

The Work of God: Creation (cont.); Providence

Next in our discussion of the work of God in creation is the theological significance of the doctrine of creation. The fundamental point of departure for the doctrine of creation is that all reality finds its source, its origin, in the creative activity of the sovereign God. This affirmation occurs frequently throughout Scripture. Genesis 1 of course opens with the words, "In the beginning, God created." And the last book of Scripture confesses, "God is both the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." I see not only Revelation 21:6, but Isaiah 44:6 as well. The only answer to the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger's question, "Why is there something instead of nothing?" is that God has willed it to be so. So God is the origin of all reality.

The first implication of the truth that God is the origin of all reality is that God is the sovereign Lord. We need to see the biblical polemic against polytheism. Remember the word 'polemic' means 'an argument against.' God has no rivals. The entire universe owes its origin to Him alone. The assertion of the Old Testament, that there is one God, is often coupled with the affirmation of God as the Creator of all things. Ezra's appeal to God's aid and deliverance is typical. In Nehemiah 9:6, Ezra said, "You are Yahweh. You are the Lord, You alone. You have made the heaven, the heaven of heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You preserve all of them, and the host of heaven worships you." It is very common in Scripture to see God's oneness brought together with creation. Clearly, if one God has created the whole universe, what does that mean? All other supposed deities are not deities at all. They are mere pretenders to the throne of heaven.

To appreciate the full significance of the Genesis kind of creation, we should note that it includes a polemic, an argument against, all rival creation accounts. Genesis 1 is not the only creation story in the Ancient Near East, but only Genesis 1 proclaims that the world is the product of one God. All rival accounts presuppose a polytheistic worldview. Only the Hebrew religion is based upon a radical monotheism. Hebraic monotheism, the fact that there is one God, is not merely the confession of Yahweh, nor is it merely the confession that Yahweh is one and that there is one God, whose name is Yahweh. It is also the confession that there are no other gods. Hebraic monotheism is the intentional and the conscious exclusion of the rights of any other deity. What is the first commandment? "You shall have no other gods." God's sovereignty over creation, God's single sovereignty, denies polytheism.

What is this polytheism? One aspect of this polytheism is that the various gods are seen as holding a merely local sovereignty. John Stott writes of the biblical account: "It was established from the outset that the God who later chose to reveal Himself to Israel was not the God of Israel alone. Israel must not regard Yahweh as the Moabites regarded *Chemosh* or *Maskot* for He was not a petty godling or tribal deity whose domain and interests were limited to the tribe and its territory, but the God of creation, the Lord of all the earth." Contrary to the Ancient Near Eastern tradition where you have a god of the sky or a god of the land or the god of the Canaanites and a god of the Assyrians, we have a God of Genesis 1 who says, "I created everything. I am sovereign Lord of all."

The gods of the sky and the earth, in the polytheistic world, were not separate from creation. They were not separate from the world. We might even say that these gods were in fact nothing more than aspects of the world, the sky, the sun, the moon. In Scripture, however, the living God of creation is constantly contrasted with other deities. Other religions of the area saw the gods as part of creation and they were akin to natural phenomena. The Mesopotamian gods were identified with celestial bodies, the sun and the moon. Sometimes they were identified with behaviors of birds and sometimes with the waters under the earth. Yet the Genesis story declares that the heavenly bodies and the waters and the fowl of the air

and everything else is created by God and therefore those things are in no sense divine. Other religions might worship those things, but the biblical religion knows only one God, and it can serve no other.

God is utterly different from what He creates. We have told this tale before but we are going to return to it because it is appropriate here. The second implication of the fact that God is the origin of all reality is that He is different from it. When God created the universe, He did not transfer something of His own being into His works. The universe is not an extension of God's own nature. If it were, then creation itself would be worthy of worship. Does that make sense? If the material universe that we live in is an extension of God's own nature, His own being, His own essence, then the universe itself is divine and the universe itself is an object of worship. Scripture tells us that to think of the universe in this way is to fall into idolatry. Paul makes that point in Romans 1:25 when he speaks about people who worship the creature rather than the Creator. There is an absolute distinction between God the Creator and that which He has created. The necessary inference of this is that everything that is not God, is not God. In other words, creation is not divine. We can always distinguish between God and His works.

