

Providence (1): The Idea of Providence

The doctrine of providence is the confession of the church. In the Old Testament Enoch preached it when he preached that all things culminate in the Lord's coming. Noah lived by faith in it and built an ark to the saving of his house. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob believed that God suffered no man to do them harm. The doctrine of providence stands as the centerpiece of the book of Job. The Psalms ring from beginning to end with the truth of God's providence as his intimate and minute care of his world that he made and his control of every detail in it. Jesus taught his disciples God's providence when he taught them that God numbers the hairs of their head, clothes the lilies of the field, feeds the ravens, and cares much more for his people. At the time of the apostles in the midst of great tribulation the church confessed concerning the cross of Jesus Christ that Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the leaders of the people did whatsoever God's hand and counsel determined to be done.

With the church of all ages, the Reformed creeds clearly teach God's providence, outstandingly in the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's days one, nine, and ten, and in the Belgic Confession article 13. The Reformed faith stands as the true development of the Christian faith in its confession of the doctrine of providence.

The confession of providence is an implication of the confession of the doctrine of God. The Heidelberg Catechism, following the Apostle's Creed, teaches this doctrine in the church's confession of the Fatherhood of the Triune God. When the church confessed, "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," she confessed as a distinct part of God's fatherhood not only that the Triune God created the world in six days, as he said in his word, but that he also upholds and governs the same by his almighty power.

The doctrine of providence is also a confession of faith. The Dutch theologian G. C. Berkhouwer wrote of a crisis in the doctrine of providence. His analysis of the cause of this crisis is that in the past unscientific man believed the doctrine more readily, but today science has eroded faith in the doctrine. That analysis ignores the reality that man by nature never believes God's providence. Man, whether ancient or modern, whether scientific or superstitious, does not believe God's providence because he does not believe in God through Jesus Christ. The doctrine of providence is a confession of faith that follows from faith's knowledge of God, who is our

Father in Christ. Apart from the gift of faith no one does or can believe and confess the providence of God.

It is faith in God's fatherhood that is likewise the essence of providence. A human may bring forth and become a father and not care for his child, but it is inconceivable that God as Father would bring forth and not care for his creation. It is this care of God as Father for the world that he made that the church intended to express by the word *providence*. Faith is the certain knowledge of and hearty confidence in that care of God not only for others, but for me also.

But then to deny that God made the world and that he likewise upholds and governs that world in every detail is also to attempt to overthrow the whole doctrine of God. This is what the Presbyterian theologian B.B. Warfield taught when he said that the confession of providence belongs to a "consistent, Christian theism." From that point of view the doctrine of providence is simple. It is the implication of the truth that God is God. Since he is God and he created the world, then all things that happen in the world happen according to his appointment and government. To confess that God is God, and to say that I believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ is to say that I believe in this God of providence.

The word *providence* means to see in advance, and thus it comes to mean to provide for some foreseen event. If we take the word in its original meaning it is, then, wholly unsatisfactory to describe the Christian and Reformed doctrine of providence. Providence is not God's provision for his creation in light of what God sees coming, as we might see that winter is coming and prepare some canned goods.

Providence is a theological term that has been adapted by the Christian church to describe a certain doctrine regardless of the literal or original meaning of the term. The doctrinal content from scripture must define the term.

By *providence* we mean the omnipotent and everywhere present power of God whereby he upholds and governs all things according to his eternal counsel.

Providence is God's upholding power, or better, God as he upholds. The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's day 10 says "as it were by his hand." By that word *hand* the Heidelberg Catechism is describing God's providence. So we may think of the upholding power of providence this way: just as a hand holds an object up, so does the almighty and everywhere present power of God keep all things in their existence.

Providence is also God's governing power. That government is to be conceived as God's controlling the entire existence of the creature and of the whole of creation to bring the creature and the whole of creation to the goal he appointed for them in his counsel. He steers and directs all things by his power.

These two, the upholding and governing powers of providence, cannot be separated from God's eternal counsel of providence. Providence is God's decree for all things according to which also he upholds and governs them. God's knows all things that have been, are, and will be, not because he sees in advance, but because he decreed those things to be.

This decree includes the goal of all things. The scripture speaks specifically of God's purpose in his decree as the glory of his name in Jesus Christ:

Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him (Eph. 1:9–10).

God's purpose is not then the building of a good, earthly, godly culture, but Christ, and only Christ. In Christ God glorifies himself.

These three aspects of providence may never be separated from one another. God upholds purposefully and God governs what he upholds sovereignly. His providence is no mere aimless power, but also directs all to the goal he appointed for them, whether for the individual creature or for the whole cosmos.

