

Providence 101

ESJ

What is providence? There is much debate among us these days about what it is, how it operates, and even with a few, if it exists at all. What are we to make of it? Is it still an active force in God's dealings with His people? Are we to be deistic, having a God who has left the world to wind down as if it were a clock? Are we to be charismatic, embracing a God who continually reveals truth and works miracles? Or, regarding God's work of providence, is there a biblical middle ground allowing us to see God as one who actually works into the system, yet not so as to suspend the natural way of things?

To begin with, the Greek word for providence, *pronvoia*: *pronoia*, has in its various forms a basic meaning of "the foreknowledge that allows someone to make appropriate provisions." While in biblical usage the actual word always refers to human foresight and planning (noun form: Acts 24:2; Rom. 13:14; verb form: Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21; I Tim. 5:8), there is certainly an application of the content of the word to God's "pro-visions." His plan, after all, has not yet come to its conclusion. He has promised to be with us to the end of this world (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5b). At the very least, God would be expected to exercise a supervisory role over His Creation project. Disinterest can be ruled out by the cross (Jn. 3:16). He has not abandoned what He gave so much to bring about. (I Jn. 5:13-15).

Divine superintendence over the creation and assistance to His people are, therefore, a certainty in the Christian Era. This combination of management and aid is what we speak of when we apply the word providence to the work of God today. God's foreknowledge allowed Him to provide for the needs of His great salvation project; His omni presence allows Him to continue to do so. Paul's words in Romans 8:28-30 put the matter in perspective; God is active in His creation in ways that are appropriate for His plan of salvation. He has provided within the context of the creation (Matt. 5:45) and He will provide as needed for the success of His kingdom (Eph. 3:20). This ongoing care refutes Deism's "wind up the clock and leave it" notion, but this refutation does not therefore imply either the hyper-charismatic "find me a parking place, I'm in a hurry" triviality, or the more reserved supernatural expressions of conventional Pentecostalism.

To clarify and put in perspective the relationship between the supernatural and the providential, a look at the work of the Holy Spirit is useful. The initial work of the Holy Spirit was to reveal and confirm the word (Jn. 14:26; 16:13-14; I Cor. 2:6-16; Heb. 2:3-4; Mk. 16:20). This work was to have a definite duration, a time of completion or perfection (I Cor. 13:8-13; Eph.4:11-16). The initial work of the Holy Spirit brought about "the faith," the completed revelation from Christ as a "once for all" system of faith (Jude 3).

The initial work of the Spirit began on Pentecost. The giving of the Spirit had been promised by Jesus (Jn. 7:39; 14:26; 16:13-14). This promise was fulfilled (Acts 2:33; 2:1-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32). The Holy Spirit was given to believers (Acts 2:38; 5:32), Apostles first (Acts 1:1:26-2:4, 43). The miraculous powers of the Holy Spirit were administered by the Apostles (Acts 8:18; II Tim. 1:6; Rom. 1:11). The Apostolic Office served was foundational in the building up of the church (Eph. 2:20-22; cf. 4:11-12).

This miraculous era managed by Apostles came to an end (cf. I Cor. 13:8-10; Eph. 4:13), but the foundation of that age remains as the same foundation for the church today (Eph. 2:20-24; I Cor. 3:11). While the miraculous work was coming to a close (I Cor. 13:9-10), the abiding work of the fully revealed word (Eph. 4:13; Jn. 14:26; 16:13) began coming to the forefront (Jude 3). Confusion can be avoided by realizing that in the time the Bible was being written, both the initial and the abiding aspects of the Spirit's work were going on at the same time.

The abiding work of the Holy Spirit is actually superior to the initial miraculous work of the early church. The temporary work of the Holy Spirit, because of its rather spectacular nature, has caused many to see that era as superior to our time. This cannot be so, however; the end result of the miraculous activity would of necessity be superior to the means used to achieve its goal (cf. Heb. 1-4).

Some have also thought that miracles are an abiding part of the Christian age. However, the Bible also disproves this, as do our own observations. What we see with our own eyes confirms that nothing purported to be going on today compares to the quality of the true biblical miracles of the first century. "Healings" are questionable and incomplete. No one today walks into a hospital and leads everyone out completely healed. People ravaged by cerebral palsy and quadriplegics with severed spinal cords are not "cured" by the so called faith healers; the miraculous power of God, when it is truly applied, knows no such limitations (cf. Matt. 8:16; 9:35; 14:14; Mk. 6:33; Lk. 4:40; Acts 5:16). Those who profess to be led by the Spirit contradict both themselves and the Bible. Where, therefore, do we find truth?

Working on the implications of the conclusions just developed, we can begin to define the borders within which we are to find a present day definition for providence. We have seen that God working counter to or in suspension of the "natural" laws of the creation is not to be expected today—not because He cannot, but because He does not. We also see that God working within the nature of the system of creation is to be expected—not because He has limited power, but because He chooses to limit the expressions of His power (cf. Jn. 20:29; Heb. 11:1). The issue is not one of whether God works, but how He works.

Joseph is a wonderful ancient example of our developed understanding of contemporary providence. God was at work behind the scenes to bring Jacob, the father of the nation of Israel, to Egypt, even as had been predicted (Gen. 45:7; 50:15-21; cf. Gen. 15:12-16). Another instructive Old Covenant example can be seen in the book of Esther. The name of God is not found in the book, but God's providential

hand is present everywhere (Esth. 4:14). With Joseph and with Esther, God was at work to further His plan for the coming Christ. He did not work by suspending or overruling natural laws. He did, however, work.

The New Testament, as we would expect, adds clearer light toward developing a better understanding of the nature of providence. One example from John shows us that prayer is answered when it is in keeping with God's will (Jn. 14:13; I Jn. 3:22; 5:14; cf. Eph. 3:20). God is therefore clearly active in the Messianic Age to advance His will. Christians can be assured that God is working behind the scenes to promote His cause. Prayers are answered. Help is given.

Additionally, intercession is provided by the Holy Spirit in areas where we do not know how to articulate the thoughts of our heart. We need not worry, God understands (Rom. 8:26-27). We also see that the Father has managed and guided His plan and will continue to do so. All things work together for the sake of God's plan of salvation (Rom. 8:28).

But how exactly does providence work? How does God do it? We do not know! We do, however, know that providence does work because God works it. While Scripture proves God's contemporary work is not miraculous and the time of miracles in the first-century served its purpose (I Cor. 13:8b-10; Eph. 4:11-13; Jn. 14:26), we can know with assurance that God has not ceased working for His people.

That brings us to one of the most interesting considerations associated with contemporary providence: we cannot know just exactly when it is dispensed. We might, due to its "within the system" nature, attribute its actions to natural phenomenon, or vice versa (cf. Jas. 5:16-18; Lk. 13:1-5). God uses His supernatural ability to effect what could otherwise be just natural occurrences. Not to worry though, our ignorance of the particulars need not bring us to dismay. As stated, we can know that God is at work (Heb. 13:5-6). Our God is alive, and He is the helper of all who serve Him! There will be no miraculous voices in the night, we will not walk on water or raise the dead, but God will be with us in our studies of His word and in all our work on His behalf. We will not experience Calvinistic enlightenment, but we will be benefited as we pray for understanding. We are not depraved, but we are all adversely affected by our sins and need all the help we can get to be the best that we can be. We must exercise personal responsibility (Jas. 2:14-26; II Tim. 2:15), but we are not alone (Matt. 28:20)!