As we have said before, the biblical worldview, the biblical metaphysic, is made up of two realities: the Creator and the creation. A worldview that reduces to a single reality, a single pole, a single principle is called monism. And whether it is materialism or spiritualism, this is always considered false within a biblical view of reality. A monistic view of things is a non-biblical view. A major impulse of Christian theological reflection from the earliest times has been to resist the temptation to fall into monism. There has always been this temptation. When you think of the gods as being the sun, the moon, and the stars, you are thinking of the divine as being the material creation, so you have automatically fallen into a monism. This theme is clearly stated in Paul's letter to the Romans in which he openly criticized the tendency to reduce God to the level of the world or to elevate the world to the level of God. Either way, you have fallen into this idolatry of monism. According to Paul, there is a natural human tendency as a result of sin, to serve created things, rather than the Creator. Thus a central task of the Christian religion is to distinguish between God and the creation, to establish the distinction between the Creator and the creation, while at the same time affirming the creation as just that, God's creation. We will say more about that as we proceed here.

Another implication of God being the absolute source of everything is that God's creative act is unique. It is unlike human creative acts. Human creativity is bound by, and is subject to the creational norms around us. My son is an artist and sometimes he talks about his creations, but his creations are bounded by the chalk and the paint and the wood or whatever materials that he uses. God's creativity, however, is bounded only by His creative purpose, and it is itself the ground for both human life and human creativity. Now there is a certain importance here for our doctrine of God, what is called theology proper. What this means for our understanding of God is that God's purposes are never frustrated. They can never be frustrated by any inherent qualities within the created order. You see in my son's working in chalk, he can only do what chalk does. He cannot use chalk to make a three-dimensional statue. Chalk will not do that. He is limited by the medium. God's purposes, however, can never be frustrated by the medium with which He works. The creation is bound to Him for He is the author. We note at this point that we spoke about *creatio ex nihilo*. Unlike the potter who needs the clay, God does not need any preexisting raw material out of which He is able to create. Rather, He creates the clay itself as well as shaping and molding the clay into the shape He wants.

Now it is important for us to note something that many, particularly modern, scholars have claimed. They have said that the 'nothing' out of which God is said to have created is itself a something. I do not know if you are aware of this, but ever since existentialism, nothing has become something. The chaos or the 'out of nothing' is bound up within some position or substantial reality. It is often said that God

had to wrest order out of original chaotic principle. But when we look at Genesis, we do not find anything like that. We do not find that God must wrestle with something. We do not find that He must wrest order from chaos, and thus the view of 'chaos to cosmos' compromises God's sovereignty and compromises His absolute right over creation.

Just as there is an import here for our doctrine of God, there is also an import here for our understanding of ourselves, our doctrine of man, or our anthropology. The uniqueness of God's creative act means that we humans remain creatures who are subject to the created order. We are not creators. We do not create anything. We are fashioners. We take the material norms of God's creation and we make those things into new things. We are invited to do that. He says do it: "Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion." In a sense, He says, "Go out and have a good time. Just love one another and serve Me and protect My universe." But we do not create. We fashion.

The fourth implication of the doctrine of creation is that nothing created is or can be intrinsically evil. I am going to go back and do some classical theology at this point. The fact that God is the Creator, the fact that God made us, that God made His world, means that nothing in His world is or can become intrinsically evil. Everything has come from God, and the creation story of Genesis insists that everything was good, even very good. The biblical confession rejects any notion of what we would call dualism, the idea that there is a principle in the universe, an internal principle, that is diametrically opposed to God's will. Even though the creation is not divine, Scripture insists that it is good. You see, in any type of dualism, there tends to be a moral distinction between the higher and lower principles or elements. Since the higher is more divine, and the lower is not the former, the higher is thought of as being more real than the others. And eventually this difference, this metaphysical difference, is also regarded as a moral difference. Thus it is very common for us to think of the higher as good and the lower as evil.

