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Providence and Its Implications for Prayer

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Introduction

God Created the Universe

The Bible begins with Genesis 1:1 saying “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Scholars interpret the phrase “heavens and the earth” to mean the entire universe,¹ which is also reflected by the writings of later biblical authors.² The implication of this biblical statement is that “God alone is eternal and that all else owes its origin and existence to him.”³ While this creation occurred a long time ago, God never abandoned the world to run entirely on its own, but He continues to care for His creation and to be involved in the lives of His people. “God is not like a master clockmaker who fashioned the world, wound it up, and is now letting it slowly unwind on its own; instead he is the loving Father who cares for what he has made.”⁴ God’s ongoing relationship and support of His original creation is known as the *providence* of God.

God Sustains the Universe through Providence

The term *providence* is readily heard in various contexts, whether in church sermons or at the tail end of the U.S. Declaration of Independence,⁵ yet the term is not often well understood. While the word *providence* is not found in Scripture in reference to God, it is a term used to

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 263; John Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in vol. 2 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 20.

² Ps. 33:6; John 1:3; cf. Acts 17:24; Heb. 11:3; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11.

³ Sailhamer, 20.

⁴ Donald C. Stamps, “The Providence of God,” in *Life in the Spirit Study Bible: New International Version*, ed. Donald C. Stamps (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 80.

⁵ The ending reads, “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine *Providence*, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” (“The Declaration of Independence,” *The Charters of Freedom*, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed December 5, 2009)).

represent a thoroughly biblical concept of “God’s ongoing relationship to his creation.”⁶ Wayne Grudem defines God’s providence as follows: “God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.”⁷ While Christians acknowledge the providence of God as a biblical concept, they often disagree on various aspects of providence, especially “with respect to God’s relationship to the willing choices of moral creatures.”⁸ As a result, theologians usually hold to one of two main positions: the “Reformed, Calvinistic” position or the “Arminian” position. A person’s view of providence will affect one’s view of prayer, which is knowingly or unknowingly used by God in accordance with His providence to accomplish things on earth.

Prayer in God’s Providential Plan

Calvinism emphasizes that God is sovereign over all, and thus He controls every facet of life. Arminianism emphasizes God’s love and justice, and thus He is in charge of everything while allowing humans to have real free will. Some might feel that prayer is not really effective since God already knows what will happen in the future. However, both positions encourage people to pray because the Bible and Christ command people to pray to a responsive God Who cares about meeting the needs of humanity on earth and is able to do so. Yet, each system believes prayer is effective in accomplishing things but each system views prayer a little differently. Thus, this paper explores the two theological systems, their views of providence, and its implications for prayer.

⁶ Grudem, 315.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Thesis and Structure of Paper

While discussing providence and its facets at length, this paper shows the implications that the two main views of providence have on prayer and the people who pray. The first part of the paper defines the term *providence* and describes some of its facets. The two main theological systems of Calvinism and Arminianism view providence a little differently. After defining each of these two systems, the paper explains how Calvinists view providence and how Arminians view providence. The second part of the paper describes how providence influences prayer and the people who pray. The paper concludes that prayer accomplishes real things on earth and that there is a relation between one's view of providence and how one views prayer.

Providence of God

Definition of Providence

The English word *providence* is derived “from the Latin noun *providentia*, ‘foresight, forethought,’ and the related verb *providere*, ‘to provide for, take precautions for or against something.’”⁹ Similarly, the Greek noun for *providence* is *pronoia*, meaning “forethought,” and it is used twice in the New Testament¹⁰ to refer to human foresight with the implication that subsequent steps would be taken to meet a need or to avert some disaster.¹¹ With foresight, “the provident person is the one who makes arrangements to deal with contingencies or to reach

⁹ Barbara E. Bowe, “Providence,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1092.

¹⁰ Acts 24:2; Rom. 13:14.

