

Providence (cont.)

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for all Your marvelous gifts to Your church and to us as Your people. We thank You, Lord, that You are just the kind of God who would send Your Son to die and to die for us. We thank You for so great a salvation and a grace that is far beyond anything that we could ever deserve, anything beyond what we could ever imagine. We pray now that as we again turn our attention to Your Word, to look at issues of providence and miracles and angels, that again our discussion would be faithful to Your Word and that it would seek to glorify and praise Your name. We thank You for all that You have given us now. In Jesus' name, Amen.

We were talking about the issue of providence and the doctrine of concurrence. The doctrine of concurrence holds that human beings are responsible for their actions yet God is intimately involved with all historical events. As Calvin would put it, God is never idle. There is never an event, never a moment, when God is on vacation. Thus both God is sovereign and human beings are responsible.

If God is the sovereign Lord over all things and He leads history through an intimate providence toward His goal, toward the goal of His redemptive and glorified kingdom, what are we to make of sin? What sense do we make of sin in relationship to God's providence? First, Scripture is clear in its insistence that God is holy. God is not the author of sin. James 1:13-14 says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me,' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone, but each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." And 1 John 2:16 says, "For everything in the world, the cravings of the sinful man, the lust of the eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world." So God is never the cause of sin. But further, and just as importantly, God is not the planner of sin. He does not conspire that we sin. The plan of God is a plan of redemption, not a plan of sin. The popular notion that God plans sin as well as redemption in such a way that we sin because God has determined that we will do so is to make both sin and redemption equal goods, for whatever God does is good. Well, if God is not the author of sin, if He is not the planner of sin, it is not as simple as saying that sin comes from man but good things come from God. No, it is not that simple, for that notion is simply a division of labor. And we said we cannot get at providence that way, that we do some things and God does other things. God's relationship to sin is actually far more complicated than that.

Let us turn our attention here more directly to God's relationship to sin. The fact is that we do see that God does use human sinfulness for His kingdom purposes. We may speak of God as relating to sin in at least four different ways. First of all, God does prevent sin. In Psalm 19:3, we see David praying that God would keep him from sin. David prays, "Keep your servant from presumptuous sin. Let it not have dominion over me." A good example of God keeping people from sin is found in Genesis 20, the story of Abimelech. Abraham, as you recall, passed off Sarah his wife as his sister and thanks to his cowardice, Sarah ended up as a member of Abimelech's harem. But before Abimelech touched Sarah, God came to him in a dream and told him Sarah was married, and thus the Lord did not allow Abimelech to touch her. We have these kinds of examples in Scripture.

But it is not the case that God always prevents sin. Sometimes He permits it. At Lystra, Paul preached that in past generations, God allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. And in Romans 1, Paul speaks of God having given men over to the impurity of fallen desires and improper modes of behavior. That is in Romans 1:24-28. Why would God do this? Why would God permit sin? Why would a loving God permit what are often murderous and heinous human acts? This question is taken up over and over again in the Bible. The psalmist continually asks, Why do the evil prosper? Why do the innocent suffer? Why is there such a lack of equity in the world?

Well, several answers are hints to that. But they are all just hints and possibly none of them are sufficient for the whole. God sometimes permits sin out of the fact that He is long-suffering. If God brought immediate judgment, every time there was sin, there would be no chance for restoration, no chance for salvation. This afternoon, I was looking at my notes and when I read that to myself I thought that if God brought immediate judgment, if He brought a lightening bolt every time there was sin, we would have a light show in this very room. Two or three of us might make it until the break, maybe not that many. Sometimes, God permits sin to teach His people of their need for Him, to teach His people of the destructive realities of their ways so that they will return to the Lord. But the fact is that when we look at these kinds of answers, that God permits sin for the sake of His redemption, those kinds of answers sound somewhat trivial, in the light of a Hitler in the 1930's, a Stalin in the 1930's-1940's, a Pol Pot in the 1970's, and the 1990's reality of Iraq and Bosnia. Why God permits a particular sin, even a truly murderous sin, is simply not clear to us. The irrational, even absurd, reality of sin introduces an element into our lives and into our history which simply cannot be accounted for in any satisfactory way.