If that did not make any sense, hang on a second and I will see if I can help. Such a distinction came to be thought of in the later history of Platonic philosophy. Plato had taught that the universe is made up of material substances and mental substances. These mental substances, what he called 'ideas' or 'forms,' are the really real world. That is where ultimate reality is, in the intelligible reality or world of ideas, in the world of perceptible or empirical objects. On the other hand, this world is simply the world of shadows, the world of the perceptible. In neo-Platonism, there came to be a moral distinction that was applied to this basically metaphysical idea. Where Plato had said the realm of ideas is the ultimately real, neo-Platonism would say it is also the ultimately good. And where Platonism had said the realm of material, of the phenomenal is the realm of shadow, neo-Platonism would say that this material realm, this physical universe is less good, even evil. Now this dualism that the spiritual is real and good and the material is evil deeply influenced the history of the church and still does. But it is problematic from a biblical perspective. While the Bible takes sin very serious, there is never the slightest hint that evil is the product of God's creativity. And God made the material universe. There is never the slightest hint that creation is inherently sinful or evil.

This is the case, and I am arguing Augustine's case, because God did not just create the world, and He did not create it as a morally neutral thing. God created the world good. I know we have problems with that because we see things that are not good. But we need to take the confession of Genesis 1 seriously. How many times is it said there? Seven times. By the time you get to verse 31, God looks at the entirety of what He has made and He calls it very good. It is almost as if He looks at what He has made and He says, "Man, I do good work!" God's world is good. It is neither evil nor neutral. As the product of God's will, as the product of God's love, the creation shares His moral character.

The goodness of creation comes with its own package of implications. First of all, the goodness of creation thrusts moral responsibility upon us. What I mean here is that moral or ethical norms come from or are part of the creational order established by God. When God said that what He has made is good, it means that goodness (His moral will) can be found within the creational order. Because the order is not neutral, because it takes on His very character, there is a moral norm right within the order of things. This means that these moral norms are for the sake of man as creature, even before man as sinner and man as saved creature, but man as originally created creature. And these moral norms do not run contrary to creation. But secondly, God's moral norms are binding upon man even as fallen man because they are built right into the nature of things. Because they are built right into things for the sake of those things, God's moral norms come upon us and hold us whether we are saved or fallen. Finally, all of this suggests that we can never justify our sinful behavior by blaming an evil or corrupting world. We can never escape our moral accountability. We made that point earlier when talked about creation, fall, redemption, consummation. We made the point that creation is not the problem; we are the problem.

Creation is to be part of, not eclipsed by, Christian piety. Our spirituality, biblically understood, is to include God's world, not deny God's world. The doctrine of creation was of considerable importance for people like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, the two founders of the Reformation. Both of them wanted to forge a world-affirming spirituality and they wanted to do that in a somewhat intentional response to the general tenor of the day in the literature regarding spirituality. Things like Thomas a' Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, kind of stand out here. One of the fundamental themes in a' Kempis' doctrine of spirituality was a certain contempt for the world, what was called the *contemptio mundi*. For a' Kempis, in order to lay hold of God, in order to say 'yes' to God, in order to be in communion with God, one had to say 'no' to everything else. One had to say 'no' to creation, so the affirmation of God was the negation of creation. Now Calvin can and did also speak about a *contemptio mundi*, a contempt for the world, in books three and four of the *Institutes*. But for Calvin that contempt was always contextualized by an important distinction. Calvin could distinguish the world as created by God and the world as corrupted by sin. He knew there was a difference. In that this world is God's creation, it is to be honored, respected, affirmed, and loved. By the way, we should not have to teach ourselves that. When you first see your infant son or daughter, you do not say, "Gee, what a miserable sinner," and walk away. We rejoice in the gifts of God.