¹¹ Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, vol. 15 of *The Complete Biblical Library: The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, ed. Thoralf Gilbrant (Springfield: The Complete Biblical Library, 1991), 309-10; G. W. Bromiley, “Providence,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, fully rev., ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing: 1986), 1020.

established goals.”¹² The term is used in secular literature to describe the belief that the universe and human history are governed by a “benevolent ordering principle,” rather than by chance, that guides all things toward an intended end; however, in the Bible, the concept of God’s providence is the belief that God lovingly cares for and protects the world, leading human history toward a desirable end.¹³ While the word “providence” does not occur in the Bible with reference to God, the providence of God is a biblical doctrine¹⁴ that “has been traditionally used to summarize God’s on going relationship to his creation.”¹⁵ Providence means the “continuing action of God by which he preserves in existence the creation which he has brought into being, and guides it to his intended purposes for it.”¹⁶ Moreover, “Providence is the will of the Creator who is actively involved in moving his creation to a goal. . . . History is being moved toward the predetermined end.”¹⁷ From these general definitions, some scholars classify providence into types of work.

Louis Berkhof defines providence as “that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.”¹⁸ Grudem defines providence similarly, and thus Grudem and Berkhof understand providence as embracing a threefold work of “God’s preservation of creation, God’s cooperation with all created entities, and God’s guidance [or steering] of all things toward God’s ultimate purposes and their highest good.”¹⁹ While this three-fold work (preservation, concurrence, and government) has been traditionally held within

¹² Bromiley, 1020.

¹³ Bowe, 1092.

¹⁴ e.g. Ps. 33:13, 15; Isa. 45:7; Acts 17:24-28.

¹⁵ Grudem, 315.

¹⁶ Robert Harden, “Providence—God’s Continuing Work,” Lecture. Southwestern Assemblies of God University, Waxahachie, TX, November 18, 2005. Tegrity video file, http://tegrity.sagu.edu/tegrity/rharden/the5413rharden/ProvidenceGodsContinuingWork_181105093426/class/default.htm (accessed December 1, 2009).

¹⁷ John E. Alsup, “Providence,” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 891.

¹⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (1938, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 166.

¹⁹ Benjamin Wirt Farley, “Providence of God,” in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 306.

Reformed theology, some Reformed theologians mention only the two works of preservation and government and absorb the concept of concurrence within the other two.²⁰ Dr. Harden also presents two aspects of providence: “1. preservation and sustenance—God’s work of preserving His creation in existence; and 2. Government or providence proper—God’s activity in guiding and directing the course of events for the purposes for which He has in mind.”²¹

As the Creator of all, God’s general providence embraces all people but especially His own people. Jesus speaks of God’s general providence in Mathew 5:45: “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Further, Jesus said that the heavenly Father feeds the birds and causes the lilies to grow; therefore, God will surely take care of each person’s individual needs since humans are more valuable to God than them.²² Thus, God’s general providence reaches to the smallest details of creation and humans. However, Scripture teaches that God extends a special work of providential care and guidance for those who “love God and are called according to His purpose,”²³ “trust in the Lord,”²⁴ “delight in His ways,”²⁵ and “seek first His kingdom.”²⁶ Therefore, J. I. Packer says, “In all things God works for the spiritual welfare of his people (Rom. 8:28); and he supplies them with whatever material things they need throughout their earthly pilgrimage (Mt. 6:25-33; Phil. 4:19).”²⁷

Providence is “one of the most commonly held and most vigorously debated beliefs in both ancient and modern times: that there is a benevolent and purposeful ordering of all events of

²⁰ Berhkof, 166.

²¹ Harden, “Providence—God’s Continuing Work.”

²² Matt. 6:26ff.

²³ Rom. 8:28.

²⁴ Prov. 3:6.

²⁵ Ps. 37:23.

²⁶ Matt. 6:33.

²⁷ J. I. Packer, “Providence,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 980.

history.”²⁸ The commonly understood definition of providence rules out that events happen by chance (randomness) or impersonal fate (determinism), since God is the personal, almighty power guiding the universe according to His divine plan. However, Christians particularly disagree “with respect to God’s relationship to the willing choices of moral creatures.”²⁹ Thus, people generally ascribe to one of two main positions regarding providence: the “Reformed, Calvinistic” position or the “Arminian” position.

