

DIVINE PROVIDENCE
A DOCTRINAL ESSAY

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Introduction to Theology
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INTRODUCTION

In the well-known musical produced for stage and screen, *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character Tevye, a poor, humorous milk-man living with his family in a Jewish community in 1910 Russia, fantasizes through song what life would be like if he were to be rich. At one point near the end of the song the mood breaks and Tevye speaks these words in prayer to God:

Lord, Who made the lion and the lamb,
 You decreed I should be what I am.
 Would it spoil some vast, eternal plan
 If I were a wealthy man?¹

It can be seen that Tevye understands God to be provident. The sentiments expressed in these lines at the very least assume that God is in ultimate control of this world and its happenings, for he has “some vast, eternal plan” and “decreed” that Tevye be what he is. He is, therefore, in Tevye’s mind, provident over the universe—its history and future. The picture of God assumed in this simple phrase is certainly an orthodox Jewish and Christian one.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, believers have always held that God is in some sense “provident.” It would be very difficult to argue for a time in history where the church has not affirmed this doctrine—and this is not surprising. For if a God like that described in the Bible does indeed exist, then we would almost expect Him to be provident in one way or another. Providence appears to be essential to the Biblical concept of God.

¹ Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock, “If I Were a Rich Man,” in *Fiddler on the Roof: Vocal Score* (New York: The New York Times Music Corporation, 1965), 48.

The Doctrine of Divine Providence² is a broad doctrine of the Christian Church and, as such, it encompasses in its bounds several other important and distinctive doctrines about God which contribute to His Providence. This makes DP a difficult doctrine to communicate without also saying something about these doctrines which are presupposed. My paper will reflect this conviction.

This paper is an attempt to explicate a broad notion of divine providence and to demonstrate its application in pastoral counseling. In regard to explication, God's perfection—His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence—is shown to be the fundamental element of DP; the providence of God springs from his perfection. Two main aspects of DP—God's preservation and God's government—will be offered and explained. Biblical examples will be given along the way to support DP as a Biblical doctrine and not merely a philosophical concept. Further, two major theological problems arising from DP will be looked at with brief definitions. These problems will include the Problem of Prayer and the Problem of Evil.

As for the application of DP, I will make an effort to demonstrate how it can be utilized in pastoral counseling as a means of comfort and a call to faithfulness through the experience of pain and suffering.

PART I: AN EXPLICATION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

1. Etymology

The word "providence" is not used in Scripture (like most other titles of systematic doctrines). Etymologically, the word "providence" finds its seed in the Latin

² From this point forward I will use the initials DP to refer to the Doctrine of Divine Providence.

verb *providere*.³ This verb literally means “to foresee.”⁴ The English word “providence” is closely related to the word “provide” and connotes “seeing ahead.”⁵ Millard J. Erickson suggests that in addition to this connotation, something more than just God’s knowledge of the future is involved in the concept of providence. He states that it also “carries the connotation of acting prudently or making preparation for the future.”⁶ It is easy to see how this term relates to DP. God’s provision for His creation is one vital aspect and is necessary in a formulation of DP. Many definitions of DP are given by theologians and most of them can be reduced to their lowest common denominator, revealing the essential elements of the doctrine.

2. Definition

A central component in an orthodox understanding of God is that He is absolutely perfect in every way.⁷ We can conclude, then, that God, in his knowledge, power, and goodness, is perfect—that is, he is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. With this as an operating premise, Thomas P. Flint formulates a definition of DP in the following way: “The notion of divine providence that orthodox Christians have typically come to endorse [...] is essentially a picture of how a God who is perfect in knowledge, love, and power exhibits those perfections through the detailed control he exercises over his creation.”⁸ Flint goes on to say that this traditional picture of God sees Him as

³ James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 1:320.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 413.

⁵ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, p. 320.

⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 413.

⁷ Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

“knowingly and lovingly directing each and every event involving each and every creature toward the ends he has ordained for them.”⁹

This all-encompassing providence of God is quite amazing. God in his perfection orders every detail of the created world in ways consistent with his goodness, power, and knowledge. This fact alone gives the Christian enormous confidence in life as he can trust that the past, present, and future are in God’s hands and He is bringing about His good purposes through the happenings in our world.

Developments in DP throughout the history of theology are too many to acknowledge here, but I would like to make mention of one particular development in which I find a meaningful illustration of DP. In the sixteenth-century, there was a remarkable revival of Scholasticism on the Iberian Peninsula, brought on largely by the Protestant Reformation and the ensuing Catholic response at the Council of Trent. Luis de Molina, a Jesuit theologian, was a leading figure in this revival and (little known today) “played a central role in one of the most tumultuous intramural doctrinal disputes in Catholic intellectual history.”¹⁰ In Part IV of his *Concordia*, Molina focuses his attention on providence and divine foreknowledge. He develops a deeply original and profound theory of God’s knowledge which has extended applications for many other issues in theology and philosophy. His theory, known as Molinism or Middle-Knowledge, centers on God’s knowledge of future contingent propositions (especially as related to human action) or counterfactuals of human freedom.

