation according to His eternal decree. If Providence is God working out His decree, then every detail is immutably fixed. The doctrine of Divine Providence brings great comfort to the people of God. As James White wrote, “*The decrees of God are the souls-comforting truth that God has wisely and perfectly decreed whatsoever comes to pass in this universe. Nothing is outside His control, nothing is without purpose. There are no renegade atoms in the universe, nothing that is beyond the positive decree of God*” (White, James. *The Potter's Freedom*, Amityville: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000, Page 45). This is a great comfort, knowing that God is working out all things according to His infinite wisdom and goodness. The purpose of this study is to examine the rich doctrine of God's Divine Providence that we might better understand God's governing of creation.

### **Bibliography:**

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### **Statement on the Divine Providence from the Second London Confession of 1689**

(Chapter 5, article 1) – “God the good Creator of all things, in his infinite power and wisdom, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will; to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.”

### **Definitions:**

- Providence has been defined as God's guardianship and care for His creatures and creation.
- Louis Berkhof – “Providence may be defined as that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.” (*Systematic Theology*, page 165).

## There are Two Elements in Providence

- A. Preservation – He holds all things together  
**Colossians 1:17** – “And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.” (hold together)
1. Nothing in creation is self-sufficient or self-sustaining
  2. If God ceased His preserving work the world would cease to exist.  
**Nehemiah 9:6** Thou, *even* thou, *art* LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all *things* that *are* therein, the seas, and all that *is* therein, and thou preservest them all. . .”
- B. Government
1. God is Lord over all affairs of creation – human and natural
  2. Every act of man is under the sovereign rule of God  
**Proverbs 21:1** – “The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.’
- C. Some theologians add a third category - Concurrence or cooperation
1. This describes the human will within the plan of God
    - a. We cannot deny the human role in world events, nevertheless, God’s will is the ultimate determiner of all things.  
**Proverbs 16:9** – “A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.”
    - b. Most include this category with God’s government
  2. Concurrence is also used to describe laws of nature, etc.  
 Berkhof – “Concurrence may be defined a sht ecooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do” (*Systematic Theology*, page 171).

## Second Causes

### Second London Confession of 1689

(Chapter 5, article 2) – “Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without his providence; yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.”

(Chapter 5, article 3) – “God, in his ordinary providence maketh use of means,<sup>7</sup> yet is free to work without,<sup>8</sup> above,<sup>9</sup> and against them<sup>10</sup> at his pleasure.”

1. Although God rules and governs all things He often works through the means of second causes. For example, God has ordained the precise moment of our death, yet He has also ordained the means through which our death will occur – disease, accident, crime, etc.
2. The atonement of Christ is the perfect example. God ordained that Christ should be crucified, yet there were many second causes that were used to bring it to pass – Judas Iscariot, Pilate, the hatred of the Pharisees, etc.
3. God is free to work directly without the use of means.

## Extraordinary Providence or Miracles

1. There is a distinction between ordinary providence and extraordinary providence.
  - a. In ordinary providence God works through second causes, laws of nature, etc.
  - b. In extraordinary providence God works without the use of secondary causes. It involves the supernatural power of God alone – supernatural (above nature).
2. The “signs, wonders, and mighty deeds” associated with the ministry of the apostles have ceased. God, however, is free to work above the established order of nature according to His good pleasure.

## The Problem of Evil

1. An affirmation of divine providence carries with it the challenge of how do deal with evil. How can a good and loving God that governs all things allow the existence of evil and suffering in the world? Some call into question either the goodness of God or the power of God to affect good.
2. Evil must be placed in two different categories.
  - A. Natural evil
    1. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, floods, etc.  
These things are often referred to as “acts of God.”
    2. Why are there poisonous snakes, stinging wasps, disease causing bacteria, etc. in a world created by a good God? Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?
  - B. Human evil – robberies, murders, rapes – the list is almost unending.
    1. Why does God allow a child to be molested or a father and husband to be murdered? Why has God allowed wars to continue as such an ongoing source of sorrow?
    2. An even more troubling question, can God be the ruler of all things including the sinful acts of men and not Himself be the author of sin?
3. There have been many answers offered to explain the problem of evil and suffering.
  - A. Some present God as not being in absolute control.
    1. Open Theism explains that while God is working to make things good He does not know the future and is thus He is busy trying to make good of a bad situation. God is merely a participant in the world process.
    2. Some have sought to explain God as a Creator who began all things but has little involvement in time and history. Deism, popular in previous centuries, paint God as a clockmaker that started creation ticking and then stepped back to let it unwind. The world is simply a machine that God has put in motion.
  - B. The Bible explains suffering in the context of sin. God created a good world that has been perverted by sin. Now all of creation is groaning and travailing. Plagues and pestilence are the result of sin. Animals were changed in disposition with the fall of man. Earthquakes and floods are consistent with a fallen world. All of this world’s suffering is testimony to God’s wrath towards sin.
  - C. The evil of men is also explained in the context of sin. When Adam sinned as our head or representative all of humanity fell into corruption. We are born with a sinful nature. All of the sinful wickedness of man flows from this sinful nature.

