Elenctic Theology: The Works of God

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*Divine Providence & Miracles*

## The Doctrine of Divine Providence

### Relation to the Doctrine of the Decree

#### Since Providence is the execution or application of the Divine Decree in creation, there are several issues the subjects have in common.

#### Particularly, students must review the sections in the ECD Theology 2 Syllabus and the ECD Decree Syllabus regarding the issues of Divine Omniscience, the Decree, Free Choice, and Issues related to causation before applying these ideas to the theological issues related to Divine Providence.

### Definitions

#### Divine Providence is the continued exercise of divine power by which the Creator preserves all his creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed ends. (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*)

#### Providence is the continuing act of divine power, subsequent to the act of creation, by means of which God preserves all things in being, supports their actions, governs them according to His established order, and directs them toward their ordained ends. (Muller, DLGTT)

#### Providence is the idea that God rules in all the realms of nature, and in their minutia and in their magnitudes. The doctrinal treatment of providence recognizes both a conserving and ruling agency. (Miley, *Systematic Theology*)

#### Divine Providence is the external act (*opus ad extra*) of the entire Trinity whereby God (a) most efficaciously upholds the things created, both as an entirety and singly, both in species and in individuals; (b) concurs in their actions and effects; and (c) freely and wisely governs all things to His own glory and the welfare and safety of the universe, especially of the Godly. (Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*)

### Non-Christian Views of Providence

#### ***Pantheism***

##### In Pantheism there are no secondary, free causes. All is divine substance and there is only one cause—the Divine.

##### As such, pantheists reject the biblical concept of providence.

#### ***Deism***

##### In Deism, humans have free will, but there is no divine concurrence or decree that relates to individual free choices (free cause).

##### As such, Deism rejects the biblical notion of divine providence.

### Biblical Proofs Supporting the Notion of Providence

#### ***The Bible clearly teaches the doctrine of divine providence.***

##### God sustains all things by the Word of His power.

###### Heb. 1:3—He upholds all things by the word of His power.

###### Col. 1:17—In Him all things hold together (endure)

###### Neh. 9:6—God gives life to heaven and earth

###### Acts 17:28—In Him we live and move and have our being

###### Is. 40:26

###### Job 37: 2-11

###### Psalm 65:9-10

##### The powers of nature are preserved in their efficiency by the power of God.

###### Psalm 104

###### Psalm 148

#### ***The Objects of Divine Providence***

##### *The Universe*—Ps. 103:19, Dan 5:35; Eph 1:11[God works “all things after the counsel of His will.”]

##### *The Physical World*—Job 37:5, 10 [God thunders doing great things and ice is made with the breath of God.]

##### *Brute Creation*—Matt. 6:26 [The Father feeds the birds.]

##### *Affairs of Nations*—Acts 17:26 [God determined for the nations their appointed times and boundaries of habitation.]

##### *Man’s Birth and Lot in Life*—Gal. 1:15-16 [Paul was set apart and called from his mother’s womb.]

##### *Incidental details*—Matt 10:30 [Our hairs are numbered.]

##### *Success and Failure*—Luke 1:52 [God brought down rulers and exalted the humble.]

##### *See* the section on Exhaustive, Meticulous Providence below for additional examples.

### The Three Modes of Providence

#### ***Preservation as a Mode of Providence***

##### *Definition:* Preservation is the continuous work of God by which He maintains in being the things He created.

###### Ontological—Acts 17:28 [In Him we live and move and have our being.]

###### Moral—I Cor. 10:13 [God will not allow you to be tempted beyond that which you are able.]

##### *Negatively Considered:*

###### Some, such as deists, hold the position that once a thing is created, it is self-subsistent.

###### Thus, the annihilation of being would require a positive act of God, rather than the mere cessation of God’s act of preservation.

##### *Continuous Creation:*

###### Pantheistic Version: There are no secondary Causes. There is no independent existence.

###### Christian Version: The world is actively and positively maintained in being by the power of God who created it.

#### ***Concurrence as a Mode of Providence***

##### *Definition:* Concurrence is the co-operation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to pre-established laws, causing them to act and act precisely as they do.

