

Providence:*

Two themes are clear in the Biblical teaching about the providence of God. God is sovereign in sustaining and controlling what takes place in the world, and human beings as images of God are agents who make responsible choices. The Bible states both very forcefully but does not seem to tell us how they are easily reconciled.

a) The two themes: The Bible teaches that God is in ultimate control of everything that happens in his creation. This includes foreknowledge of what will happen, but also foreordination (predestination), actually causing things to happen according to his plan. The scope of this control encompasses the natural world, political events and individual subjectivity. There is no fate, fortune or human determination that can veto or overpower his purposes:

This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For the Lord of hosts has planned and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? (Is. 14:26-7)

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. (Eph.2:8)
The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. (re Lydia, Acts 16:14)*

On the other hand, the reality of human choice is assumed both by the hundreds of imperatives directed to people in the Bible by God the Father, Jesus, prophets and apostles and also by the obvious framework of moral accountability which is the context of human life on earth. The Biblical covenants themselves are promises and also conditions; the conditions presuppose choice. The Bible also states this explicitly:

*Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve... (Josh. 24:15)
For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live. (Ezek. 18:32)*

Believing that God is in control of all things does not mean that we believe that God is the creator of evil. As Dr. Schaeffer put it: "When God created the universe ex nihilo, he made everything good (Gen.1:31). There was no inherent need for sin/evil to enter the universe. Everything was made perfect and free. If God had created it otherwise, he would be responsible for evil in the world, which would directly contradict scripture (Ps 5:4; James 1:13, 14). Therefore there is no evil in God. "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all". (1 John 1:5)

b) Simplistic solutions which we reject: In trying to reconcile the two themes, Christians have sometimes sacrificed one to the other. Sovereignty and responsibility have become parts of a zero-sum interaction (i.e. an interaction of competing or mutually exclusive interests in which what is gained by one side is lost by the other, e.g. as God is more sovereign, people are less responsible, or vice versa). We reject this approach.

Some claim that the theme of greatest importance and Biblical clarity is that God is sovereign, and that therefore references to human choice are to the *sensation* we have of making choices, not to the reality of that sensation. References to God "repenting" are only metaphorical and not substantive. Intercessory prayer gives the one who prays growth in faith and peace of mind, but does not "change anything". All human events have been fixed, much as the story of a feature film is electrically imprinted on a video tape, and is not open to change as you watch it.

On the other side, there are many variations on limiting or eliminating the sovereignty of God in order to make room for human choice. God "repenting" is a prominent theme; he doesn't know the future. Some admit foreknowledge but not foreordination, others deny both, saying that God is like a good manager in a meeting, leading people to make choices that he wants, but with no influence on their volition. Foreordination and even foreknowledge are said to make a divine-human love relationship impossible. You cannot have a relationship of love with someone who knows what you are going to say before you have said it.

We reject both of these directions for three reasons: 1) Despite sometimes having a high view of scripture at a creedal level, both disrespect scripture as they interpret it in practice. Each uses a hermeneutic which enables them to use one of the themes to eclipse the other. 2) Although they end up in very different positions, they both follow the same non-Biblical rationalism. Both allow their own idea of the function of human reason to stand over the richness of Biblical truth, forcing a zero-sum relationship between the two themes. 3) The Bible itself never tries to reconcile or systematize the two themes into an intellectually comfortable framework. In fact, whenever it is raised as a problem, the Bible seems to discourage our attempts at resolving it. *We are never led to even think that we will be able to grasp the nature of the causal interface between the infinite Creator God and his finite and human creation.* (Job 38-41; Rom. 9:14-26)

c) The Bible teaches both themes as complementary truths: Biblical references to God's providence are not the voice of one who has relinquished control of his world or his creatures (Is. 14:26-7). Biblical references to human choice do not refer to the mere sensation or experience of freedom. The Biblical idea of covenant embraces both. In a number of places the two themes are held together in the same passage without hint of conflict.