In that the world is fallen, it is to be criticized and, to a degree, fled from, but always with work toward redeeming it. Thus, Calvin was able to hold together two equally fundamental biblical insights: man is fallen, he is sinner; yet man is the creation of God. Man's sin does damage to the world, corrupts the world, but the world is God's creation. And thus it remains the possession, even the kingdom, of God. So in Calvin, the doctrine of creation leads to a critical, world-affirming spirituality. You do not just go around saying 'yes' to everything you see, but you say 'yes' to God's creation. The world is to be affirmed, even rejoiced in, but it is never to be absolutized or confessed.

Asceticism is a view of spirituality that denies or seeks to deny the hold of the body or the world. Ascetic practices would include things like a monk not speaking, depriving himself of food, sleeping on a hard bed, denying the comforts of the flesh, taking a vow of celibacy, and those kinds of things. So asceticism does not appear to be a biblically legitimate avenue toward spirituality. The Bible does not teach asceticism. In other words, salvation and spirituality are not found by fleeing God's creation. I know this is kind of contrary to what a lot of us have been taught. Salvation and spirituality are found by seeking the redemption of the world, the redemption of the different aspects of the human existence within God's creation. We might define a world-affirming spirituality as living obediently in this world through grace. Douglas John Hall, in a book called *Imaging God*, said it very clearly, and I have used

this book as a textbook in different courses. He put it this way: “When you love someone, you learn to love the things that they love. And loving God means nothing less than loving His creation because He never gives up, He never walks away.” And because of that very principle, Hall spends an entire book beating up on or trying to correct remedially the longstanding problem in Christian piety of our view of saying ‘yes’ to Jesus means saying ‘no’ to everything else. Saying ‘yes’ to Jesus does mean relativizing everything else. It means saying only He is Lord, but saying ‘yes’ to Jesus means also loving the things that He loves.

All creation is creation and therefore good. All of creation is good. God has created a rich diversity within His creatures and they are all creatures of God. Jesus indicated that God loves and cares for all of His creatures (see Matthew 6:26-30 and Matthew 10:29). God does not love just some of His creatures and not others. He does not just love parts of His creation and not others. He loves it all. This means that we should be very careful in creating hierarchies of importance between different kinds of creatures. And by creatures here I do not just mean human beings versus animals, or green people versus plaid people. What I mean here is everything in reality, because all things are creatures in one way or another. We should be very careful with distinctions of value between heaven and earth, body and soul; some of these distinctions are valid, at least in their twoness. But twoness is not bad. Twoness is not an automatic hierarchy. You know, some things come in two’s and that is good; God made them that way and that is because God likes diversity, boys and girls, for instance. But we should also be careful that we do not create false two’s, such as sacred and secular, or spiritual and material. Paul discredits that one in Romans 12:1-2: “Present your bodies unto God, which is your spiritual service.” Right there, Paul says bodies (material) are spiritual. That whole spiritual-material distinction that our culture works with actually borrows more from Greek philosophy than it does from Scripture. What does the word ‘spiritual’ mean? In the Bible, it means, that which conforms to the rule of the Spirit of God. It is simply the adjectival form of spirit.

At this point, the question is often raised of how we should think about bacteria, vipers, diseases, and other such things. What if we looked at them this way: Where are we presently in the creation, fall, redemption story? We are in fall and redemption. But we do not know quite how to get along with all of God’s creatures. You might have heard it said that dragonflies do not have any purpose in creation. Maybe it is because we do not know enough about creation. Would we all agree that God made vipers? If God makes stuff and stuff is good, then vipers are good. That does not mean that you should stick your hand in one’s mouth. But it does mean, within the rectitude of creation, both where we started and where we are going to end up, God has a place for vipers (and I am going to assume that it is not with my four year-old). The same would hold for mosquitoes; God has a place for them.

I have also been asked if fasting is a kind of asceticism. Yes, and it was meant as such. Fasting, in some ways, like the Sabbath principle, is meant to draw us away from the natural order of things, our work-a-day world, our work-a-day schedules, for the purpose of drawing ourselves to worship of God. It seems to me that there is what I might call the retreat-activism principle in Scripture. The Reformed tradition has always held to a kind of activist piety, a piety that is busy in the world, building the Kingdom of God, but not on the Sabbath day. On that day, I am called to engage in worship, in thinking about God, so I think it is more in that reality of retreat for the sake of worship and generating our batteries for work in the world. Sunday is the first day of the week that comes before our work week and it helps draw our attention to God.

