

## **Class 1 Definition of Divine Providence**

### Getting Acquainted with Divine Providence

Ephesians 1:9-11, "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him (Christ) with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."

While not trying to be overly simple or cute, I want to make the clear proposal that Christianity, with no qualifying statements, proclaims and asserts that there is a God, that He is the one only true and living God, that God is sovereign in every aspect of life (including in human history and experience), and all aspects of the universe and reality are sourced from God and find their meaning in God. In the words of Romans 11:36, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

This is a course on divine providence. We must see that divine providence by necessity presumes (rightly and truly) divine existence and sovereignty. And at the same time, providence essentially exists as the natural and necessary extension from divine sovereignty, and in particular relates to God's person, goodness, power, creation, oversight, and purpose. All this must be assumed and understood before we begin.

Furthermore, as I have recently said to some with regard to this course, I believe that there is no greater doctrine that needs to be rightly understood by God's people, and this doctrine is absolutely essential for the peace and comfort of God's people during times of trial and trouble.

Tonight's class on divine providence seeks to define and understand the meaning of God's providence. I will begin with doctrinal statements regarding divine providence, then I will summarize with some theological insights from these statements. I believe that these doctrinal confessions are representative of biblical teaching concerning divine providence.

Note: These doctrinal statements were included in John Piper's book on "Providence."

### **Heidelberg Catechism (1563)**

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) was composed in the city of Heidelberg, Germany at the request of Frederick III, who ruled the province from 1559 to 1576. This catechism was intended as a tool for teaching young people and for a guide for preaching in the churches. The Synod of Dort (1618-19, Dordrecht, Holland...the colloquial shortened name was "Dort" ...This Synod was called to deal with Arminianism that had been taught in some of the churches by Jacobus Arminius) approved the Heidelberg Catechism in 1619, and this catechism soon became the ecumenical catechism for Reformed churches and the basis of their confessions.

*Question 27: What do you understand by the providence of God?*

*Answer: "The almighty, everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by His Fatherly hand."*

Note the following emphasis on divine providence in the Heidelberg Catechism:

- The catechism links the providence of God to the attributes and nature of God, especially His omnipotence and His omnipresence. Further this catechism relates to divine sustenance (maintenance) and governance (which implies God's rule and reign over all things). I like the clear statement in this catechism that divine providence means that there is no such thing as chance.

### **Belgic Confession (1561)**

The word "Belgic" refers to the area considered to be the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which at the time included what is now Holland and Belgium. The Reformed churches in the Netherlands had suffered great persecution by the hands of the Roman Catholic church during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This confession was based on a confession written by John Calvin, and the confession was modified and adopted by the Synod of Dort.

#### *Article 13: The Doctrine of Providence*

*"We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to His holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God orderly arrangement."*

Note the following observation:

- As with all Reformed confessions and catechisms regarding divine providence, the Belgic Confession also states that all aspects of reality and in human history rest upon God's providential leadership, oversight, and orderly arrangement.
- The Belgic Confession makes clear that divine providence is based on the goodness of God; thus, it not only rests upon the nature of God, but especially the goodness of God.

### **Westminster Larger Catechism (1648)**

The Westminster Larger Catechism was devised for Reformed churches in England, Scotland, and Ireland.

#### *Question 18: What are the works of providence?*

*Answer: "God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to His own glory."*

Note:

- This catechism links divine providence with God's sovereign power and control, it also links providence with divine intervention and condescending action on earth, giving order to the actions, and the catechism states that God acts in providence for His own glory.

### **Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)**

This is the confession of faith upon which the Westminster Catechism is built.

#### *Chapter 5, Providence*

*5:1 "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."*

5:7 "As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of His Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof." (1 Timothy 4:10; Amos 9:8-9; Romans 8:28; Isaiah 43:3-5, 14)

Note:

- Look at the verbs used together to enlarge on the actions of divine providence; these are very powerful. Read the verbs again: uphold, dispose, and govern. Notice also the universal comprehensiveness of these verbs: all creatures, actions, and things. Note also that providence is "most wise and holy, according to His (God's) infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will." Thus, providence is always wise, holy, and dependent upon God's predetermined infallible foreknowledge and will. Finally, providence always results in the manifestation of God's wisdom, power, justice, wisdom, and mercy.

## ***Philadelphia Confession 1742***

### **Chapter 5**

#### **Of Divine Providence**

The Philadelphia Confession of 1742 was adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association on September 25, 1742. It is obvious that these Baptist churches were reformed in doctrine. You will note clearly that this is almost an exact quotation (with some modifications) of the Westminster Confession. The Second London Confession (1689 England) and the Philadelphia Confession of 1742 (America) were both Baptist confessions that were in agreement with the Westminster with regard to the fundamental teachings on the doctrine of God and salvation of the Reformation.

*1. God the good Creator of all things, in his infinite power and wisdom doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will; to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.*

*(Heb. 1:3; Job 38:11; Isa. 46:10, 11; Ps. 135:6; Matt. 10:29-31; Eph. 1:11)*

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

*(1 Tim. 4:10; Amos 9:8, 9; Isa. 43:3-5)*

#### **Main Theological Ideas in Biblical Providence**

1. The theological essence of the person of God in His glorious attributes, His exaltation, and His are maintained and required in the doctrine of providence
2. The doctrine of creation and God's sovereign control over creation are taught and maintained by the biblical doctrine of providence.
3. Providence gives meaning and purpose for the entire material universe, without which nothing in this world makes sense.
4. The allowance for the doctrine of sin and human responsibility in the matter of sin are maintained and presumed within the scope of God's sovereign providence.

5. The doctrine of redemption and the salvation of the believing elect are established by the doctrine of providence.
6. Divine providence upholds God's absolute sovereignty and transcendent authority in all matters, and providence fulfills in human history and experience that which God ordains resulting in goodness and God's glory.
7. Providence confirms divine wisdom and justice, even though in life experience God's elect do not see or understand either through the lens of their limited perspective and weakness.

#### Noteworthy Clarifications and Considerations:

1. The sovereignty of God works sovereignly through the providence of God, which performs God's decrees and secret will in the universe, human history, and in the lives of God's elect believers.
2. The operation of divine sovereignty does not negate or deny human responsibility and accountability, the exercise of human will (we use the term "human agency of will", not "free will"), or the presence of evil that results in dishonor of God and suffering among people.
3. The perception of God's sovereign providence in human affairs and events from God's point of view is perfect and complete, but from man's point of view is mysterious, secretive, complicated, and beyond our capacity to fully understand in this life. Thus, we approach the topic and application of this doctrine with humility, seeking the truth of God, so that we may live rightly in the view of this truth.