Third, God also directs sin, and this really flows from the previous point. God sometimes permits sin because it becomes an opportunity for His redemptive purposes, and thus He takes that sin and directs it. He turns evil to good. He uses an evil that is already there for His redemptive purposes, and the Bible is full of examples of this. Think of Joseph and his brothers. His brothers wanted to get rid of him, so they sold him into slavery. And of course years later when they meet him in Egypt, he tells them that God meant it for good, so their evil act ultimately becomes an occasion for him becoming their deliverer. In Exodus 4, we are told of Pharaoh's hardened heart, even that God hardened his heart. But it is already clear in Exodus 3 that Pharaoh is already, and already by his own fallen nature, a very hard man indeed. When God says, "I am going to harden your heart," He is saying to Pharaoh, "Do not change. I am going to use you just as you are. The character that you are will be used for my glory." A third example of course is the crucifixion of Jesus. As we are told in Acts 2, it was an unjust, illegal act. It is interesting that God can do these kinds of things, that He can take our sinful acts and use them for His glory, that He can use them for His redemptive purposes. All of that presupposes an intelligence, a kind of military intelligence, and a patience and a confidence that is truly supreme.

God's fourth response to sin is that He limits it. There are times when God does not prevent it, but He rather restrains its extent. He places some limits upon the power of sin and the evildoer. Think here of Paul's promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that God will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength, but He will provide a means of escape.

Now those four points come from an examination of biblical materials. But after we cite them we are all still left wanting more. More needs to be said. And throughout the history of the church, theologians have felt that same reality and they have sought to say more. Thus we come to the complexity of the issue and the limitation of our temporal horizon. Augustine was one of those people as a systematician who wanted to say more. His doctrine of monergistic election, the idea that redemption takes place by the singular action of God, called for an equally high view of divine sovereignty. Augustine said that God superintends the flow of history in such a way that He is present and active in all things. His will is efficient at all times. Yet, Augustine saw the problem. If God superintends all of history, what are we to make of historical events that appear to be contrary to God's will? If there are no such events, then all things are good. If God has willed everything, then all things are good because God is good. Augustine could hold that sin is contrary to the will of God, but he formulated the issue this way: sin does not belong to God's decree. Augustine would speak of a decretive will. God has decreed only the good. Sin, however, belongs to God's permissive will, which you might think of as God just slightly turning His

back. Augustine had this idea of God's passive actions and His active actions. Now in the end, Augustine knew that this construction was not sufficient, but he was willing to live with the antinomy of it because he thought it did justice to both sides of the biblical equation. God is sovereign yet we are responsible for our own acts. God does not tempt anyone to sin; He is not the author to sin, yet He is involved in every moment.

I think Calvin gives a more full, more satisfying answer. Like Augustine, he also acknowledged the anomalous nature of the issue. He said there is no way to formulate the matter such that it is perfectly rational to the human eye. Man cannot measure the measurelessness of God. Indeed, Calvin warns us against penetrating too deeply into the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. Rather than talk about a decretive will and a permissive will, as if these are two different kinds of things, two different kinds of will, as if they function differently, Calvin preferred to speak of God's revealed will and His secret will. We have to be careful here. By this language, Calvin did not mean to refer to two different things, two different wills. By the term 'revealed will,' Calvin meant the singular, all-embracing purpose of God insofar as God's purposes have been revealed to us and they can be understood by us. By the term 'secret will of God,' Calvin meant the same singular will, but that will includes realities or depths of God's intentions that are unknowable to us.