There is no such thing as autonomous nature, no such thing as an autonomous creation. This brings us to the issue of providence. God is not only the sovereign Creator, but He is also the sovereign Lord over His creation. Though we have talked about this for some time, it is worth coming back to every day. But

God's authority over His works, God's sovereignty over His creation, does not cease once He calls the universe into being. Traditionally, the doctrine of creation refers to God's originating work with respect to the universe and the doctrine of providence refers to God's continuing action in the world. Through His continuing action, God preserves or maintains His creation and He guides His creation toward His intended purpose. So right here we have some distinctions and some questions to be asked. The first distinction we need to make is the distinction between preservation, or what is sometimes called guidance, on the one hand, and government on the other. I am going to tip you off here that with some of the texts we are going to talk about Scripture does not make this distinction in any neat way. It will tend to talk about God's preserving the natural order in one verse, and in the next verse will talk about God's government in the history of Israel, then the next verse will talk about God creating in the first place, so all these things get kind of bound together as a single reality for the purpose of praising God. So as we go through this, we need to realize that while these distinctions are somewhat artificial, they do have some validity in the way that we have come to think of things classically.

The term 'providence' comes from the Latin word *providio* and it means 'to see beforehand, to make provision for.' As the term implies, providence then refers to a past arrangement. You see, I can provide for a cross country trip without taking the trip. I can make provision for the journey by taking the car into the garage and making sure that all of its systems work, by getting the necessary maps and laying out the route, by making sure there is gas in the tank and air in the tires, and then I can sit back and watch football all weekend while my wife drives to California. Planning is not doing. And the word *providio* means 'to make provision for.' In the Reformed tradition, however, God's providential acts, or action, is a matter of His present concern, not merely His past concern. Providence is a present activity of God. To be sure, God's preservation, or it is sometimes called His sustenance, is concerned with the maintenance of God's original creation. But it is a present, active sustenance, maintenance, and preservation.

Some Reformed theologians, people like Herman Bavinck, have even spoken of preservation as being *creatio continua*. Now you do not need to know Latin to figure out what that means. The force of such terminology is to make this point: God does not walk away from His creation once it is made. God cannot walk away from His creation once it is made. He must continue to actively, continually uphold things. Thus, from the beginning, the Reformed commitment is that a kind of deistic watch maker ideology is impossible. We are going to talk about deism here so I might as well very quickly describe the deistic idea. The deistic idea is that God created things, but once creation was made God set all the principles and powers that were needed for the continuing of creation into it in such a way that He can now retreat. It claims that we do not need the presence of God to explain things, we only needed the origination of God to explain things. The Reformed commitment, however, is that God's work does not end with creation because the universe is never self-sufficient. There is, if I can put it this way, there is no cruise control setting in creation. There is no autonomous, innate principle by which the universe works. By saying that, I am not alleging that there is anything lacking in the world. I am not suggesting for a second that there is something bad about creation. All I am doing is recognizing that creation is the vassal. It is ever subject to its King. It is ever dependent upon God's love and power. Some might put it this way, as different theologians have: the continuation of the universe, the presence of the universe right now, is just as much a product of the divine will as the original creative act was.

Let us look at a few of the biblical texts for divine preservation. I am going to mention each one and mention a few things that are in each of these texts. First is Nehemiah 9:5-7. As the text opens, the point is made that God is to be praised because He is the Creator. Also He has made everything and He gives life to everything. This one God did it all. And God's work of creating the world and preserving it is foundational for His governing of things. It is foundational for His deliverance of Israel, which is from

verse 7. Actually this verse is a good example of that mixing up of things so that you have that deliverance of Israel, you have creation, God superintending the seasons, all of these kinds of things tend to be referred to together in Scripture. This is purposeful and you see it here in the Nehemiah text. You see it in a lot of these texts we are going to talk about. They get ganged up for the purpose of calling our praise to God. God is to be praised not only because He is the Creator, but He is also the sustainer, and He is the one who governs our lives, and much more.