Calvinistic Position of Providence

Calvinism

The Calvinistic position of providence emphasizes that humans do “everything” that God has ordained for them to do and “only” those things that God has ordained for them to do, from a plan that God had before the humans existed. Such a belief is derived from God’s absolute sovereignty as the all-determining reality, especially with regard to salvation. A *Calvinist* is one who ascribes to a doctrinal system formed by French theologian John Calvin (1509-64), whose system was later expressed³⁰ in five points: (1) Total depravity of man; (2) Unconditional election; (3) Limited atonement; (4) Irresistible grace; (5) Perseverance of the saints.³¹ The five points emphasize God in His sovereignty in regard to the doctrine of salvation (or soteriology) and are remembered quite well by the acronym TULIP, where each of the five letters represents the first letter of one of the five main points. The theology of Ulrich Zwingli, who was the first reformer in Zurich, coupled with the Protestant theology of reformer John Calvin of Geneva,

²⁸ Alsup, 890.

²⁹ Grudem, 315.

³⁰ Because Calvinism was being attacked for its teaching of predestination, reprobation, and other things, a synod was called by the States General in 1618 to settle these issues. While the Arminians were invited to present their views as exemplified in the Remonstrance, their views were rejected at the Synod of Dort in 1619, thus the synod reaffirmed the Heidelberg and Belgic Confessions. The Calvinists originated at the synod five points of Calvinism to counteract the five points of the Remonstrance.

³¹ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008), 706.

formed the roots of Reformed theology. Calvin's theological system is seen in his biblical commentaries, pamphlets, and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,³² which Donald McKim calls the "bedrock for much Reformed thought."³³

Providence

From a Calvinistic perspective, in reference to providence and human freedom, J. I. Packer emphasizes that "men do only that which [God] has ordained that they should do":

God rules the hearts and actions of all men (cf. Pr. 21:1; Ezr. 6:22), often for purposes of his own which they do not suspect (cf. Gn. 45:5-8; 50:20; Is. 10:55ff.; 44:28-45:4; Jn. 11:49ff.; Acts 13:27ff.). God's control is absolute in the sense that men do only that which he has ordained that they should do; yet they are truly free agents, in the sense that their decisions are their own, and they are morally responsible for them (cf. Dt. 30:15ff).³⁴

Moreover, Calvinist Edwin Palmer says, "Foreordination [or providence] means God's sovereign plan, whereby He decides all that is to happen in the entire universe. Nothing in this world happens by chance. God is in back of everything. He decides and causes all things to happen that do happen. . . . He has foreordained everything . . . even sin."³⁵ Universal providence was taught by John Calvin whereby "God is in direct control of every event, including every human thought and action"; yet, other theologians question the reality of human responsibility and free will within this concept. Thus, those from an Arminian position desire "to preserve a significant doctrine of providence while rejecting universal providence."³⁶

³² W. S. Reid, "Reformed Tradition," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 997.

³³ Donald K. McKim, preface to *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), v.

³⁴ Packer, 980.

³⁵ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, enlarged ed. (1972; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 24-25.

³⁶ M. J. Langford, "Providence," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 478.

Arminian Position of Providence

An alternative way of viewing providence, which is in line with the Arminian position, preserves the notion of human freedom: “Since God works by a continuous persuasion that respects the freedom and dignity of man, there can be a sort of inevitability in the long run, and thus a significance in the idea of providence, but there has also to be a radical contingency in the short run, with a consequent stress on human responsibility.”³⁷ Such a belief is derived from the true heart of Arminian theology—God’s loving and just character,³⁸ especially with regard to salvation.

