

## WCF 05: OF PROVIDENCE

The word ‘providence’ come from the Latin *providentia* which means “foresight or forethought.” But it does not speak of God’s foreknowledge as the etymology of the term may suggest. Rather, it speaks of God seeing to all things before hand, or of God bringing to pass all that he has decreed will happen in creation. That is to say, the work of creation answers to God’s eternal decree to bring into existence (out of nothing) all things in this universe. Providence, on the other hand, answers to God’s eternal decree by which He did “unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time” (WLC 12).

The Holy Scripture teaches us about God sovereign providence from various angles.

- *Firstly*, it affirms that all things in this universe continue to exist (or have being) because they are upheld by God in Christ, “by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3).
- *Secondly*, it affirms that all things live and move by God’s power: “For in him [i.e. God] we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28a).
- *Thirdly*, it declare that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Obviously for *all* things to work for the good of those who love God, God must be in sovereign control over all things that happen in this world no matter how insignificant it may appear in our sight.
- *Fourthly*, God’s work of providence at the micro level is illustrated in numerous ways. For example, we are taught that not a sparrow will fall to the ground without the heavenly Father’s ‘permission’ (Mt 10:29); and, in fact, not one of our hairs can grow or drop without His bringing it to pass, for even our hair are all numbered (Mt 10:30). Nothing happens by chance. Even such as appears to be random in our perception are purposefully brought about by God’s providence, for as Solomon declares: “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD” (Prov 16:33).
- *Fifthly* and finally, the Scripture also illustrate God’s providence at a macro level. For example, we are told that the patriarch Joseph was delivered into Egypt through the wicked acts of his brothers, in order that he might be instrumental in saving alive the fledging church under-age during a great famine that God was going to bring about (Gen 45:7). Indeed, even the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was by God’s providence, for we are told that He was “delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

Our present chapter builds on these biblical data, to provide a systematic and theological study of the doctrine of providence.

### On God’s Providence Over the World

5.1 *God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold,<sup>1</sup> direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things,<sup>2</sup> from the greatest even to the least,<sup>3</sup> by His most wise and holy providence,<sup>4</sup> according to His infallible foreknowledge,<sup>5</sup> and the free and immutable counsel of His own will,<sup>6</sup> to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Heb 1:3; <sup>2</sup>Dan 4:34–35; Ps 135:6; Acts 17:25–26, 28; Job 38; 39; 40; 41; <sup>3</sup>Mt 10:29–31; <sup>4</sup>Prov 15:3; Ps 104:24; 145:17; <sup>5</sup>Acts 15:18; Ps 94:8–11; <sup>6</sup>Eph 1:11; Ps 33:10–11; <sup>7</sup>Isa 63:14; Eph 3:10; Rom 9:17; Gen 45:7; Ps 145:7.

- Having created all the substance of the universe and forming the first things—organic and inorganic, God continues to uphold and sustain what He has made. There are four common theories on how this is done:
  - (1) *Deism*: God has created the world, set its first series of cause and effect in motion, and then left it to run on itself. That this is false is obvious: “Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4).
  - (2) *Pantheism*: Every phenomena in the universe is a manifestation of the mode of existence of the one eternal substance—God. This is also false, for the Scripture clearly distinguishes God from His creation.
  - (3) *Creatio Continua*: God’s power is exerted in continually creating every individual thing again and again every fraction of duration. This has been held by some eminent theologians such as Jonathan

Edwards and John Gerstner. But the problem with such a view is that God becomes the immediate cause of all things, including all evil passion, wicked thoughts and acts. Also the freedom and consciousness of free agencies are no longer real.

(4) *Creator and Governor View*: God has given all that He created—material and spiritual—real and permanent existence as entities exterior to Himself. These truly possess all the properties and attributes that God has severally endued them with, so that they exert real and not merely apparent second causes. Yet, as creatures, they are not self-existent. The ground of their continued existence is in God and not in them: “In Him we ... have our being...” (Acts 17:28).

- Moreover, it is God who directs all the actions of all His creatures according to their respective nature and modes of actions: “...by him all things consist” (Col 1:17); “[Christ is] upholding all things by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3). “In Him we live, and move, and have our being...” (Acts 17:28).

- The Scripture also declares that God has absolute providential control over:

(1) *The natural world*: “Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places. He causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings for the rain; he bringeth the wind out of his treasuries” (Ps 135:6–7; cf. Job 37:6–13; Ps 104:14; Ps 147:15–18). Also, “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father” (Mt 10:29).

(2) *Events that appear fortuitous*: “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD” (Prov 16:33).

(3) *The circumstances and affairs of men*: “And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding” (Dan 2:21; cf. Isa 10:12–15). “The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s, and he hath set the world upon them” (1 Sam 2:6–8; cf. Jas 4:13–15).

(4) *All the actions of men, whether good or evil*: “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand” (Prov 19:21; cf. Ex 12:36; Ps 33:14–15; Prov 21:1; Phil 2:13). “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain” (Ps 76:10; cf. Acts 4:27–28).

