

CHAPTER 6

GOD AND THE WORLD

A. Providence

Providence is the rule of God over the course of time. This refers to the means God uses to make provisions for how humans must act in order to fulfill their own potentialities, as well as realizing God's plan for creation. Providence is God's continuing relationship to our world.

Since man possesses freedom, his destiny is often threatened by emotional anxiety and moral ambiguity. Repeatedly men worry about their fate; they become anxious about the future. At the same time they feel unsure about what it means to live by ethical standards. Are moral laws written into the very structure of the universe? Does goodness pay and is wickedness punished? There is no uncontestable answer to such questions, in the light of all the evidence around us. So our belief in providence rests on faith.

God's involvement in nature and history has often been misunderstood. He is not always able to carry out what He intended. Hence it is misleading to identify providence with predestination. Predestination is too rigid, too mechanical, to describe God's care for His creation. As Jesus taught, God relates to us as a father and mother relate to their children. He

surrounds us with signs of His affection and concern. But we are not like puppets who move because God is pulling the strings. To use another analogy, God is like a lover and we are His beloved. He does not control what we do. Rather, He tries to persuade us; His method is never one of simple coercion.

Traditional Christian theology distinguished between two types of providence: general providence and special providence. In general providence, God sets up the conditions under which we live. He establishes laws of nature and creates the favorable—or at least supportive—circumstances for human life. As part of His general providence God provides man with fresh air, sunshine and rain, fertile earth and everything else which makes up a habitable environment.

Then there are acts of special providence. These are specific and concrete events, sometimes of an extraordinary nature. Often the Jews have considered their successful flight from Egypt, and particularly their passage over the Red Sea, to be clear signs of Yahweh's special providence. Special providence concerns God's relationship with men rather than His relationship with the world at large. Through acts of special providence God does what is necessary to bring us to Him. In such acts He enables us to become His children.

Leslie Weatherhead, the British theologian, once defined God's will in terms of three different aspects: His intentional will, His circumstantial will and His ultimate will. It is God's intentional will that no one should suffer. God intends for us to live happily in fellowship with Him. Therefore God does not cause wars or traffic accidents. He sets up certain laws for our benefit, and when people break them they suffer. He never intended them to suffer. If men suffer, they are responsible.

In the second place, God works out His will through circumstances which are of our choosing instead of His. Since He endows us with freedom, He finds it necessary to carry out His purpose within the situation we create. God's circumstan-

tial will means that He works for good within the context of our freedom.

But finally, God's purpose will be realized; in and through our lives, it is God's ultimate will to achieve His final goal for creation. No matter what we do, no matter how many mistakes we make or how often we rebel, God's will shall be done here on earth as it is in heaven. To accomplish His design, God is even able to use tragic events on behalf of His righteous purposes. This divine ability to transform something evil into something beneficial is exemplified in what God did at the cross. In spite of everything men did at the crucifixion, God was able to bring good out of evil.

Augustine was the first to work out a complete doctrine of divine providence. He saw history as a conflict between God and Satan. Since the Fall there has existed a City of God made up of faithful angels, saints and righteous men who are opposed by the temporal City of Earth populated by wicked men subject to demonic powers. The battle between good and evil will continue until the Last Days, when God will triumph over Satan and establish His everlasting messianic kingdom. The Church is now the tiny nucleus for that future kingdom engaged in spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness and sin.

Calvin expounded the idea of providence from a different perspective. Augustine stressed the continuous struggle between good and evil in history, whereas Calvin emphasized the sovereign majesty of God. God is the omnipotent ruler over creation and all history. He decided prior to creation what He wanted to accomplish. Hence the destiny of the world and every man is predetermined from all eternity. God's election decrees are absolute and unchangeable. Everything that happens is due to the will of the all-sovereign God. Thus, we can be sure that if we remain loyal to Him in word and deed, we need never fear about what the future may bring.

Many theologians find it difficult to accept the Calvinist notion of double predestination.¹ If God has foreordained some men to heaven and others to hell, man has no free will or sense of responsibility. Therefore, non-Calvinists insist that God does not control human activity. He seeks to transform human nature so that it will conform to His will. He wants men to work with Him as His partners. He longs to inspire them, so that their lives will become purposive in His eyes. The bad side of predestination is that it makes life determinist and fatalist.

In reaction to Calvinism, many theologians since Arminius have stressed human freedom. It is the very essence of man to possess free will.

But if man is free, God's sovereignty is somewhat limited. To preserve faith in God's sovereignty, some theologians today say that God is self-limited. What does this mean? God knows all our past, because He is all-seeing. He is also aware of the possibilities which are open to us. What He does not know is which possibility we may choose to realize. God does not know how we shall act until we act. That fact preserves our human freedom.

We are free to act. Because we possess free will, we can choose to act against God's will. This freedom to act against God's will is exercised either willingly or unwittingly. Even so, man's true freedom is found in acting in accordance with the divine purpose. Abuse of our free will leads to bondage. When we obey God, we fulfill the potentialities of our human nature. When we oppose God we feel frustrated.

Finally, God remains sovereign. In spite of our real but limited freedoms, He is still the ultimate master of our destiny. Even at the cross, which was the extreme example of human waywardness, folly and sin, God was still the sovereign Lord of history.