Arminianism

Arminianism is a doctrinal system formed by Dutch theologian Jacob (or James) Arminius (1560-1609), professor of divinity at the University of Leiden, as a reaction to Calvinism in the Netherlands. Upon his death in 1609, Arminius’ sympathizers called themselves Arminians and produced the *Remonstrance to the States-General*, protesting the strict Calvinism in the Netherlands and asking for modifications of the catechism and the Belgic Confession.³⁹ Arminians have always opposed the Calvinistic belief in unconditional reprobation, or “God’s selection of some persons to spend eternity in hell,”⁴⁰ since this “impugns the character of God,”⁴¹ and thus Arminians also reject its corollary of unconditional election—“the selection of some persons out of the mass of sinners to be saved apart from anything God sees in them.”⁴²

Affirming the key beliefs of Arminians, the five points of the Remonstrance were (1) conditional

³⁷ Langford, 478.

³⁸ Roger, E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 97.

³⁹ J. C. O’Neill, “Arminianism,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 43.

⁴⁰ Olson, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

election based on God’s foreknowledge; (2) unlimited atonement; (3) although man has a free will he cannot save himself; (4) prevenient grace, which enables man to cooperate with God in salvation; (5) conditional perseverance—believers can be lost.⁴³ Arminianism “rejects unconditional election (and especially unconditional reprobation), limited atonement, and irresistible grace because it affirms the character of God as compassionate, having universal love for the whole world and everyone in it, and extending grace-restored free will to accept or resist the grace of God, which leads to either eternal life or spiritual destruction.”⁴⁴ Those who ascribe to an Arminian Theology include Methodists, Holiness groups, Pentecostals, Free Will Baptists, and many charismatic believers, as well as others.

Predestination

One of the main distinctions between the two theological systems is concept of predestination. Predestination is “that part of providence that refers to man’s eternal destiny: heaven or hell.”⁴⁵ For the Arminian, predestination is a “predecision on God’s part to save the ones who repent and believe. Thus its view is called conditional predestination, since predetermination of the destiny of individuals is based on God’s foreknowledge of the way in which they will either freely reject Christ or freely accept him.”⁴⁶ Roger Olson reemphasizes this important point saying, “What Arminians deny is not predestination but unconditional predestination; they embrace conditional predestination based on God’s foreknowledge of who will freely respond positively to God’s gracious offer of salvation and the prevenient enablement

⁴³ Enns, 704.

⁴⁴ Olson, 16.

⁴⁵ Palmer 25; Palmer uses the term *foreordination* as a synonym for *providence*.

⁴⁶ J. K. Grider, “Arminianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 97.

to accept it.”⁴⁷ Related to the concept of predestination of individuals for salvation is the concept of providence whereby God, in His sovereignty, is in charge of all creation, events, and people.

Providence

Like Calvinists, Arminians believe in divine sovereignty and providence; however, they interpret it differently. While Calvinists stress that “God’s control is absolute in the sense that men do only that which he has ordained that they should do,”⁴⁸ “Arminians affirm that God is in charge of nature and history but deny that God controls *every event*” or person.⁴⁹ Olson makes a distinction between God “directing” human choices and God “controlling” human choices: “Arminians do not object to the idea that God ‘directs’ human choices and actions [through the power of persuasion]. All Arminians object to is belief that God controls human choices—especially evil and sinful ones!”⁵⁰ If God did control every event and every person’s action, as Calvinism claims, “this would make God the author of sin and evil” that is prevalent in the world, according to the Arminians.⁵¹ The amount of sin and evil in the world seems incompatible with the goodness of God if God truly determines everything, including all human choices.⁵² Therefore, human free will must be the cause of sin; otherwise God would be the author of sin. Although God is sovereign and could control every human decision and action, God has chosen to limit his control over human freedom. Robert Harden concurs by saying humans are free moral agents, having wills, and doing what they want to. Although God could step in and make humans do something, He chooses not to, but God is sovereign and can do anything He wants to.

⁴⁷ Olson, 19.

⁴⁸ Packer, 980.

⁴⁹ Olson, 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵² Jerry Walls, “The Free Will Defense, Calvinism, Wesley, and the Goodness of God,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 13, no. 1 (1983): 28.