Although God governs all things and all the actions of men, all of our sinful deeds are our own and we bear the responsibility. God is not the author of sin. Neither does He approve of sin. He will judge the sinful deeds of man.

God is free to restrain the wickedness of men to prescribed bounds and their wicked actions can be overruled for good.

- D. God uses evil to fulfill His purposes and uses evil for His own glory but can never be said to do evil.
3. The ultimate meaning of suffering is covered in mystery.
- A. Although it is wrong for us to try to place a particular cause to every natural disaster or to every human sickness we know they are never by accident and all serve a purpose. God is the sovereign ruler of all things.
- B. We know the ultimate purpose of all things is God's glory as He works out His redemptive purpose perfectly upon the earth.  
**Romans 11:36** – “For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things: to whom *be* glory for ever. Amen.”
- C. Christians have the solace of knowing that God rules over all and even the evil in the world will work out for the good of God's people.  
**Romans 8:28** – “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.”

## Divine Providence and Freedom of the Human Will

1. Men have free agency yet God determines every act of man.  
“Scripture nowhere says that we are ‘free’ in the sense of being outside of God's control or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 331)  
**Proverbs 21:1** – “The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”  
**Proverbs 16:9** – “A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.”
2. That God is involved in the thoughts and actions of men in no ways absolves men of accountability.
- A. The 1689 Confession affirms that God does not compel the actions of men. Men act with full liberty of choice.  
*1689 Confession, Chapter 3: Of God's Decree*  
“God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature. . .”
- B. We sin because our wicked heart is inclined to sin. God commands obedience and holds us accountable for our sinful actions  
**Luke 22:22** – “And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!”

- C. That God is involved in the thoughts and actions of men in no way impugns His holy character nor makes Him the author of sin.
1. That God has ordained the actions of men does not mean that God forces men to act against their wills.  
*1689 Confession, Chapter 9: Of Free Will*
    1. God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that it is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.
  2. God controls the actions of men by the outward workings of Providence and the inward workings of grace and thereby changes the minds of men.
  3. Men act according to their free volition but always consistent with their nature. God is able to use our sinful inclinations to accomplish His righteous ends. Our sin is our own, however. God is not the Author of sin.

### **Cautions with How We React to Divine Providence (adapted from Thomas Boston)**

1. Beware of drawing an excuse for your sin from the providence of God; for it is most holy, and is in no way any cause of any sin you commit. Every sin is an act of rebellion against God; a breach of his holy law, and deserves his wrath and curse; and therefore cannot be authorised by an infinitely-holy God, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity without detestation and abhorrence.
2. Beware of murmuring and fretting under any dispensations of providence that you meet with; remembering that nothing falls out without a wise and holy providence, which knows best what is fit and proper for you. And in all cases, even in the middle of the most afflicting incidents that happen to you, learn submission to the will of God.
3. Beware of anxious cares and fearfulness about your material well-being in the world. This our Lord has cautioned his followers against, Matt. 6:31. "Take no thought, (that is, anxious and perplexing thought,) saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" Never let the fear of man stop you from duty, Matt. 10:28, 29; but let your souls learn to trust in God, who guides and superintends all the events and administrations of providence, by whatever hands they are performed.
4. Do not think little of means, seeing God works by them; and he that has appointed the end, orders the means necessary for gaining the end. Do not rely upon means, for they can do nothing without God. Do not despair if there be no means, for God can work without them, as well as with them. If the means be unlikely, he can work above them. If the means be contrary, he can work by contrary means, as he saved Jonah by the whale that devoured him. That fish swallowed up the prophet, but by the direction of providence, it vomited him out upon dry land.

### **Other Beliefs and Actions Inconsistent With of Divine Providence**

1. A belief in luck or chance is inconsistent with divine providence. If God rules over all nothing is left to chance. There is no such thing as "bad luck."

2. Superstitious behavior such as refusing to step on a crack or crossing your fingers or making a wish when you blow out your birthday candles are all sinful as they place the rule of the universe outside the rule of God.
3. Worry and anxiety is a failure to believe that God is working all things for His glory and our good.