With these three aspects of providence we see the richness of God's upholding power.

It is not static. His upholding includes his government so that there is constant change in creation as creation is moved toward its appointed goal. To be creature is to change. Only God stays the same in his being and in all his perfections.

The evolutionist presents change in creation as a great problem for God's providence. It is not a problem for the believer who knows the power of God. He can change the world very rapidly. In about a year and ten days he destroyed the world that then was and brought forth the world that now is and that is reserved for a fiery judgment. There can be change in animals and in the environment. There is development even at the microscopic level. There are cycles, rhythms, and flux in creation. Of some these the Bible speaks explicitly—the water cycle, the cycle of the seasons, the planting and harvesting cycle, and many more. None of that is excluded

from the providence of God. Change is part of God's providence as he hurries all things to his goal.

We can describe what providence is more precisely as God's word. The Reformed were in the habit of speaking of providence as *continual creation*. That term is not a good one. It does not distinguish properly between the works of creation and providence. It is also imprecise and prone to abuse. The better Reformed theologians who used it recognized this and virtually qualified it out of existence.

Though we reject the term, however, we should do justice to the reason that the Reformed spoke of continual creation. They used that term originally to emphasize the closeness of the work of creation and providence. They are inseparable. Furthermore, the Reformed used that term to teach that the power of creation, the word of God, is the very same power of providence, the continual utterance of that word. In the beginning God spoke the creatures into their existence by his word so that by the word of the Lord were the heavens made and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.

That word is the essence of each creature, and continually speaking that word, God upholds that creature in its being and moves that creature toward its goal. By his word God made all things and by the continual utterance of that word all things continue to exist and are brought to their appointed goal.

This is the teaching of Hebrews 1:2–3, where speaking of the word made flesh, the Bible says “and upholding all things by the word of his power.” God's providence is the word upholding all things by the word of his power where *word* means the continual utterance of his mouth. This is the teaching of Psalm 29 regarding certain particular things in the world that all are done by his voice:

The voice of the LORD *is* upon the waters... The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars... The voice of the LORD divideth the flames of fire... The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to calve.

It is by his voice that Jehovah works in creation. If that applies to these things, some of them grand, such as the dividing of the flames, and some of them mundane, such as the calving of the hinds, then that is how he works in all his creation.

This view of providence honors Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh, by whom and for whom God made all things. The wind and waves that were told to be still heard a familiar voice, and it is not strange that Jesus Christ now controls and directs all things.

This view of providence also makes it personal. Providence is not a bare fate, an extension or effulgence of God, or an impersonal power of God's. Providence is God himself as he upholds and governs all things. Providence is God's own intimate and minute care of the world in which he upholds that world and directs that world and all that is in it according to his eternal purpose in Jesus Christ to glorify that world in a new heaven and new earth for the manifestation of his glory and wonderful grace. The church never intended by this to teach that God is a father to all, or that he has a love toward all, but rather that the world is his, brought forth by his act of creation as he destined that world to be the eternal home of his people in Jesus Christ for his glory. For their sakes God cares for his world and directs it to that goal. To speak in a dim analogy: God's care of the world is like a man who owns a vast estate of thousands of acres, worked by many hired men. He provides for all their tools and wages, and the will of the landlord is done by all, but everything serves his household and family and he does everything on the estate for them.

The creation as God made it in the beginning was not the purpose of God, and God never intended that Adam should continue, but that Jesus Christ be revealed and the creation perfected in him. That world as it is destined to be perfected in Christ Jesus is the object of his love, and for it he personally cares.

Of this care of his creation the Bible speaks vividly. He gathers the clouds and rides on them like a chariot, sends out his lightning, brings night and day, and covers the ground with water and snow. He gives the peacock his beauty, the ostrich her speed and folly, the horse his strength, and the eagle her home in the rocks. He hunts prey for the lions, provides for the beasts, feeds the ravens, commands the eagle to fly, and knows where the wild goats calve and helps them in their labor.

He clothes the lilies so that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them.

He numbers of the hairs of our head, and not one falls to the ground except by his will.

He controls the devil, raises up kings and hews them down again, stops the mouths of lions, overthrows plots against his people, and has the heathen and their counsels against him in derision.

In all this he has a paternal, particular, and gracious care toward his people, to whom he gives his daily bread and for whom in this life he averts all evil or turns it to their profit.

In short, God's providence extends over all. To that we turn next time.

Rubric: Where We Stand

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