However, God has chosen not to take away humans' free will, and thus they are free to do whatever they want to, even sin.⁵³ While God never tempts someone toward sin, evil, or ungodliness,⁵⁴ Donald Stamps says, “[God] does at times permit it, direct it, and overrule it in order to carry out his will, to accomplish his redemptive purpose, and in all things to work for the good of those who love him.”⁵⁵ Arminians believe that God never plans or decrees sin and evil, but He only allows them.⁵⁶

Because God is characterized by supreme love and justice, particular acts of God are inconceivable, such as foreordaining sin and evil.⁵⁷ Jacob Arminius and latter Arminians emphasized that God's sovereignty is not limited by anything in creation, but only by God's own character of love and justice,⁵⁸ “which is derived from divine revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture, and not from early modern cultural influences.”⁵⁹ Olson explains the implications of these two characteristics: “Out of love he is respecting the freedom of his creatures for the sake of genuineness of relationship. Out of justice he is not coercing or predetermining their actions.”⁶⁰ Thus, “God [voluntarily] limits himself to allow for human free agency (for the sake of genuine relationships that are not manipulated or controlled)”⁶¹ and, consequently, “much that happens in history is contrary to the perfect antecedent will of God,” but God is still in charge of everything, for His government is comprehensive, but He does not control every event.⁶² Instead, God permits certain events and actions to occur that He does not specifically desire, according to His “permissive will,” but He works all actions for the good in his overall plan for creation. “Nothing

⁵³ Harden, “Providence—God's Continuing Work.”

⁵⁴ James 1:13.

⁵⁵ Stamps, 80.

⁵⁶ Olson, 126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 124n20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 38.

at all can happen without God's permission, and many things are specifically and directly controlled and caused by God," but in reference to sin and evil, "God permits and limits them without willing or causing them."⁶³ On the other hand, Calvinists believe all that happens is God's predetermined will, in accordance with providence, because God has absolute and meticulous control over everything. "The view that one holds as to the nature of providence affects the Christian approach to prayer and action."⁶⁴

Prayer in Relation to Providence

The Question of Prayer's Effectiveness

Based upon some assumptions of God's providence and logical reasoning, some might conclude that prayer could not be effective in influencing God and changing the world, except perhaps to align one's own attitude and desires with God's will. However, both Calvinism and Arminianism maintain that prayer does accomplish real things on earth. Robert Harden articulates some assumptions and questions about prayer and providence:

"If God is in control, if God knows where things are headed and what's going to happen in advance, then the question is asked, 'What does prayer really accomplish?' If prayer has any effect on what happens, then it seems that God's plan was not fixed in the first place, in that providence is in some sense altered by whether, and/or how much, someone prays. But on the other hand, if God's plan is established and He is going to do what He is going to do, then does it matter whether someone prays or not?"⁶⁵

The assumptions that God's entire plan is established ahead of time and that God is in control of everything are tenets of Calvinism, which, when carried out to its logical conclusion, does seem to lead one to conclude that prayer could not have any real effect on God's plan or changing

⁶³ Olson, 116.

⁶⁴ Langford, 479.

⁶⁵ Robert Harden, "Providence and Prayer," lecture, Southwestern Assemblies of God University (Waxahachie, TX, November 18, 2005), tegrity video file, http://tegrity.sagu.edu/tegrity/rharden/the5413rharden/Providence%20and%20Prayer_181105154730/class/default.htm (accessed December 1, 2009).

things on earth, since God “has already decreed just what he will do in every instance.”⁶⁶ Olson, an Arminian theologian, also believes that Calvinism’s beliefs lead one to logically conclude that prayer is ineffective: “If God’s sovereignty were already completely exercised de facto, why would anyone need to pray for God’s will to be done on earth? In that case, it would always already be done on earth.”⁶⁷ However, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,”⁶⁸ which surely implies that God does answer prayers and change things on earth as a result of them, just as other Scriptures also exhort believers to pray that God’s will be done⁶⁹ as if God’s will on earth was dependent upon these prayers.⁷⁰ While some might reason logically that prayer could not be effective in changing the world since the order of God’s providence is unchangeable, the biblical way of reconciling this is to understand that God’s answering of prayer is not “a violation of the order of natural Providence, but rather . . . the carrying of Providence into effect.”⁷¹ This is especially true from a Calvinistic perspective and can be true from an Arminian perspective with some further clarification of God’s decrees and unchanging plans.