An example might help. Think of being out on the ocean and seeing an iceberg. We now know that there is much of an iceberg that is underneath the ocean. There is that part of the iceberg that is perceptible, above the water, and there is that part of the iceberg which is imperceptible. And I think this analogy comes close to what Calvin means by secret will and revealed will. We are talking about the same iceberg but it actually has two manifestations. By God's secret will, He governs all things and He destines them to their end. But this will is far beyond our knowing. While God calls humans to obedience and our obedience and the possibility of our disobedience is real, we can never limit God's government to that reality. We can never limit God's government to those things that we can comprehend, to those things that we can ascertain, to those things that we can know. You see, God's covenantal obligation of being the governor and preserver of all reality demands far more of Him than merely what we can see and comprehend. He not only drives the celestial frame and all its parts, but He also sustains, nourishes and cares for everything He has made, even the least sparrow. In his commentary on Genesis 2, Calvin says, "If He should withdraw His hand even a little, all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing." Now this means that God directs all according to His providential plan. All events are manifestations of God's purposes and His Fatherly providence. And yes, this intimate, Fatherly providence extends even to sin and evil, although in ways we cannot fathom. Again, God is not idle. He is always thoroughly engaged with His creation, even in the sin of man. With this construct of a revealed will and a divine will, Calvin was able to affirm both the proposition that God calls all to redemption, that is His revealed will, yet also that God intends only to save the elect, and again, that is part of the mystery of His secret will. It is a mystery not in a sense that it is withheld from us, but mystery in the sense that we simply do not have the capacity to ascertain it.

None of this means that Calvin is a hard determinist. I want to defend him here. At one point in his career, he found himself in a debate or a controversy with a group of people called Libertines. The Libertines believe that all things are traceable to a single causation, something which determines everything, good or bad. They had a hard determinist view. Calvin responded that this kind of view reduces the distinction between good and evil to mere appearance and it destroys human responsibility. Calvin wanted to defend that we are responsible creatures. God has not planned everything in such a way that our present is actually His mental past. We are not simply playing out the divine record that was determined in the distant past. To the Libertines, Calvin responded that God has charged us to

exercise care over our lives and to pray for others. These things are real and we are responsible for them. Yet secretly in ways we most certainly cannot comprehend, all of these are part of His secret plan.

Notice here that Calvin has refused to reduce the whole thing to a nice division of labor: “I do this and God does that. I do the bad and God does the good. God gets the glory when I am good and I get the ashes when I am bad.” The truth is, the hailstorm which destroys the crop and brings famine is not beyond God’s Fatherly care. He is not idle, even there. Even though we cannot understand His purpose. Calvin said, “Whatever happens to us, happy or sad, prosperous or adverse, comes to us from him.” Is God willy-nilly in His plan then? Calvin would say, “No, He is not.” Since we have faith in God’s goodness, we can firmly believe, and I quote Calvin again, “that God always has the best reason for His plan, even if that plan is not immediately transparent to us.” God’s love and wisdom apply to the world in such a way that our human understanding of those things, of His love and His wisdom, are weak and trivial by comparison. As we do not understand as God does, fundamental questions about the relationship of God to the world remain incomprehensible to us. Calvin’s conclusion of this discussion in the *Institutes* turns to Romans 9, and I am going to turn there too, to Romans 9:20-21. Calvin reads this not as an accusing question, but as a doxology. Romans 9:20-21 says, “Who are you, o man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” Calvin ends his discussion in chapter 17 in Book 1 of the *Institutes* by saying, “We do not try to make God render account to us.”

Scripture talks about God having a plan that includes all things, and there are plenty of texts. I am not going to bother reading all of them. I think of Isaiah 42 which says, “I determine the ends from the beginning.” The purpose of this kind of language is not meant to render our responsibility void. The purpose of this kind of language is not meant to deny God’s holiness and His justice. Nor is the purpose of this language meant to give us a nice, neat, tidy, rational explanation of reality. The purpose of the biblical testimony to God’s plan is to comfort us that God is in control and that we do not live in a world that is chaos.