- This providential control is in all respect the consistent execution of God’s eternal, immutable, and sovereign purpose, which is ultimately to manifest God’s own glory: “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph 1:11); “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18). “For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (Rom 9:17). “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

## On Second Causes in Providence

5.2 *Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly;<sup>1</sup> yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Acts 2:23; <sup>2</sup>Gen 8:22; Jer 31:35; Ex 21:13; Deut 19:5; 1 Kgs 22:28, 34; Isa 10:6–7.

- God as the First Cause has immutably decreed all things that will come to pass, and all will indeed come to pass: “The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations” (Ps 33:11; cf. Job 23:13; Lam 2:17). How are these brought to passed? Our Confession teaches us that, they will be brought about by second causes in God’s providence. Second causes are anything in the created universe that produce effects in one way or another. Every effect must have a cause. Only God is the uncaused Cause.

- The sun and the rotation and revolution of the earth are examples of necessary second causes that brings about different weather types and harvest seasons (cf. Gen 8:22; Jer 31:35; Isa 55:10). A loose axe head or a stray arrow which “by chance” killed someone is an example of free second cause (cf. Ex 21:13; Deut 19:5; 1 Kgs 22:28, 34). Isaiah 10:6–7 demonstrates another kind of free second cause. In verse 6 we are told that the Lord will use Assyria as a rod against a hypocritical nation, but in verse 7, we are told that Assyria has no idea about God’s decree: she was pursuing her own purpose! Prayers which are answered accordingly are examples of contingent second causes. When Paul announced to the centurion on the ship to Italy that all in the ship would survive only if the sailors remain in the ship, he essentially made the condition a contingent second cause to God’s purpose of preserving all in the ship.
- It is to be noted again that the manner in which God controls His creatures and their actions is always consistent with the nature of the creature and his mode of action. We know this to be true from experience—that we are conscious of acting freely according to the law of our constitution as free agents. In the same way, God’s control of inanimate objects is always consistent with the properties of the substances that make up the objects. We know this to be true from empirical science.

5.3 *God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means,<sup>1</sup> yet is free to work without,<sup>2</sup> above,<sup>3</sup> and against them,<sup>4</sup> at His pleasure.*

<sup>1</sup>Acts 27:31, 44; Isa 55:10–11; Hos 2:21–22; <sup>2</sup>Hos 1:7; Mt 4:4; Job 34:10; <sup>3</sup>Rom 4:19–21; <sup>4</sup>2 Kgs 6:6; Dan 3:27.

- What §5.2 calls ‘second causes,’ this section calls ‘means.’ This section, essentially, teaches us that God occasionally ‘intervene’ directly, sovereignly or miraculously, the ordinary course of nature in order to accomplish His purpose. This does not mean that God sets aside His original plan of working according to the ordinary course of nature since miracles would also be comprehended in the eternal and immutable plan of God.
- The adjectives ‘without,’ ‘above’ and ‘against’ the ordinary means, are specially chosen to reflect scriptural illustrations. (1) *Without*: “But I will have mercy upon the house of Judah, and will save them by the LORD their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, by horses, nor by horsemen” (Hos 1:7). (2) *Above*: “And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform” (Rom 4:19–21). (3) *Against*: “the iron did swim” (2 Kgs 6:6), “[their] bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them” (Dan 3:27).

## On God’s Providence in Relation to Sinful Actions

5.4 *The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men,<sup>1</sup> and that not by a bare permission,<sup>2</sup> but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding,<sup>3</sup> and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends;<sup>4</sup> yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Rom 11:32–34; 2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chr 21:1; 1 Kgs 22:22–23; 1 Chr 10:4, 13–14; 2 Sam 16:10; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; <sup>2</sup>Acts 14:16; <sup>3</sup>Ps 76:10; 2 Kgs 19:28; <sup>4</sup>Gen 50:20; Isa 10:6–7, 12; <sup>5</sup>Jas 1:13–14, 17; 1 Jn 2:16; Ps 50:21.

- This section addresses—without attempting to explain—the nature of God’s providential action as it concerns the origin and control of sinful actions of His creature. There are two,—apparently paradoxical,—main propositions:
  - a. Sinful acts are not only permitted, but directed and controlled by God for His own purpose. This is the clear teaching of Scripture: “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain” (Ps 76:10); “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (Gen 50:20); and “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23).

- b. God is not the author nor approval of sin: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. ... Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas 1:13–14, 17; cf. 1 Jn 2:16; Ps 50:21).
- These two facts cannot be reconciled due to the limitation of the human mind. We can at the most say that God does not do violence to the heart or will of his free agents. Free agents act according to what is perceived to be the most attractive course of actions. God ordained the external causes that contribute to the creature’s perception, and He ordains the creatures’ actions, but the motive for the actions come from the creatures themselves. Robert Shaw explains beautifully:

To solve the difficulty connected with this point [of difficulty], theologians distinguish between an action and its quality. The action, abstractly considered, is from God, for no action can be performed without the concurrence of Providence; but the sinfulness of the action proceeds entirely from the creature. As to the manner in which the providence of God is concerned about the sinful actions of creatures, it is usually stated, that God permits them, that He limits them, and the He overrules them for the accomplishment of His own holy ends. But the full elucidation of this abstruse subject, so as to remove every difficulty, surpasses the human faculties. We are certain that God is concerned in all the actions of His creatures; we are equally certain that God cannot be the author of sin; and here we ought to rest (p. 70).