The second text is Isaiah 40:12-31. This was a text that was very important for my own conversion, hearing about a God who measures out the heavens in the span of His hand, and holds galaxies on His fingertips. In this text, we find that human beings are puny compared to God. He is to be praised for His greatness, for His majesty. He is the transcendent one, in verse 22. He rules the earth, in verses 23-24. He created the heavens and He keeps them going by His power, in verse 26. Something that comes up in many of these texts is that God is eternal, found in verse 28. And God is Creator and Sustainer who encourages and strengthens His people, in verses 28-31. A lot of these texts deal with God's eternity, the fact that He is eternal. Why is that important? If God upholds the universe and must uphold the universe, and He is not eternal, what happens? If He is not going to be here tomorrow, we are not going to be here tomorrow. So if we are going to talk about God upholding things, it is crucially important that God is eternal.

I am just going to make one comment about Psalm 148. This psalm calls upon everything, not just man, but everything in heaven and earth to praise God because of His works of creation and for His providing for His creation. Hebrews 1:3 speaks of the Son as upholding the universe by His word or power. In Colossians 1:15-17 it is interesting that the Son, Christ, is the agent of the Father in creation. In verse 17, Jesus does the work of providence. Also in verse 17, Jesus is eternal. And as Creator and Sustainer, He is preeminent over all things, which is back in verse 15. As the heir of all things, all things exist for His purposes, for His glory, in verse 16. There are many, many more texts, and we are actually going to speak about some more of them. But I just wanted you to see that there is certainly sufficient biblical foundation for the idea of preservation.

I do this in the context of a kind of deism, the kind I have spoken about, but also a kind of naturalism, which is not all that different from deism. Where the deists would say, "God created things and went on vacation, therefore we do not need God to explain processes that are going on," the naturalist would agree with the latter, but would simply say we do not need God to explain the origin either. So when we see that Scripture affirms that the very presence of creation right now depends upon God, then we are ready to respond from a biblical perspective to the notion of an autonomous, physical universe. And this is what we are doing. We are spending a little bit of time on this because any of us who went to public school were taught an autonomous, physical universe. There are self-sustaining principles within biological systems, within astronomical systems, within geophysical systems, and any other system you can think of. All of which render the hypothesis of God irrelevant. We can explain natural phenomena simply by using the laws of natural causation.

From a biblical perspective, how are we to respond to the notion of an autonomous, physical universe? First of all, neither God nor the physical universe can be abstracted from the other. The world is never a self-sufficient or self-existing magnitude. Creation cannot be absolutized as an autonomous or sovereign quantity. A truly biblical perspective insists that any notion of an independent creation is really a kind of idolatry. So from a biblical perspective, I could summarize it this way: the hypothesis of an autonomous nature is idolatry. That which is independent is essentially free from God's sovereignty, free from His power, free from His moral order, free from His goal.

Secondly, neither God nor His creation can be abstracted from each other. God does not will to be God without His creation. We talked about this before when we talked about the fact that we do not get to God except from how He manifests Himself within the world. He has not willed (remember, that is His determination), He does not will to be God apart from the world. But the opposite is the case. Notice the converse is the case too, which is, God does not will the creation to be the creation without Him. God never wills the creation to exist without Him. Article 13 of the Belgic Confession of 1561 says, "After He created all things, He did not abandon them." It is interesting that the Belgic Confession stated it that way because in the 16<sup>th</sup> century people were already arguing for an autonomous creation. John Calvin said that if we limit God's activity to the primal act of creation, we necessarily cut ourselves off from God's Fatherly concern. That makes sense, does it not? We were not there; we are here. If God worked only there and not here, we do not know His Fatherly love, a love to which, and I continue here with Calvin, the Bible so abundantly witnesses. For it is in the present, not just in the past, and then Calvin quotes Acts 17:28, that we have our being and move and live in God.