##### *Implications:* Concurrence implies that (1) the powers of nature do not work by themselves, but that God is immediately operative in every act of His creatures, and (2) that secondary causes are real and not merely the direct and efficient causes or operations of God.

##### *Scriptures Generally Indicating Divine Concurrence*

###### Acts 17:28—In Him we live *and move* and have our being.

###### Gen. 45:5—God sent Joseph to Egypt, not his brothers.

###### Prov. 21:1—The King’s Heart is in the hand of the Lord and He turns it wherever he wishes.

###### Ezra 6:22—God turned the heart of the King of Assyria.

##### *Characteristics of Divine Concurrence*

###### *It is Teleological*—God causes everything to move in the direction of His predetermined end or *telos*. Note that there is an element of divine government in this aspect of concurrence.

I Cor. 12:6—“There are a variety of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*.”

Eph. 1:11—“also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

Phil. 2:13—“For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

###### *It is Simultaneous.* —The First Cause and second cause work simultaneously. (Cf. Acts 17:28)

##### *Divine Concurrence & Sin*

###### General References

II Sam. 16:11—God made Shimei curse David.

Is. 10:5—God calls the Assyrians “the rod of My anger, the staff in whose hand is My indignation”

I Kings 22:20-23—God put a lying spirit in the mouth of King Ahab.

###### Sinful acts are under divine control, occur according to God’s purpose, and occur by divine *permission*. God does not directly or efficiently cause man to sin.

Gen. 45:5—God sent Joseph to Egypt, not Joseph’s brothers.

Gen. 50:20—“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Ex. 14:17—“I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them.”

Acts 2:23—“this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

###### God sovereignly restrains sinful acts.

Job 1:12; 2:6—God restrained Satan from putting his “hand” on him and later prevent Satan from taking his “life.”

###### God overrules sin and directs it to His good ends.

Gen. 50:20—“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Ps. 76:10—“For the wrath of man shall praise Thee.”

Acts 3:13—Sinners “delivered up” and “disowned” Jesus, but God used the sacrifice of His Son as the remedy for sin (cf. Matt. 20:28).

Rom. 8:28-30—“God causes all things to work together for good.”

#### ***Government as a Mode of Providence***

##### *Definition:* God rules all things to secure the accomplishment of the divine purpose.

##### *Scripture*

###### Matt 11:25; Acts 17:24—God is “Lord of heaven and earth.”

###### I Tim. 1:17—God is “King eternal, immortal invisible.”

##### *The Universality of God’s Government*

###### Ps. 22:28, 29—“For the kingdom is the LORD’s, And He rules over all the nations….All those who go down to the dust will bow before Him.”

###### Dan 4:34, 35—Nebuchadnezzar praises the LORD, saying “His kingdom endures from generation to generation,” that God “does according to His will” in heaven and on earth, and “no one can ward off His hand.”

###### I Tim 6:15—Jesus is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

### Extraordinary Providence: Miracles

#### ***Theology, Apologetics & Miracles***

##### It is important to note the different purposes for studying the topic of Miracles.

##### *Theology:* One of the primary reasons theologians study miracles is to understand *why* God chooses to work in an extraordinary manner, as opposed to His ordinary providence.

##### *Apologetics:* One of the primary reasons apologists engage in the subject of miracles is to respond to the claim that there are no divine miracles.

##### Both theologians and apologists are concerned with the epistemic and historical value of miracles to prove some of the truth claims of the Scriptures.

#### ***Definition of Miracles***

##### A miracle is often designated “extraordinary providence.” It is extraordinary in the sense that God, instead of working mediately through the common means of secondary causes, works immediately without the means of secondary causation.

##### A secondary understanding of the concept of miracle is that God uses ordinary means to bring about an unexpected or extraordinary result.