Leaving the philosophical discourse on this topic behind, I would like to reference Molina for what he says about the notion of providence towards the end of Part IV of the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, tr. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), vii.

Concordia. After a rigorous explication of the relationship of foreknowledge and providence, Molina comments that

[T]he leaf hanging from the tree does not fall, nor does anything else whatever happen without God's providence and will either *intending it as a particular* or *permitting it as a particular*. This is the greatest consolation of the righteous, who place all their hope in God and rest comfortably in the shadow of the wings of His providence, desiring that in both prosperity and adversity God's will with regard to them might always be fulfilled.¹¹

It is likely that Molina had in mind Matthew 10:29-30 where Jesus says "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (NIV). The conviction that nothing happens without God's knowledge and either His allowance or direct ordering of it is present in Molina's thought; indeed, it is the very point he is arguing. There is a strong connection between this high view of God's providence (which is evident in Scripture and in the history of theology) and the confidence of the believer.

3. Providence as Preservation and Government

Providence can be thought of in two ways: God's preservation of creation and God's government of creation.

Preservation. God's preservation of the world which he created involves two things: protecting creation from harm and destruction as well as providing for the needs

¹¹ Ibid, p. 252.

of the members of creation (human and nonhuman entities).¹² The central idea underlying these aspects of providence is that God not only establishes creation but also *maintains* it. Biblical data exists to support this way of seeing providence in both the Old and New Testaments. An Old Testament example is Nehemiah 9:6, which reports Ezra saying, “You alone are Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them” (TNIV). This text supports the idea that God created everything and when linked with New Testament texts such as Colossians 1:17, which reads, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together,” the idea is extended to include God’s sustaining power over creation.

This is utterly distinct from the view expressed by Deism which affirms that God created the world in its entirety but has given it over to its natural processes and cycles, remaining completely uninvolved in the affairs within it, however large or small they may be. Another more interesting view suggests that there exists in God’s providence a “continuing creation.”¹³ On this view “God actually creates the universe anew in each instance of time.”¹⁴ Karl Heim is one major proponent of this view, holding that the universe is continually ceasing to be, but God continually calls it back into existence in every moment.¹⁵ There is very limited Biblical data to support this view.

In short, God’s providence entails his maintenance of creation –His continual activity of preserving what he originally created in the ways which he desires.

¹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 414.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Karl Heim, *Glaube und Denken* (Hamburg: Furche, 1931). This work is referenced as a footnote in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 417

Government. Another way to think of DP is as God's governance of his creation. When we say and believe that "God is in control" we are saying and believing in God's government of creation. This view is distinct but not entirely separate from God's preservation discussed above. The government of God is basically His willful direction of the events in the universe toward the ends he has planned for them. This is expressed clearly in Psalm 135, where the Psalter proclaims that

The Lord does whatever pleases Him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. (vv. 6-7; TNIV)

Not only does God govern nature but also human affairs. In Hannah's expression of praise to God for His answering her prayer for a son (Samuel), she says, "The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (1 Sam. 2:6-7).¹⁶

4. Special Problems with DP

I will now set forth two problems that naturally arise from DP. In no way will I attempt to give a thorough treatment of either of these problems, for both of them demand sophisticated and detailed work that requires more knowledge, skill, and paper than I have available. I will merely formulate the problems and show why they are indeed "problems" for theology.

¹⁶ I have borrowed this reference for this context from Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 421.

The Problem of Prayer. If God does reign with sovereignty over this world in His providence and directs all things to the ends which he has determined for them, then why pray? Prayer seems meaningless since it assumes that we have a role to play in God's outworking of the future. But if we have a role to play in God's "vast, eternal plan" that Tevye speaks of, then that would seem to mean that God has no set "plan" in mind.

This problem has several possible solutions by several different schools of thought. As far as it goes, we should at least obey the Biblical commands and examples when it comes to prayer and trust that our prayers do indeed have meaning even if we can't quite understand exactly how prayer relates to a high view of DP. We should also avoid the extremes that would cause us to stop praying or to diminish the scope of God's providence.

The Problem of Evil. The so-called problem of evil is probably the greatest intellectual and emotion hindrance to the Christian faith. The problem arises because we experience horrendous evils in the world, both natural evils and moral evils. Evil seems so rampant and yet we are still called to think of God as being provident. There seems to be great tension between our experience of evil and our Biblical view of God's providence. If God is in complete control over the world's affairs, then why does evil exist? Would not God, who is perfect in every way, including in his love, power, and knowledge, choose to rid the world of all evil? As David Hume's classic formulation of the problem goes, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent

evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”¹⁷

This problem has received large amounts of attention in almost every stage of theological and philosophical development and shows no signs of slowing, though there has been progress made, especially from the philosophical perspective.