I will say something briefly about Jonathan Edwards. In his book, *The History of Redemption*, Edwards likened God’s providence, and by extension all of history, to a vast river system, a system that has many tributaries and streams, a system whose sources are lakes and mountain snow packs that are hundreds, maybe thousands of miles distant from one another. Up close, we see merely a single stream, or a tributary, and often the tributary or the stream we are fishing in appears to be flowing in the opposite direction from where the big river is ultimately going to go. Quite simply, from our temporally limited vantage point, history is a mess. It is a complex of competing motives and cacophonous voices, and often it is difficult to hear God’s voice, or to determine His motive. I give you that analogy from Jonathan Edwards. You might want to add it to Calvin’s notion of secret and revealed will. Edwards’ analogy gets at the issue of perception.

Remember, a declaration of God’s sovereignty, both in Calvin’s construction of it and Scripture’s construction of it, can never be used as an excuse to say, “Well, I married the wrong person but it was God’s idea.” That is not the purpose of making those declarations in the first place. Nowhere is God’s sovereignty articulated to take the gun out of our hand, if I can put it that way. Rather, His sovereignty is articulated to make it clear that we do not live in a willy-nilly universe. You are still responsible for your actions. Ultimately our decisions, even in sin, concur with God’s secret choices. This deals with God’s secret will. I cannot use this as an excuse. Remember that concurrence tells us that we cannot limit or reduce anything to a single causation. One of the problems in the so-called history of Calvinism versus Arminianism, is that Calvinists are many times so eager to defend the sovereignty of God, that we talk

about all things happening because God wills them and we forget that human beings are also responsible actors in the covenant of history. And the Arminians seem to come from the other side. They are so eager to defend a human libertarian freedom that they reduce God's sovereignty to merely a kind of persuasion. It seems to me that biblically, we need to affirm both. God is a full actor in history. And we are full actors. And there is no division of labor in such a way that you can say that some percentage is God's doing and some percentage is ours. It makes bad math, but the Bible makes bad math a lot. It is 100 percent each that God and we are responsible for. It is never the case at any point that one can say, "God has willed this so it is not my fault. It is not my responsibility." Calvin's affirmation of God's sovereignty was never meant to fall into that kind of determinism.

Sometimes God's providence is blatant. It is unmistakable. Sometimes God's action is not concurrent, but unilateral. There are some works of God's providence which appear to fall outside the norm, outside of mere preservation or government. In fact, some works of God appear to be inexplicable on the basis of the usual patterns of history and nature, and we call such things miracles. Yet within Christian circles, there have been many different perspectives on miracles. I would like to concentrate on the thought of one person here, Johann Diemer. Diemer was not a theologian, nor a philosopher. He was, in fact, a biologist in the mid-20th century. He worked primarily in the 1940's and he is a Dutchman. But he raises questions about miracles that are very interesting and he puts them into a very interesting context. The first thing we note is that Diemer's argument is polemical. He is arguing against someone. His approach toward miracles was directed against the supernaturalism that grew up in 18th century orthodoxy, a supernaturalism that arose as a kind of response to Enlightenment deism. I am going to go a little bit slowly here because some of the terms we will use here in talking about miracles are somewhat philosophical. It may take you a second to mentally get a connection on them.

According to Diemer, 18th century orthodoxy by and large accepted or bought into a deistic worldview, the idea that God is the Creator but He in fact runs the world by way of a collection of imminent, natural laws. The created order is run by a series or collection of autonomous natural processes. But against deism, orthodoxy still wanted to hold to the idea of miracle. On occasion, God interferes with the regular cadence of things by way of a radical intrusion of foreign and novel power, and this is what Diemer means by dualism. You have on the one hand this collection of autonomous natural forces and on the other you have God acting personally, dramatically, supernaturally. So we have a normally self-sustaining, natural order and an interventionist supernaturalism. That construct did comport well with the definition of miracle as it was commonly understood in the 18th century. That definition was, "A singular, unexpected event, which clashes with the usual order of events or at least departs from the laws which experience has discovered." Now Diemer critiques or judges that to be dualistic. We have autonomous nature on the one side, and on the other side, supernatural occurrences which scrap the natural order by an arbitrary act of the divine will.