For example, Paul tells the Philippians to "work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure". (Phil. 2:12-13) They were to work, because God was at work within them at the level not only of their actions but of being able to will the right actions. This passage suggests not a zero-sum, mutual exclusion of sovereignty and responsibility, but a complementary interdependence. (see also Gen. 50:19-20; Lev.20:7-8; Mt.11:27-28)

d) Three practical implications:

i) Prayer: Although every aspect of the Christian life is at stake here, we take prayer as an example. Only by maintaining the complementarity of sovereignty and responsibility is Biblical prayer upheld. The most timid and tentative intercessory prayer depends on the compatibility of these two truths – that God can grant a request if he wants to, and that he takes us seriously enough to be listening and responding. If by intrinsic limitation or by the choice of self-limitation, God can do nothing about weather, politics, health or especially about human attitudes and decisions – why bother asking him to change these things? On the other hand, if people are not responsible, choosing, agents -- again why bother? If that was so, prayer would be God talking to himself like a ventriloquist talking through his dummy. In the Bible, prayer is not only for our own growth, but God changes things in response to it. James wrote, *“You do not have, because you do not ask.”* (James 4:2) Had they prayed, things could have been different.

ii) Reading Providence: Because God is in providential control of what goes on in his creation, that does not mean that we can necessarily “read” or interpret events to determine what God’s intention was or is. Paul wrote that God’s judgments are “unsearchable” and his ways “inscrutable” (Rom. 11:33). In the case of Job, faith in God required him to relinquish the demand for an interpretation of why things happened as they had. In the matter of Philemon’s escape, conversion and return, Paul wrote, *“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while...”* (Philemon 15) It was “perhaps”. Paul made no claim to know for sure. While discernment is especially appropriate in matters of guidance, interpreting providence must be done with great caution and humility, and we must admit that it is sometimes impossible altogether. (cf. Mordecai’s words to Esther, Esther 4:14)

iii) Trusting God: We can trust God for his goodness toward us. See Romans 1:28: *“...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* God works for the good of those who love him in all things, not just the good things that he brings us, but also in the evil things that come from Satan, like Paul’s thorn in the flesh (II Cor. 12:7-9). Although God’s providence is over the whole world, his relationship to good and evil is asymmetrical. That is, he stands behind, or is more directly involved in causing blessing in this fallen world than in causing suffering, except where he is explicitly bringing judgment or discipline. Jesus taught us to pray that God’s will would be done “on earth as it is in heaven”, because it is *not* now being done on earth *in the same sense* as it is in heaven. If I sin, that is not outside of God’s providence, but it is my responsibility for having done it, not his. Dr. Schaeffer refused to say, “God gave me cancer”, though he believed that it had taken place within God’s ultimate providential oversight.

If sovereignty and responsibility are complementary, then we can trust God to be able to fulfill his promises to protect us in a dangerous world. It is a mistake to limit God’s sovereignty in order to emphasize human responsibility for evil. What peace can we have if providence is so limited that God is not capable of restraining evil people -- others or ourselves? In fact the Bible teaches that God can and does restrain evil people. He “foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples” (Ps. 33:10). He warns in the N.T. that he can withdraw his restraint, as he gives them over to the lusts of their own hearts, showing that his normal providence includes restraint of human sin (Rom. 1:24,26; also cf. Is. 14:26-7).

e) Embracing mystery: We must not be threatened or embarrassed by acknowledging the reality of mystery. Mystery is not a Christian escape route reserved for times when we suddenly find ourselves trapped in a discussion. It is a sensible, faithful and rational recognition, made by finite creatures who are standing before an infinite God. *God must be allowed to be God – that is, great enough to create a world in which he is in ultimate control and in which there are creatures who have significant choice.*

This is not equivalent to saying that God is great enough to make a four-sided triangle, that is, great enough to contradict himself, and so to assert that this mystery is intrinsically irrational. Nor is it like saying that “God is sovereign, God is not sovereign”, which is a flat contradiction. God’s sovereignty and human responsibility contradict each other only if we assume that God’s ways of causation are at the same level of simplicity as our own notions of mechanical causation, e.g. such as the interaction of the balls on a billiard table. The Bible suggests that this is totally inadequate. *To claim that God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are mutually exclusive one would need to assume a far deeper and more comprehensive understanding of both God and humanity than our finitude allows.*

Despite their doubts, laments and questions, the response of Biblical writers to the mystery of God is ultimately the same as their response to providence in general -- wonder and gratitude. *“...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* (Rom. 8:28) *“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”* (Rom. 11:33). Habakkuk, who began with a lament about the nation that he loved, *“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you would not listen? Or cry out to you ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?”* (Hab. 1:2), ends with a different perspective:

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” (Hab. 3:17-19)