PART II: AN APPLICATION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

DP can be a very powerful tool to utilize in pastoral counseling. The pastoral role of counseling will expose many pastors to life situations of others that require not only sound theology to address them but also a comforting demeanor and spiritual wisdom.

Pastors usually find themselves counseling people because there is a problem in their lives. They may be having marital problems, problems with children, problems with anxiety and depression, spiritual oppression, financial problems, addictions, etc., or any combination of these. From my own experience, I find that many of the problems people face usually boil down to them struggling ultimately with the Problem of Evil. They want to know where God is in their pain and suffering or that of their family and friends. Some may wonder why God allows them to experience the pain and suffering in their present situations.

A starting point in reference to applying DP to pastoral counseling is to remember what was suggested by Molina above, that God’s providence is “the greatest consolation of the righteous” and that whether in good times or bad, we can rest assured that God is in complete control, working his good out of things that seem so bad. Of course, this is

¹⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part 10; quoted in J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for the Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 536.

easier said than done for someone going through trials and experiencing evil in their lives.

Most people seeking counsel will presumably be experiencing inner hurt and maybe even bitterness against a God who allows them or others they know to suffer. One of the greatest examples of such feelings about God is expressed in the extraordinary novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*. For the character Ivan Karamazov, the problem comes down to these very same feelings described above. After concluding that he would have nothing to do with the Christian God, he declares, “I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I am wrong.” Ivan is rejecting God on the basis of the Emotional Problem of Evil.¹⁸

In responding to such hurt, there may be a couple of different ways to do so. Some people may just need a loving friend who will hear them out and provide emotional and spiritual comfort through their presence and attention. Others may need words of counsel and it is here where DP and the Christian faith as a whole offer much grace for the hurting one. The Christian God is not a removed and distant Creator who leaves us alone in our suffering but joins with us in our suffering. The greatest measure of God’s providence is displayed in the power of His Son, Jesus Christ, who humiliated Himself to a cruel death on the cross. The mighty God of the universe stripped Himself of His glory and became shame for the sins of the world, and all this is part of His providential plan. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig rightly say that “paradoxically, even though the problem of evil is the greatest objection to the existence of God, at the end of the day God is the only solution to the problem of evil. [...] God is the final answer to the

¹⁸ Quoted in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, p. 551.

problem of evil, for he redeems us from evil and takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good, fellowship with himself.”¹⁹

These are the truths that should be communicated in pastoral counseling to demonstrate the glorious depth of DP and its ability to comfort the soul with the power of the Gospel. The good news of Christ and His work is the ultimate vindication and demonstration of the goodness of God’s providence and the source of healing for the soul in sorrow.

It is necessary to understand that when using the truths of DP in pastoral counseling, a process is involved. In addition to words of counsel offered to help heal a hurting person, there is a period of indeterminable time that usually must pass for a person to be restored to emotional, physical, and/or spiritual health. In many cases people overcome their pain through long periods of prayer and reflection on certain truths. God providentially works through their minds and hearts as they poise themselves to receive His love. An example of this can be found in the life and work of John Milton, the famous seventeenth-century poet and author.

During the writing of his Nineteenth Sonnet, Milton experienced the failure of physical sight and was threatened with the possibility of complete blindness. Russell M. Hillier argues that the Nineteenth Sonnet “comprises a meditation upon divine providentialism.”²⁰ The pattern of the Sonnet, he argues, reflects that of an epistle that Milton wrote to the eminent Athenian physician Leonard Philaras, with whom he consulted in a quest for a cure for his blindness. Milton writes

¹⁹ Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, p. 552.

²⁰ Russell M. Hillier, “The Patience to Prevent Murmuring: The Theodicy of John Milton’s Nineteenth Sonnet,” *Renascence* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 248.

Because if, as it is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God, that is, why should not someone be at rest in this same idea, that it is sufficient to have sight, not in the eyes alone, but in the leadership and providence of God.”²¹

In commenting upon this letter, Hillier recognizes that “[t]he sonnet’s scope, like that of Milton’s letter to Philaras, arguably follows a similar pattern, moving from an agitated state to rest, finally, in God’s disposal of events.”²² It is through this process of contemplation of God’s providence that Milton comes to the end of his questioning of God and the seeming meaningless evil that he experienced in his failing sight. He becomes spiritually and intellectually satisfied with the confidence and trust he developed in God’s providential power, resting not on his own understanding, but in the all-sufficient power of God.

Like Milton, those whom we counsel can be led to a place where they will come to rest in God’s providence, though it may take time and much patience. We must continue to affirm the providence of God in pastoral counseling, holding fast to its Biblical foundation and practical confidence it gives the Christian in times of pain and suffering.

²¹ Quoted in Hillier, *Patience to Prevent Murmur*, pp. 249-250.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 250.

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