

CHAPTER 5

OF PROVIDENCE

Definition of providence

“1. God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

All of the creation is included in God’s providence:

- Creatures
- Actions
- Things
- “From the greatest to the least”

God controls all that happens to all his creation; he “upholds, directs, disposes, governs.” This universal control of God over his creation is called his “providence.”

This providence of God is taught in Scripture (Ps 135:6; Eph 1:11; the phrase in Acts 15:18, “known to God from the ages are [all] his works” is omitted from the Greek text with a {B} rating). The Bible also shows that God controls all events, since he controls all types of events—events of nature, “chance” events, events of history, even sinful events (see first section of Chapter 3, above, for examples).

The providence of God is not mere whim, but is “wise and holy.” He directs all things to the plan he has ordained from the beginning, according to his “infallible foreknowledge.” This plan was devised by the “free and immutable counsel of his own will”—that is, God’s plan comes from him alone, and is unchangeable. Apparent “changes” in God’s plan were included in the original plan!

This providence of God has as its purpose the manifestation of these attributes of God:

- Wisdom
- Power
- Justice
- Goodness

- Mercy

God’s providence shows each of these qualities to be “glorious.”

Means of providence

“2. Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

“3. God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.”

As noted already, everything that happens has been decreed from the beginning by God (Job 23:13-14; Ps 33:11; Lam 2:17). But normally these things happen because of “second causes,” other events also decreed by God. Thus, God decrees that a child is to be born. But he carries out his decree through the parents, the normal created order. God has decreed that rocks fall downward, not up. This he accomplishes by the creation of gravity. God controls the weather; but he uses preexisting physical forces in the earth and the atmosphere, along with physical laws, such as those governing the volume, pressure, and temperature of gasses.

Whenever something happens to us, it normally is through “second causes.” But we should realize that God is the one who determined it. Compare the case of Job in Job 1:13-22.

These second causes are described in this section (and referred to earlier in *WCF* 3:1) as being one of these:

- Necessary—as “laws” of nature
- Free—actions of free moral agents (people)
- Contingent—depending on some other event

Section 3 declares that God is free to operate how he pleases. If he desires, he is perfectly free to do things without normal “second causes.” These events are normally classed as “supernatural.” Supernatural events include such things as miracles and the final resurrection—anything that requires God’s direct intervention in the creation.

We believe that God normally uses means. People are saved through the preaching of other people, not through supernatural visions. People are healed by means of medical treatment, not by “divine healers.” People learn languages by studying and practicing, not by a spiritual gift. To rely on miracles instead of doing what we can, is to “tempt God” (Matt 4:7).

Providence related to sin

“4. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.”

Sections 4-7 of this chapter of the Confession show how God’s providence is related to various aspects of people’s spiritual lives. The most difficult topic is that of sin and unbelief. How can God remain sinless and still control even sinful thoughts and actions of people? These questions are similar to those arising from his ordaining of all things (WCF, Ch. 3). These sections of the Confession explain this important relationship.

Section 4, in particular, deals with the relation of God’s providence to sin itself. Even sinful actions of people have been decreed by God. Here are a few examples from the Bible:

- Brothers selling Joseph (Gen 45:5-8; 50:20)
- David numbering the people (2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chr 21:1)
- Ahab’s prophets telling lies (1 Kgs 22:22-23)
- Assyrians attacking Judah (2 Kgs 19:23-25)
- Babylonians fighting Judah (Hab 1:5-11)
- Jews crucifying Jesus (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)
- Romans keeping Paul in prison (Acts 24:26; 25:9-12; 23:11)

Even Satan’s fall, and the subsequent fall of Adam and Eve into sin were part of God’s plan—not just his permission, but his purpose. For because of the fall into sin, God provided in his Son the salvation of the elect, all to the praise of his glory (Rom 5:19; Eph 2:1-7).

But in all this, God is not the author or source of the sin. The sin itself arises in the hearts of free moral agents (Jas 1:13-14, 17).

Providence and the sins and difficulties of Christians

“5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption, and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.”

God’s plan does not include total sanctification for us in this life. He often leaves us to follow our own sinful impulses even after we are saved. There are several reasons why God allows this retrogression in our lives:

- To chasten us for earlier sins
- To humble our self-confidence
- To draw us closer to him for support
- To make us more watchful against future sins
- “For sundry other just and holy ends”

Romans 8:28 says that “all things” work to our good; even sins we commit can later have a beneficial effect if we learn from them. But this encouragement should not lead us to more sin, only to more gratitude to God (Rom 6:1-2, 14-15, 22-23).

Providence and the hardening of unbelievers

“6. As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.”

There are two possible degrees of hardening referred to in this section: God can merely withhold his saving grace and leave unbelievers in their darkness, or he can further their corruption by removing in their minds even the normal restraints of conscience and society, thus plunging them into greater darkness. Many Scriptures say that God hardens hearts, as well as softens them:

- Pharaoh hardened (Exod 7:3; 8:15, 32)
- Sihon hardened (Deut 2:30)
- Gentile unbelievers hardened (Rom 1:24, 26, 28)
- Jewish unbelievers hardened (Rom 11:7-8)
- All types of unbelievers hardened (2 Thess 2:9-12)

The same things that lead to the hardening of sinners often also lead to the salvation of the elect. The most common of these things is the preaching of the gospel (Acts 28:26-27; 2 Cor 2:14-16; compare 1 Pet 2:7-8 for unbelievers and verses 9-10 for believers). Other such events might be terrible catastrophes, such as earthquakes or wars; during such times many turn to God, while others become utterly depraved.

Blessings for the church

“7. As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.”

God's providence is seen always working in behalf of his people. This fact is a great joy to the believer, and is seen throughout the Bible (Isa 43:3-5; Amos 9:8; Matt 6:33-34; and of course Rom 8:28).