

Providence (2): The Scope of Providence

When we speak of God's providence as his personal government of the world, we mean that he governs all things. The scope of providence extends to all things. It includes the entire universe, every creature in the universe, and every event that happens in that universe from the explosion of a star, to the oscillations of the tiniest atomic particle, to the rise and fall of kings and nations.

This is simply the implication of the confession that God's providence is his almighty and everywhere present power. Since it is almighty, there is nothing that he wills to do that he cannot do, and since nothing happens apart from his will, all things are in his hand. This is the implication that God is God. The Reformed confession of providence will have nothing to do with the pagan notion that the gods take care of the big things but ignore the little things. Even the number of hairs on a man's head and the falling of an insignificant sparrow are included in his providence.

The Reformed confession of providence is equally opposed to the false doctrines of both Deism and chance.

Deism is the false doctrine that describes God's relationship to the world as similar to that between a master craftsman and a watch that he made. If the master craftsman is competent, he makes a watch that can function without his intervention. The deists were those in the history of the world who while they spoke of God, the creator and Father, nevertheless taught that God made the world so precisely that the world runs on its own without—as they called it—divine intervention. The deists were particularly opposed to miracles, which they call super natural interventions. According to the deist, the world is a finely tuned and exquisitely fashioned piece of craftsmanship, and it can run on its own.

Over against that idea the Reformed faith has said that God controls everything as it were by his hands, so that his providence is not set of divine laws, but the good government of God himself as he is involved in every aspect of creation. There is no such thing as divine intervention, for every event is to be traced back to God. Over against the deist, miracles are to be seen as the works of God's grace to perfect his creation according to his purpose in Christ. There is strictly speaking no such thing as a law of nature, but rather the orderly government to the Triune God.

The Reformed faith in its confession of providence is equally opposed to the notion of chance, fortune, or luck. It is this false doctrine that the Reformed creeds single out and reject emphatically. For instance, the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's day 10 says that "all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly

hand.” In the Belgic Confession article 14 the Reformed faith says that God who made the world, “did not forsake the world to fortune or chance,” and that same article says that we reject the errors of the “Epicureans who say that God regards nothing but leaves all things to chance.”

There is a massive resurgence of chance in Reformed churches today through the wide-spread acceptance of the evolutionary worldview. Nearly all North American Reformed denominations fail to discipline heretical teachers of evolution and tolerate it in their fellowships, if they have not become wholly intolerant to the doctrine of creation. Evolution is not only an assault on creation and Genesis 1–3, but also an assault on providence and thus on the doctrine of God. Evolution is a massive assault on providence because creation and providence are closely connected. God’s making of the world and his rule of the world are so tightly tied together that the denial of one necessarily denies the other. Further, the espousal of evolution necessarily denies providence because it enthrones chance, providence’s—and God’s—mortal enemy on the throne of the universe. The evolutionary worldview cannot be reconciled with the Reformed worldview of providence. It is at war with providence and the God of providence.

Over against these errors in particular the Bible teaches and the Reformed creeds insist that God’s providence includes all things. There is nothing that happens in the creation, on the earth, above the earth, or beneath the earth, that happens without his having decreed it, upheld it, and governed it.

We particularly include here the eternal destinies of all men and God’s leading them to their destinies. The Arminian doctrine that the salvation of human beings is contingent upon the free will of the willing sinner’s accepting God’s offer of salvation is a denial of providence. By teaching that God is dependent on the will of the sinner in salvation, Arminianism is a blatant denial of God’s sovereignty over all things. It places the eternal destinies of men in their own hands, and thus takes them out of God’s hands.

