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Getting It Right From the Beginning, Part Two

The doctrine of creation does not stand alone. The universe has not been set adrift in time without purpose or divine direction. The Christian affirmation of God requires an affirmation of His continuing sovereign Lordship over the created order. This affirmation sets the Christian worldview apart from alternative worldviews which recognize no continuing divine direction. Today, Dr. Mohler considers the Christian doctrine of Providence.

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The doctrine of creation does not stand alone. The universe has not been set adrift in time without purpose or divine direction. The Christian affirmation of God requires an affirmation of His continuing sovereign Lordship over the created order. This affirmation sets the Christian worldview apart from alternative worldviews which recognize no continuing divine direction. Deism, a perspective accepted by many in the nineteenth century, affirmed God as the creator of the universe, but denied any continuing divine will expressed in the history or future of the creation. God, it was suggested, had created the world much as a clock, and had wound it up to move by its own direction. Contemporary challenges to the affirmation of divine providence suggest that though God created the world and set the original forces in order, God has either ceased to will, or is unable to make his will effective within the creation.

All of these are clearly in opposition to biblical theism. The God of the Bible is a God who acts within the history of His creation and who has ultimate control over the affairs of the nations, natural forces, and humanity.

Like creation, God's providence is a Trinitarian activity. The Lord who exercises providence is none other than the Lord and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that providence is energized by the presence of the Holy Spirit within the world. The root meaning of providence is "foresight," though the biblical meaning is far more rich in significance. God does not exercise mere foresight into the affairs of the cosmos; he ultimately orders and directs world occurrences. The biblical doctrine of providence is demonstrated in the concrete experiences of Israel and her neighbors in the Old Testament and in the life of Jesus and the development of the church in the New Testament. As such, divine providence is a sign of God's steadfast covenant love with his people. The history of the Jews in the Old Testament exists as a powerful witness and sign of God's intervening covenant love—a love ultimately revealed on the cross.

"In God," Paul declares, "all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17) Nothing in creation itself is self-sufficient. God is responsible for both the origin and the preservation of all creation. Without God's continuing preservation of creation the cosmos would cease to exist. No atom of the universe is self-sufficient—all creation is utterly dependent upon God's gracious sustenance. As Ezra affirmed in the book of Nehemiah, "Thou art the Lord, thou alone, . . . thou preservest all." (Nehemiah 9:6)

To affirm providence as the divine preserving is to acknowledge that creation has limits. That these limits do not rule the creature is due to God's acting preservation. This is not a passive divine activity. God enters into world occurrence and ordains that it should exist. This is not to suggest that God creates the world anew each moment, as has been suggested by some theologians. God's creative activity as represented in new beings and new life demonstrates the continuation of his creative will, but the original creative act which set the cosmos in place is a unique once-for-all event. The Christian does not know the means of God's preservation of the world, but the knowledge of his preserving love provides comfort and refutes contemporary naturalism, which supposes that the world exists on its own.

This aspect of divine providence is often called divine government. The Christian affirms the Lordship of God over all the affairs of humanity, nations, and natural forces. The universe is not set adrift in purposeless trajectory. Human history is not a meaningless record of isolated events and movements. The future is not a matter of mere human responsibility or

chance. The biblical worldview presupposes the governing Lordship of God in the cosmos, and biblical theism, that understanding of God's own nature demonstrated in the text of Scripture, requires an affirmation of God's sovereign rulership over all world occurrences—past history and future hope.

The divine ruling has both individual and corporate dimensions. It encompasses the unfathomable forces of energy reaching throughout the vast expanse of the universe. Furthermore, it includes the experiences, actions, and destiny of individual human beings. Theologians have often identified a third aspect of divine providence, God's accompanying of the creature, that is, divine concurrence or cooperation. This is best understood within the context of the divine ruling, however. In affirming God's cooperation with the creature theologians have attempted to do justice to the role of the human will within human activity. The human is not a static creature, but possesses a will and limited means to accomplish that will. The biblical worldview does not deny this human role in world events and the actions of the individuals. Nevertheless, the Christian recognizes the ultimacy of the divine will and ruling. Insofar as the creature exercises its will, it does so in the context, acknowledged or not, of the ultimate divine will. The sovereign divine will is effective, but not despotic. Human freedom and divine sovereignty are both affirmed. As Paul affirms in Philippians 2:13, God is active in both the willing and working of his creatures.

Any affirmation of divine providence must acknowledge the enormous challenge to that biblical affirmation represented by the problem of evil and suffering in the world. In the minds of many individuals, the presence of tremendous human suffering and manifest evil calls into question the goodness or potency of God, or both. This problem is not a modern discovery. It is as old as the book of Job and as persistent as any theological issue.

Two forms of evil must be distinguished: natural evil and human evil. Natural evil includes earthquakes, floods, fires, and other causes of suffering not caused by direct human evil. This problem may be posed as the question: "Why are there scorpions, sharks and snakes in God's good creation?" Human evil is more easily defined. It is the product of human activity; humans inflicting evil and tremendous suffering upon others.

The Christian must not evade these issues. The secular mind may never be satisfied with the Christian response, but the believer must not ignore the challenge. Believers themselves are often troubled by this challenge to faith. Death, acute and chronic physical pain, profound mental anguish, and manifold other forms of suffering face both believers and unbelievers on a daily basis.

Various theological options have been suggested as a means of addressing this challenge. Some have suggested that God has ceased to be active in the everyday experience of the world. Others, including Christian Scientists and numerous New Age thinkers deny the presence of evil and explain it all as a metaphysical experience. Some contemporary worldviews posit God as a participant in the world process, struggling with the creation, with the eventual liberation from evil and suffering. Many of these are patently in contradiction with the biblical understanding of God. Nevertheless, the biblical concept of God does repeatedly affirm his identification with the plight of humanity and his determination to suffer with humanity.

Christians have the solace of some limited understanding of God's purposes in the world as revealed in Scripture—purposes which make human suffering and the presence of some evil understandable. Nevertheless, the knowledge and understanding of the creature is partial and fragmentary. The meaning of all suffering and evil is outside the creature's limited reach. Even for the Christian, much suffering is beyond understanding. In this century two central symbols of this suffering are the Holocaust of Hitler against the Jews and the extermination of millions in the former Soviet Union—as well as the potential holocaust of a catastrophic terrorist attack. The Christian community must resist the tendency to evade these questions of suffering or to be satisfied with commonly accepted responses which do justice to neither the issue nor the biblical witness.

What distinguishes the Christian biblical worldview is its affirmation that God is the sovereign Lord in whom all creatures, forces, and experiences find their purpose and meaning. Though the problems of evil and suffering constitute an awesome challenge to the believer, they do so only in the context of a profound faith in the purpose of the sovereign Lord who gave the world his ultimate sign of power and providential love on the cross.

The Christian believer knows the key to the ultimate meaning and significance of the created universe and human experience. Though our present knowledge is limited, even as we are limited creatures, believers know the source of the cosmos and rest in the confidence and hope which comes through a personal knowledge of the Creator. This knowledge

is not discovered by the creature through observation of the universe, but is revealed in Scripture and, ultimately, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Christ we have knowledge of the fatherly Lordship of the Creator, upon whom the creation depends for its existence, and in whom the cosmos finds its purpose and confident hope. Therefore, the Christian worldview is necessarily distinct from all others in the midst of contemporary nihilism and the frantic search for meaning. Christians bear witness to the God in whom all creatures find their meaning and purpose. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:36)

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