It is only because we are confident in God's sustaining love, in His faithfulness, that we can have faith about the regularities of creation. Think about this for a second. The sun will come up tomorrow, not because of an innate law, but because of God's promise. What is natural law anyway? I know we have all been taught in science class that there are innate, independent, impersonal, abstract laws. What is a law? A law is nothing more than our observing that something happens with regularity. Is there a text somewhere that says, this is the law? Well, yes, it is called the Bible, but other than that, no. What we call natural law is nothing more than statistical projections based upon observation. And that is a pretty good scientific description of law. But our comfort, our hope that tomorrow will come, that the sun will come up tomorrow, lies not with probabilistic constructs, but with the personal promise of a sovereign Lord. A good example of this promise and comfort that comes to us from it is Psalm 104. Notice how active God is in His creation. I am not going to read the text; I am just going to cite some things and you can follow along. God sets the earth on its foundations so that it will never be shaken, in verse 5. But notice, God is the active one here. God set the earth. In verse 10, He sends the streams into the valley. Whereas verse 5 is in the past tense (creation), verse 10 is in the present tense. In verse 13, He waters the mountains. In verses 20 and 21, He makes the darkness so that the beasts of prey can seek their own sustenance. In verses 24-30, all creatures receive their food from Him. He sends, He makes, He waters, and all creatures receive. That is our comfort.

The preservation of creation, the fact that God must hold the world in His hand right now or it would fall apart, is not all there is to providence. Creation is not static after all. The creation did not just begin somewhere. It is also going somewhere. Right at the very beginning, God introduced a principle of dynamism into creation, a principle of novelty, a principle of contingency. If you want to know what that is, look in the mirror. There it is. God created one of His creatures as a free respondent to His love and His law. When God introduced man into the creational order, He guaranteed that things would change. He guaranteed that they would not stay static. In the same way that God would give all His creatures a role that they would play in creation, so He gave man a role, but with an important difference. He invites this creature to reflect His own imaginative character. As God delegated His own rulership to man and made man His vice regent, the human is not only responsible to preserve and protect creation, but also to seek new things within it, to make new things, to shape it into new things. I guess I could put it this way: in a very real sense God's intent was that He would rule His creation through the human. But through the abuse of his responsible freedom, the human introduced dangerous and counterproductive elements into creation as well. We introduced sin. As sinners, we are poor vice regents. As sinners, we tend to get it wrong. As sinners, we cannot see things as they really are. We have a tendency to see good as evil and evil as good. As soon as we do not see things as God intended, either their realities or their futures, we need help. We need lots of help. Help to see, directions to act, and we

need remediation; we need fixing. As broken vessels, we break things, which must be fixed. And thus, we force God to sustain His creation in spite of us. So part of God's sustaining ministry, His sustaining act, is to uphold creation in spite of His covenant vassals. There is a certain irony there. I hope you see that, that He intends to govern through us but it does not work because of our fallenness.

When we speak of providence as government, as God's rule over creation in history, we are obviously here talking about the kingdom of God. But there is a certain irony to the kingdom of God in Scripture. We can speak of the kingdom as a structural reality, as God's right to rule over all things. But in terms of the biblical story, the vast majority of the kingdom, or I could say the Scripture's greatest concern in talking about the kingdom, is its remedial trajectory, its redemptive intention. So in some ways, God's sustaining His government is remedial in action. As government, God's providence means that He directs all things to their appointed ends. I should also note here that Reformed theology has also spoken of sustenance here as well. Again this is an example of how things can be confused, for God must sustain and protect the redemptive strategies, agencies, and entities that He calls to existence. So again, our sin tremendously complicates the realities of things, even the realities of how God must govern and protect His creation. We are going to deal with the issue of God's sovereignty and free will, and our sin; our fall tremendously complicates this issue. Obviously, I think we would all agree, it is much more complicated because we are sinners than it would be if we were not sinners.

As I have already indicated, many texts combine or fail to make any distinction between God's leading His people, His sustaining activity, and His creating. I will give you as an example Psalm 133. In verses 1-3 of Psalm 133, God is to be praised for His work. In verses 6-9, God created by His word. In verses 8-9, all should fear Him because He is the Creator. In verses 10-11, God fulfills His plans and He frustrates the plans of the nations and He continues to do so. And in verses 12-22, God is the Creator and Sustainer who loves Israel.