Denying God’s sovereignty, Arminianism is the mother of the gross heresy of open theism that was begotten in the mind of the Arminian theologian Clark Pinnock. Open theism teaches that God is open to the inputs of man in his government of the world. This heretical view is the underlying assumption in a popular and widely held view that prayer changes God, which itself stands behind the idea of prayer chains, so that humans suppose they are heard by God for their much speaking, and not that the fervent and effectually prayers even of one righteous man avail much. Consistently developing the Arminian idea that man has a free will, open theism teaches that God does not know the outcome of choices that men make, and consequently that God does not have a definite counsel for all things—especially not the

salvation of sinners—but leaves many things to the choices of men and adapts himself to those choices. According to the open theist God is not sovereign, omnipotent, and omniscient, knowing even the heart of man and turning it wherever he wills, but God exhibits a kind of omni-competence to deal with every eventuality men's choices present to him. Especially is God open to changing his plans according to prayers of men.

Over against this, the Reformed faith confesses that as part of God's counsel is God's eternal appointment of all men to their eternal destinies, elect and reprobate, according to his own will.

Now applying that truth especially to providence, we also say that according to his decree God also deals with those men in this world and brings them to those destinies by all sorts means.

Here we address particularly the error of common grace that God in his dealings with men in the world blesses the reprobate ungodly with a common grace favor in this life that gives to them rain and sunshine and earthly prosperity, restrains sin in their hearts, mitigates the effect of the fall, and enables fallen man to do much good.

Especially are we opposed to the teaching of common grace that God gives to the reprobate wicked the gospel preaching and expresses by means of that preaching his desire to save them—the well-meant gospel offer and the most offensive part of common grace. It is a teaching that most have made the touchstone of supposedly Reformed orthodoxy and a denial of which earns one the name hyper-Calvinist today. That teaching and with it the whole teaching of common grace denies providence.

God's dealings with men in his providence are according to his decree, so that his favor rests upon the elect and righteous all their days, and the curse of God is in the house of the ungodly, so that he gives all that he gives to them in his wrath toward them and for the purpose of their damnation.

This is the teaching of the Reformed faith in all the creeds, which teaches that God's grace is particular. His favor rests on his people all their days and there is no peace to the wicked. No one has yet given any creedal proof for common grace.

That is because teaching the particular grace of God to the elect, the creeds teach scripture, and scripture teaches no common grace and especially no well-meant gospel offer. In Psalm 73 with regard to plagued saints, the believer confesses that God is good to Israel and only to Israel, and with regard to the prosperous wicked he confesses that by means of that prosperity God is not blessing the wicked, but sets them up in slippery places for the purpose of casting them down to destruction. That psalm also

gives the devastating practical effect of teaching that God blesses the wicked with their earthly prosperity, which is the inescapable, intolerable, and despair-inducing conclusion that then he curses the righteous in his calamity.

This is also what the wise man of Proverbs taught his son in Proverbs 3:33 when he taught him that the curse of God is in the house of the wicked, so that in giving him that house and with that house God curses the wicked, but that his blessing is upon the righteous. The wise man also gives the practical reason for the insistence that God does not bless the wicked: so that the believer does not envy the wicked and his prosperity and imitate his wicked ways, but receives whatever God sends him in his life, enjoying the good with thanksgiving and enduring the adversity with patience. Common grace, denying God's particularly gracious dealings with his people alone, brings with it not only despair but also worldliness.

God's providence while it is over all, is never general in the sense that he governs favorably toward all or sends to all in his favor rain and sunshine, but his providence must also be viewed from his purpose in Christ and his particular favor toward his elect people in Christ and thus also his purpose toward the reprobate whom he hates. Psalm 145:20: "The LORD preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy."

Here as well the Reformed faith in its insistence that God is sovereign over all insists especially that God is sovereign in his providence over evil. Indeed, it may be said that this is a specific emphasis of the Reformed confession of providence. We are not interested in a theodicy. Theodicy is God's work. He will defend himself and the justice of all that he has done in the day of the revelation of his wrath and of the judgment of all men. He will so justify himself that every knee will bow, whether willingly or not, and will confess that Christ is Lord. We are interested in explaining in light of scripture and the Reformed creeds the Reformed confession that God is sovereign over evil. To that we turn next time.