#### ***Examples of Biblical Miracles***

##### Gen. 1:1—*Ex nihilo* creation

##### Ex. 14:21-25—The parting of the Red Sea

##### I Kings 18:17-46—Elijah & the Prophets of Baal

##### Acts 3:1-4:22—Healing a man lame from birth

##### Acts 26:26 (cf. Lk. 24:37-39; I Cor. 15)—The Resurrection of Christ

#### ***Miracles v. Wonders***

##### It is important to make a distinction between the various types of supernatural causes and effects.

##### *Miracle (Latin: miracula)*

###### Classically, the word “Miracle” was reserved to refer only to Divine works brought about by Divine omnipotence.

###### Thus, humans, Satan, demons, and the elect angels, by definition, cannot perform miracles.

##### *Wonder (Latin: mirabilia)*

###### Mirabilia are wonders or amazing events effected in the physical world by the causal powers of angels and demons. They are supernatural, but not a work of God.

###### We must distinguish between the limits of the causal powers of angels and demons and God.

###### See the Angelology, Satanology & Demonology syllabi for details.

#### ***False Miracles & Lying Wonders***

##### Ex. 7:11; 8:7—The Pharaoh’s Magicians

##### Matt. 24:24—False Christs and False Apostles

##### II Thess. 2:9—The Antichrist

##### Deut. 13:1-5—False Prophets

#### ***The Purpose of Miracles***

##### The general purpose of miracles is revelation and edification.

##### John 20:30-31—After noting many signs Jesus did that remained unrecorded, John tells us he recorded the many miracles that we might believe in Jesus

##### Matt. 12:39-40—Not solely for a sign.

##### John 5:36; 10:37, 38—Works authenticate Jesus as the Christ.

## Special Topic: Exhaustive, Meticulous Providence

### Exhaustive Detail & Precision in the Decree & Providence[[1]](#footnote-1)

#### *Definition* Exhaustive, Meticulous Providence means that every event, choice, and free action, with regard to the greatest or smallest details, is predetermined by God in the Decree and providentially executed by God in His Creation in the exercise of Divine Providence.

#### *Scriptural Examples*

##### **General Example:** God “works all things after the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11).

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##### **Specific Examples**

###### The fall of sparrows (Matthew 10:29),

###### The rolling of dice (Proverbs 16:33),

###### The slaughter of his people (Psalm 44:11),

###### The decisions of kings (Proverbs 21:1),

###### The failing of sight (Exodus 4:11),

###### The sickness of children (2 Samuel 12:15),

###### The loss and gain of money (1 Samuel 2:7),

###### The suffering of saints (1 Peter 4:19),

###### The completion of travel plans (James 4:15),

###### The persecution of Christians (Hebrews 12:4-7),

###### The repentance of souls (2 Timothy 2:25),

###### The gift of faith (Philippians 1:29),

###### The pursuit of holiness (Philippians 3:12-13),

###### The growth of believers (Hebrews 6:3),

###### The giving of life and the taking in death (1 Samuel 2:6), and

###### The crucifixion of his Son (Acts 4:27-28).

#### *Meticulous Providence & Evil*

##### God governs all things for His wise and just and good purposes (Isaiah 46:10).

##### The Scriptures speak most clearly to this in the most painful situations.

###### Amos asks, in time of disaster, "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?" (Amos 3:6).

###### After losing all ten of his children in the collapse of his son's house, Job says, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

###### After being covered with boils he says, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10).

#### *Meticulous Providence & Satan*

##### Job 2:7 says, “Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.”

###### Satan struck him. But Job did not receive comfort from looking at secondary causes. He received comfort from looking at the ultimate cause. Job says, “Shall we not accept adversity from God?"

###### And the author of the book of Job agrees with Job when he states that Job’s brothers and sisters “consoled him and comforted him for all the adversities that the LORD had brought on him” (Job 42:11).

###### James explains God’s purposeful goodness in Job’s misery: “You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful” (James 5:11).

###### Job concludes in prayer: “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2).

1. Note: This section was adapted from John Piper’s essay on Exhaustive, Meticulous Providence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)