Let us clean this up a bit. Scripture speaks of God's government as outstanding to all things. A lot of examples are found in the Bible, though I am not going to mention the texts. God sustains and directs the universe. He tells the moon its orbit. He tells asteroids and comets what to do. He governs the realm of nature. He governs the realm of angels, including Satan and the fallen angels. He governs the nations, human beings, animals, the free actions of people, the sinful actions of people and Satan, and even accidental occurrences.

I am sure there are many ways that Scripture talks about God's lordship over history and nature, but two common ways that theology and Scripture get at this are by the doctrines of concurrence and miracles. I want to talk about both of those. First, the word 'concurrence' only means cooperation. The idea of concurrence has a long history in Reformed theology, and even in broader Christian dogmatics. It oftentimes never makes it to the pew. In fact, it does not make it to the pew because it does not adequately make it into the pulpit. Many people have the idea that Calvinists teach that God does everything. Well, we do. But further, they think those Calvinists will teach that man does nothing. We do not. Some claim that those Calvinists teach that human beings are like puppets on strings and all history is the result of a divine decree, and even a divine execution, and it does not need any human input or participation. Well, we do not teach such things. There may have been and there may be some people who approach this kind of thing with something called hyper-Calvinism. But the majority position in the Reformed tradition has never been the view that God does everything while man does nothing and we just sit there and wait for Him. We do not do that. Interestingly, you can find an affirmation and discussion of concurrence in almost every Reformed systematic theology. In fact, Bavinck called concurrence the primary manner in which God exercises His providence in the world. Well, what do we mean by it here? Just to start, we can say that history is never a merely divine

enterprise. History is never a merely human enterprise. Both God and man are real actors within history. And already, by knowing that concurrence means cooperation, you can get a hint at where we are going.

Let me give you a couple disclaimers about what concurrence is not. I do not think that we are going to get anywhere by trying to understand God's agency in history or our agency in history by way of games with causality terms. I think this is actually what happens oftentimes in Aristotelian causality, where you have final causes and formal causes and efficient causes and secondary causes and tertiary causes and I am sure I have left out some causes. The action of God in history is not merely another way of talking about our action but in different language. I think that is what a lot of that different language does. We are simply, by changing the language, pretending we have made a change. The fact of the matter is, we have not made a difference at all in talking about formal, efficient, effective, and all the rest of the causes. A second thing concurrence is not is a division of labor in which we point to one kind of event or one event and say, "God did that," and we point to another event or kind of event and say, "Man did that." That is a kind of synergism. In the first one, when we are talking about the different kinds of causation, what we really do is make one of the two redundant. Either man did it or God did it. Make up your mind. And in the second one, we have a division of labor, which says only one did it.

I think it is better to think of history as an inherently covenantal enterprise. It is interesting that both G.C. Berkhouwer and Louis Berkoff likened concurrence to marriage, and that might be our best analogy here. God's relationship to our historical action in history is much like the relationship of one spouse to another in a healthy, working marital relationship. In other words, history is fully the product of both in cooperation. In terms of the biblical text, we should note that Scripture confesses that God is sovereign over all His works, even to the point that Isaiah can say in chapter 42, actually it is Yahweh speaking, "I determine the ends from the beginnings." God is sovereign over all His works, but Scripture holds just as unrelentingly to the thesis that we human beings are responsible for our behaviors, and both are true all the time at each moment in history. God is sovereign and I am responsible. As Berkhouwer noted, and you have a good quotation here, concurrence excludes neither party. He says, "Scripture nowhere suggests that God's work is limited by human activity, or that God's activity negates human enterprise. He who understands well the biblical teaching of God's government knows that it is no despotism, compulsion, or sort of overpowering which renders real creaturely activity null or impossible. He knows that it is a divine ruling in and over all creaturely enterprise." Notice here that we are not simply chalking everything up to the inscrutable God. History and our lives are far too complicated for that.