Calvinistic Position on Prayer

For a Calvinist, God ordains that a person’s prayer will be the means of bringing significant results in the world, and thus Grudem says “when we earnestly intercede for a specific person or situation, we will often find that God had ordained that our prayer would be a

⁶⁶ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, revised by Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 129.

⁶⁷ Olson, 117-18.

⁶⁸ Matt. 6:10.

⁶⁹ Matt. 26:42; Luke 11:2; Rom. 15:30-32; James 4:13-15.

⁷⁰ I. Howard Marshall, “Predestination in the New Testament,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 139.

⁷¹ Leslie Walker, “Divine Providence,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12510a.htm> (accessed December 5, 2009).

means he would use to bring about the changes in the world.”⁷² For a Calvinist, both the prayer and the answer to the prayer are foreordained. “The one making the prayer is conditioned by God’s Holy Spirit in providence so that at the given moment he desires to pray for the particular object for which the prayer is uttered. The prayer is uttered freely by the individual, but the Holy Spirit conditions the soul so that the desire to pray that prayer freely arises in the mind of that individual.”⁷³ When prayers are unanswered, it could be because God’s hidden will is not known by the people praying, and thus, in God’s sovereignty, “many events will not come about until the time that God has decreed,” according to Grudem.⁷⁴ In contrast to the Calvinist position of God ordaining prayers, the Arminian position sees people as freely participating with God’s work for the earth by praying.

Arminian Position on Prayer

From an Arminian perspective, if a person’s choice is ultimately caused by God’s decree, then the choice is not a “real” choice, yet Arminians believe God allows real choices to be made by people. Therefore, Christians have the freedom to pray or not to pray, because God does not foreordain their actions. Prayer is a means for accomplishing real things according to God’s will that would not have been done if the prayer was not offered. Scripture supports this by saying, “Ask, and it shall be given to you,”⁷⁵ and “You do not have because you do not ask.”⁷⁶ While God’s providence and predetermined plan includes some major events, many other events are not predetermined and are subject to the will and prayers of people; yet God will not allow the actions of people to thwart God’s predetermined major events. There is an interesting tension in

⁷² Grudem, 334.

⁷³ F. E. Hamilton, and R. L. Harris, “Providence,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1976), 920-22.

⁷⁴ Grudem, 391.

⁷⁵ Matt. 7:7.

⁷⁶ James 4:2.

Scripture between God's sovereignty and human free will in accomplishing God's decrees.

While some events, such as creation and the first and second comings of Christ, do not involve direct assistance of humans, other decrees of God either directly or indirectly involve human participation. God decreed that Jesus would be crucified as a result of the irresponsibility of human participants. In other cases, humans are willing participants who faithfully follow God and step into His sovereign plan as He has decreed. While the plan and end result are decreed, the particular participants, who have free will, may not be decreed, except in foreknowledge of the events taking place. God does answer prayer according to His will and does "influence" people for whom prayers are directed, but God will not "override" their wills.

While God does not force or impose His will upon free moral creatures, prayer does have the ability to influence people. Further, prayer also has the ability to influence God who can influence people.⁷⁷ I. Howard Marshall says, "The wills of men can thus be affected by prayer or else we would not pray for them. To believe in prayer is thus to believe in some kind of limitation of human freedom, and in some kind of incomprehensible influence upon the wills of men."⁷⁸ Olson says, "Arminianism does not object to the idea that God directs human choices and actions through the power of persuasion."⁷⁹

While God's overall plan is definite and fixed and not subject to revision, prayers do have value and do accomplish real things. In contrast to the Calvinist view, where prayers themselves are ordained by God to accomplish God's predetermined will for everything, the Arminian view holds that only particular universal events are set in stone and all other events can be accomplished by the wills of humans and the influence of God from prayers freely offered. God

⁷⁷ Marshall, 139.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 139-40.