Now Diemer suggests that the motive behind this conception of things was really to preserve miracles. The 18th century church wanted to preserve the miraculous. But it did so at a great cost, for it impoverished creation and it divorced the natural world from God's divine concern. If we want to know the natural world, we look at the natural laws that control the natural world. As Diemer put it, seeking to preserve the miraculous powers of Christ, supernaturalism allowed itself to be "imprisoned in a rationalistic concept of nature." In the end, not only does nature suffer, but our conception of the miraculous and the supernatural does as well. If you are going to have a dualistic structure here, if you are going to try to bring together a natural physics with a supernatural interventionist miracle, you hurt both your understanding of creation and miracle.

By creating a radical disjunction between the natural and the supernatural, we push the supernatural off into a realm where it is of little or no good to us. How many of you have had a miracle? About 20 percent. The other 80 percent of us just got secularized, because we haven't experienced a miracle. That is what this structure does. It says that for those of us who have not had a miracle, have not had a miraculous healing, our entire lives have been governed by an autonomous physics that has nothing to do with God's kingship, has nothing to do with His kingdom. We end up defending an abstraction. Diemer argued that supernaturalism seeks to explain as much as possible by way of imminent physics, and what happens is it allows whatever falls through that net to be caught up as a miracle. Supernatural events, unlike natural events, do witness to God's power, but those events are locked up by and large in Scripture. In other words, they belong to a different time in a different place. So Diemer suggests that one of the problems of the usual understanding of miracle is that it in fact secularizes nature. God works in miracles, not in natural order.

The doctrine of creation also suffers here because this dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural tends to view God not as Creator, not as Sovereign over all things, but rather as something akin to the deity of ancient Gnosticism. The Gnostic god was not the creator, he was only a redeemer. He would kind of sneak in, in the darkness while the god of creation was sleeping and he would perform his magic shows which would take a soul off to redemption. In fact, a deity whose miracles violate the natural order of things shows a disrespect for creation because he violates the norms to which creation is subject.

Beyond Diemer's critique, what is his own view? Does he deny the miraculous? He does insist that this dichotomy, this distinction between the natural and the supernatural, is unnecessary for making sense of the biblical events. But by doing that, he does not mean to suggest the adequacy of purely naturalistic explanations either. Diemer thinks the key here is not so much an analysis of those events, but rather a philosophical analysis of nature. First, Diemer held that the law structures that God originally designed into creation still hold. The fall did not mitigate God's law, God's Word for His creation. The earth is still the Lord's. Second, that which we call miraculous is not an intervention. It is not a suspension of imminent physics. Rather, Diemer held that miracles take place fully in accordance with the divine order established in creation. There is no release from the creational order, under either the realities of sin or redemption. He said, "God never works outside of the root of nature." Third, miracles, then, do not violate nature. Rather, they open up the natural depth dimension of the created order. You have to think about that sentence for a minute. They open up the depth dimension of the created order. We will come back to that. In the conditions of fallen history, miracle manifests the restorative powers of God. Diemer said, "With the signs and miracles of God's providence and the history of mankind, no laws or fixed relationships are circumvented, but under other than the ordinary well-done conditions, other powers are opened up." I will say more here in a second. But his fourth point is that miracles run neither counter to nature nor above it, but rather, miracles restore nature to its original purposefulness. Diemer held the miracles of Jesus did not meddle with the natural law in any way, but were an extension of Jesus' own natural dominion over creation.

Now Diemer is following this approach because he holds that Scripture does not speak of God as working either in tandem with or in opposition to any autonomous forces. There is no such thing as an autonomous process. Nor does Scripture depict God as a God of gaps, one who acts supernaturally wherever some kind of imminent physics are insufficient. All power, and here is the point he wants to get to, all power is God's and by His power all things are done. Thus we see that the dualism between nature and supernature evaporates because all things are miracle. All things are supernatural for him. Furthermore, the miracle of recreation calls for the powers "which sleep in creation." He actually talks about creation having a natural healing process, thus a miracle is not a categorically different kind of act.