*5.5 The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled,<sup>1</sup> and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>2 Chr 32:25–26, 31; 2 Sam 24:1; <sup>2</sup>2 Cor 12:7–9; Ps 73; 77:1, 10, 12; Mk 14:66–72; Jn 21:15–17.

Although God cannot possibly seduce any man to sin, He sometimes permits His children to fall into temptation or sin for previous sins.

We can glean from the Scripture that amongst God’s purposes for doing so are:

- (1) “to chastise them for their former sin”;
- (2) “to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled”;
- (3) “to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself,” i.e., to more fervent prayer against sin and corruption;
- (4) “to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin”;
- (5) “for sundry other just and holy ends.”

Thus the Lord allowed Hezekiah to sin by showing off his riches to the ambassadors of Babylon, so “that he might know all that was in his heart” (2 Chr 32:31), namely his pride. Similarly, the children of Israel was chastised for their sin when God “moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah” (2 Sam 24:1). Again, Peter was allowed to fall into grievous sin of denying the Lord so that he might discover his arrogance and the deceitfulness of his heart (cf. Mk 14:29, 66–72 and Jn 21:15).

*5.6 As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous Judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden,<sup>1</sup> from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts;<sup>2</sup> but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had,<sup>3</sup> and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin;<sup>4</sup> and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan:<sup>5</sup> whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Rom 1:24, 26, 28; 11:7–8; <sup>2</sup>Deut 29:4; <sup>3</sup>Mt 13:12; 25:29; <sup>4</sup>Deut 2:30; 2 Kgs 8:12–13; <sup>5</sup>Ps 81:11–12; 2 Thes 2:10–12; <sup>6</sup>Ex 7:3; 8:15, 32; 2 Cor 2:15–16; Isa 8:14; 1 Pet 2:7–8; Isa 6:9–10; Acts 28:26–27.

- While God allows his elect to fall sin for the purpose of exposing the sinfulness of their sin to them, He punishes the sin of the ‘wicked and ungodly’ or the reprobate by blinding and hardening them. This is

clearly taught in the Scripture: “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves” (Rom 1:24; cf. Rom 1:26, 28); “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day” (Rom 11:7-8).

- But we must be careful to note that God does so not by infusing any wickedness into their hearts or by any positive and direct manipulation or influence of their soul to render them obstinate. Rather, it is: (1) by withholding grace that is necessary to enlighten their understanding or to soften their hearts that they may see the sinfulness of their sins: “Yet the LORD hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day” (Deut 29:4); (2) by withdrawing “the gifts which they had” (see Mt 13:12, 25:29)—which gifts refer to opportunities of hearing the Gospel and opportunities of repentance, etc.; (3) by exposing them to “such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin”: thus God is said to harden the heart of Sihon king of Heshbon by directing the children of Israel to pass through his land—knowing that he would not allow them to pass through peaceably (cf. Deut 2:30, 24); (4) by giving them “over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan”: “So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust: and they walked in their own counsels” (Ps 81:12, see also v. 11), “And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thes 2:11–12).
- Indeed, the wicked harden themselves, “even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.” Thus, Pharaoh hardened his heart even though the plagues would have had an opposite effect on others; and as the hardening of his heart was God’s original purpose in sending the plagues, God is said to harden Pharaoh’s heart (Ex 7:3; 8:15, 32; Rom 9:17). Thus preachers and the preaching of the Word of God is “a sweet savour of Christ” of life unto life for the elect, but a savour of death unto death unto the reprobate (2 Cor 2:15–16; cf. Isa 6:9 and Acts 28:26–27). Thus Christ is a sanctuary and a precious corner stone for those who believe but a stone of stumbling for those who reject Him (Isa 8:14; 1 Pet 2:7).
- We note, then, that God has a very different purpose in permitting sin in His elect and in the reprobate. For His elect, it ultimately magnifies His grace; whereas for the reprobate, it ultimately displays His justice.

## On General and Special Providence

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>*1 Tim 4:10; Amos 9:8–9; Rom 8:28; Isa 43:3–5, 14.*

- The providence of God may be considered as general and as special. His general providence is exercised over all His creatures, whereas His special providence is exercised, in a particular manner, for His Church and His people. Indeed, God constantly have the interest of His own people in view in the outworking of His providence, so that all things,—whether prosperous or adverse—are made to cooperate in promoting their good (Rom 8:28).
- Also, as God exercises special providential care over Israel,—His Church under-age in the Old Covenant (Amos 9:8–9; Isa 43:3–5, 14),—so God continues to exercise a special providential care over His Church under the New Covenant. Thus, while God sometimes permit His Church to be persecuted and reduced to very low condition, the means by which His enemies intend for her destruction always become a means of edification and enlargement of the Church under the overruling providence of God. Thus, the Early Church grew because of the persecution she experienced (Acts 8:4).