⁷⁹ Olson, 98.

partners with humans in accomplishing His will on earth.⁸⁰ “God has set certain general bounds within which his universe is to operate. Within these bounds, he has given man freedom to act.”⁸¹ While prayer will not change God’s overall plan and decreed events, prayer is the means by which God accomplishes his purposes. Thus, prayer is vital in the sense that many things would not come about, within God’s permissive will, without prayer.⁸² God has chosen not to act unless we pray, though he certainly has the ability to do anything He wants to do according to His nature and purpose. According to Henry Thiessen,

God does some things only in answer to prayer; he does some other things without anyone’s praying; and he does some things contrary to the prayers made. In his omniscience he has taken all these things into account, and in his providence he sovereignly works them out in accordance with his own purpose and plan. . . . Thus, there is perfect harmony between his purpose and providence, and man’s freedom.⁸³

In sum, people’s prayers do accomplish eternally significant things, for prayer is a means that God uses to bring about His will on earth. God has chosen to make things happen on earth in accordance with prayers freely prayed. Prayer is a means of linking divine providence with human work that accomplishes God’s will on earth, especially in meeting human needs.

Work as an Answer to Prayer and as a Means of Providence

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus encourages believers to depend on God for food and the necessities of life on a daily basis by praying “Give us this day our daily bread.”⁸⁴ Yet, God brings the answer to this prayer, providentially, in the form of humans working real jobs to provide and obtain food and other necessities of life.⁸⁵ In God’s providence, He cares for the world through natural structures (such as the sun, moon, stars, laws of gravity, entropy, etc.) and

⁸⁰ Mark 6:6; Matt. 8:5-13; 9:18-22; 14:22-33.

⁸¹ Thiessen, 303.

⁸² Harden, “Providence and Prayer.”

⁸³ Thiessen, 129.

⁸⁴ Matt. 6:11.

⁸⁵ Grudem, 320.

through “the work of His human creatures.”⁸⁶ God provides tangibly for the necessities of human life by bestowing upon people aptitudes and then guiding them into particular occupations in the world to ensure that He supplies society with food, clothing, shelter, family, friends, neighbors, economic resources, and stable government.⁸⁷ In providence, “God Himself carries on his creative activity in this world,” and sustains creation, through the work that God calls people to do.⁸⁸ “God’s providence is seen as the force that arranged circumstances in such a way that a person has a particular work. God also equips a person with the necessary talents and abilities to perform the work. In fact, the original Protestants made this one of the tests to know whether one was in the right calling.”⁸⁹ Thus, prayers to God for Him to meet one’s daily needs are essentially answered as workers partner with Him “in God’s creating and sustaining activity on earth,”⁹⁰ which includes caring for humanity according to God’s providence.

Conclusion

God created the heavens and the earth—the entire universe—and God continues to sustain His creation and to maintain a relationship with His creation, which is known as the providence of God. God’s providence is usually described as having three main functions: 1) to keep and preserve things in the universe; 2) to cooperate with all created things; and 3) to guide all things toward God’s purposes. In general, providence is “God’s activity of preserving and

⁸⁶ Kathryn Kleinhans, “The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective,” *Word & World* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 398.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), xiv-xvii.

⁸⁹ Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work & Leisure* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 200.

⁹⁰ Kleinhans, 396.

governing the whole of creation.”⁹¹ The providence of God is a biblical concept, but Christians often hold divergent views concerning providence, usually aligning with either the Calvinist position or the Arminian position.