It is just an action with a different goal. Its goal is to restore rather than to perpetuate. Sixth we must say that all phenomena is miraculous, that the signs and wonders of the Gospel story are of one piece with the balance of created reality. So there is categorically no difference between your being healed from cancer or your growing a new fingernail. Finally, the restorative act of miracle transcends fallen reason and is known only by faith. But that is no asylum of ignorance. What Diemer wants to say here is that all things can be known only by faith. It is never the case that nature is a raw given. Nature is never openly exhaustible by natural reason, and here he is not only arguing against 18th century deism and 18th century orthodoxy but he is also arguing against the Thomistic tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Our confession cannot be brought in as a stopgap to fill the space left by rationalism. In other words, our confession that God has acted is not an epistemological adjunct to reason. Rather, our confession, the fact that God is the sovereign Lord of all things, is an essential ingredient of any adequate epistemology. Nature is nothing by itself. All nature comes from the hand of God, thus all nature is miracle. But it is only by faith that we will know that.

How do we evaluate what Diemer has done? Let me be critical at first. I think the idea of a natural healing process is the problematic statement here. Diemer seems to subsume sin and redemption under creation. He seems to suggest that restoration is inherent to creation. And if that is the case, if restoration is inherent to creation, then so is sin. But further here, you must point out that the law structures of creation do not necessitate the gracious act of God to get rid of sin. Another way of getting at this is that, for Diemer, grace is almost built into the mechanism. If things break and they heal by themselves, then we can say that, that healing is inherent to it, is intrinsically part of it. Biblically, though, what we see is that grace is grace. It is a gift. You cannot assume it. You cannot presume it. It is not something that is owed. It is not automatic. Grace is not grace if it is part of a mechanism.

I think Diemer misses the fact that in grace there is a new action of God. God did not have to save. He could have left us as fallen. He did not have to perform healing miracles. He could let us die. And then finally, Diemer does not do justice of the wonder of miracle. The fact of the matter is the biblical language of miracle is that there is a difference between different kinds of events. There is the biblical language of wonder, of marvel. There is a kind of wonder in the reality of biblical miracles, and I think that Diemer underemphasizes these things.

But what is good here is that Diemer wants to criticize the dualism that we often think about when we come to the issue of miracles. We often do, even as Christians, think of the material world as just being there, of acting all on its own. It has its own kind of system. It has its own kind of laws: "God acts by miracles, but we all know where babies come from. God has nothing to do with that." So I find Diemer's emphasis on the sovereignty of God a very helpful corrective to this dualism.

How can we fix what is wrong with Diemer? If Diemer gives us some positive advice, some positive help in thinking about miracles, maybe we can fix what is wrong with him. I would appeal here to C.S. Lewis' notion of countervailing force in his book *Miracles*. In that book, Lewis gives us a way of thinking about miracle as a second work. We have creation and now we have redemption. We have the first creation of God and now we have the miraculous act of God. It gives us a way of affirming that second action but without falling into the dualism that Diemer fears. Lewis suggests that in a miracle, the usual processes, God's usual working is not suspended nor violated, but it is overruled. Think, for instance, of an axe head that floats. That is because there is an unseen hand holding it up. The law of gravity is still working but there is a physic that we do not understand. It is unusual. It is miraculous. But it is not anti-creational. It is not a violation. This allows the very kind of distinction between miracle and everyday occurrence that Scripture seems to affirm but Diemer under-emphasizes.

One last point here that I am going to add, which helps Diemer's case, is that we need to realize what we are talking about when we are talking about laws of nature. Laws of nature are really nothing more than statistical reports. This is what we usually see. I think we need to realize, and I think that Lewis helps here, that there is more to the physics of running a universe than we or our science have even begun to realize. When we talk about laws of nature and all the rest, we may in fact relativize the wonder of creation.