Calvinism emphasizes God’s sovereignty, whereas Arminianism emphasizes God’s love and justice. Calvinism holds that God controls every facet of life and is the main force behind every action, even sin. Arminianism holds that God is “in charge” of everything, but allows humans to have free will to do as they please, even sin, though within certain limits surrounded by God’s eternal decrees. Russell Joyner says, “Within these decrees are those actions done by God for which He is sovereignly responsible, and then those actions allowed by God to happen but for which He is not responsible.”⁹² Calvinism emphasizes that God is sovereign over all, and thus He must be in control over everything and everyone. However, Calvinism “neglects the fact that God is sovereign over himself and is thereby able to limit himself in areas of His choice so that we might have true free will, able to choose to become His children, rather than bound to be His puppets.”⁹³ The main difference between the Calvinism and Arminianism in relation to providence can be seen by Clark Pinnock’s question, “Is God the absolute Monarch who always gets his way, or is God rather the loving Parent who is sensitive to our needs even when we disappoint him and frustrate some of his plans?”⁹⁴ God’s love is the main motif in Arminian theology, for a loving God provides free will to his creatures instead of instigating every action and thus instigating sin and evil in them and in the world. Calvinism says that God “knows” by foreordination, by making things happen the way He intended beforehand. Arminianism says

⁹¹ Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 15, <http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/1578-I.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2009).

⁹² Russell E. Joyner, “The One True God,” in *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed., ed. Stanley M. Horton (Springfield: Logion Press, 1995), 143.

⁹³ James H. Railey, Jr., and Benny C. Aker, “Theological Foundations,” in *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed., ed. Stanley M. Horton (Springfield: Logion Press, 1995), 49n23.

⁹⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, introduction to *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), ix.

that God “knows” what is going to happen through foreknowledge but has not predetermined how free will creatures will respond.

“Some hold that prayer can have no real effect upon God, since he has already decreed just what he will do in every instance.”⁹⁵ Yet, only Calvinists believe that God has decreed everything for everyone, which seems to imply that prayer could not make any real change in God’s predetermined plans. Instead, Arminians believe that God has decreed some major things but gives room for people to truly exercise free will, with prayer accomplishing some things that would not have been done if the prayers were not offered. Regardless, both positions do encourage people to pray because the Bible and Christ command people to pray to a responsive God Who cares about meeting the needs of humanity on earth and is able to do so. Further, people should pray because experience shows that God does answer prayer, when offered according to His will and with proper motives. Thus, both Scripture and experience show that prayer accomplishes real results, since God’s plan is to work on earth through the prayers offered by people.

In line with the principles of Calvinism, the Calvinist explains that prayer is foreordained and so are the results. In His sovereignty, God causes a person to pray the prayer that He wants prayed so that God can answer the prayer according to His predetermined will. In line with the principles of Arminianism, the Arminian explains that prayer is offered freely, not because God predetermined that a person would pray. Prayer is a real means for accomplishing real things on earth that would not be accomplished if the prayers were not offered.

Pentecostals, having a primarily Arminian theological heritage and stance, believe that God will answer prayers for His intervention into people’s lives. Thus, people can receive forgiveness of sins and salvation, physical and emotional healings, baptism in the Holy Spirit

⁹⁵ Thiessen, 129.

that brings boldness and power for witnessing and living the Christian life, and miracles. Without such prayer and faith on the part of individuals, such results would not occur, especially since they have not been foreordained to occur by God. Instead, humans have freedom within certain boundaries to live life for good or bad, with the results being known by God only through foreknowledge and not because he predetermined it to occur. Prayer for God's intervention (like in the book of Acts) is needed to see real changes take place that would not have otherwise taken place. Prayer does accomplish eternally significant things as they are prayed according to God's will.

As people pray for their own needs and the needs of the world, God supplies them with those needs. In God's sovereignty, and in response to prayers, "God especially guides the desires and inclinations of believers, working in us 'both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2:13)."⁹⁶ Yet, God guides all humanity in some ways to accomplish his purposes on earth, such as equipping them and guiding them into certain kinds of work to meet the needs of society and individuals within society. Prayer and the results of prayers upon working people are God's means of providence for both the Calvinist and the Arminian, but the Calvinist sees God as foreordaining people to pray for things that has God preplanned to accomplish, whereas the Arminian sees people praying in accordance with their own free wills for things that may not occur if they do not pray.

⁹⁶ Grudem, 321.

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