However, the cross shows that God's sovereignty often remains hidden. Many of those at Calvary could not see how

God had been—or would be—victorious. Yet He was. Hence, from the Christian perspective, God always holds in His hands our final destiny. His will does get accomplished, although sometimes the way is temporarily hidden from our sight.

God's purpose for creation is unchanging. In creating men and women and giving them this world as their home, God intended to make this world an earthly paradise, in which His will would be fully realized, in harmony with the spiritual world.

In creating the first human couple, God did not intend for them to seek their own selfish pleasure and use their freedom without regard for His laws. He intended them to produce a family which could expand to a clan, tribe, nation and world living in conformity to divine will and realizing His ultimate purpose, the establishment of the kingdom on earth. This was also Jesus' mission, and it will remain God's goal until it is fully realized. Therefore, God's providential care for each individual must be subordinate to His overall plan for humanity. Happiness and a meaningful life for each person will be gloriously achieved when the purpose of the whole is realized.

B. Miracles

The Old and New Testaments contain accounts of miraculous happenings. The Old Testament reports such inexplicable events as Enoch's physical ascension into heaven, Moses' turning his staff into a serpent, the sudden collapse of the walls of Jericho, Joshua making the sun stand still, and Daniel's preservation from harm in the lions' den. None of these events can be explained on a purely natural basis. There are similar astounding happenings in the New Testament: the virgin birth, Jesus' physical resurrection and ascension, and the apostles speaking foreign languages at Pentecost.

Jesus' miracles are of two types: healing miracles and na-

ture miracles. Among the healing miracles are the cure of Peter's mother-in-law, the exorcism of demons, the healing of the paralyzed man and the restoration of the blind man's sight.

Then there are the nature miracles. Jesus walks on water, and calms a storm. He feeds 5000 with two loaves of bread and a few fish. He curses a fig tree, causing it to wither. Also, Jesus revives the dead. Many scholars who accept the basic historicity of Jesus' healing ministry are either baffled by or sceptical about his ability to control nature.

During the Enlightenment, when Christianity was subjected to the test of reason, theologians often tried to prove Jesus' divinity by appealing to the biblical prophecies and the miracles, holding that they proved that Jesus was more than human. Since that time, except in Fundamentalist circles, this kind of argument has generally not been used. Rather than helping to demonstrate the claims of the Christian faith, miracles have become an obstacle to belief for educated people. Hence, a new attitude toward them has developed.

Miracles today are defined as "sign-events"; events which are not important in themselves, but rather as signs pointing to God. Past theologians described miracles as divine breaks in the regular operation of natural laws. This interpretation has been largely abandoned.

According to the contemporary view, a miracle is a sign of God working with unusual intensity. A miracle is a manifestation of God's nature and purpose. The New Testament uses the word 'sign' for what we call a miracle. It also uses the word 'power.' A miracle, then, is a dramatic release of divine energy in a specific situation. A third New Testament synonym for miracle is 'wonder.'

Please note what a miracle is not in this modern definition.

1) A miracle is not a supernatural violation or interruption of natural law. 2) It is not a magical performance designed to

provoke astonishment; a New Testament miracle is always a purposive act. 3) A miracle is not intended to compel belief. It is never designed to contradict reason. In the Gospels, the signs and wonders attributed to Jesus were not intended to coerce his onlookers into becoming disciples. Paul makes no mention of either Jesus' healing miracles or his nature miracles. So, whether one accepts all the Gospel miracles or not has nothing to do with his Christian faith. Hence we should never consider the abandonment of reason necessary for faith.

However, it is true that miracles are a part of the New Testament; we should therefore pay strict attention to how Jesus himself looked at miracles. What did Jesus think of these awe-inspiring deeds? According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus often refused to give outward signs as proofs of his mission. He flatly repudiated those who expected him to demonstrate his claims. He never required that his hearers accept the irrational; rather, he expected their rational assent through a free act of the will. In his parables he appealed to man's conscience. He felt his power lay in the logical persuasiveness of his arguments. Jesus' general attitude toward miracles is seen in the temptation story. It was not God but Satan who urged him to demonstrate his messiahship by jumping down from the highest pinnacle of the temple, to be saved from death by angels.

The New Testament assumes that faith can accomplish astonishing feats. But these mighty proofs of God's power should be found in the power of love and justice. We are called, not to be miracle workers, but to be co-workers with God. Even the New Testament miracles have a humane purpose. Jesus was not interested in astonishing men with spectacular happenings. He used his powers to heal the sick, comfort the sorrowing, feed the hungry, and inspire the hopeless.

However, we should recognize that the evangelists were

not consistent in their treatment of Jesus' attitude toward signs and wonders. They employed miracle stories to prove Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God and the Logos. We must therefore see that the Gospel miracles were not bare statements of historical fact. Instead, they express the doctrinal faith of the Christian community after Jesus' death.

Another important fact should be noted. Miracles were taken for granted in every part of the ancient world. Jews and Greeks alike believed in miracles, and had whole collections of them about prominent men. For every miracle recounted in the New Testament, there are equally astounding marvels told of Hellenistic religious figures, Jewish rabbis, Buddhist monks and Hindu sages. This love for the miraculous continued in Christian history throughout the medieval period, and has not completely vanished to this day.

One final remark about this topic. Miracles are usually based on an alleged manifestation of divine power. But from the Christian perspective, sheer power is never an unmistakable sign of God's presence. Astonishing power can be a mark of evil, rather than of good. Unless power is tempered with love, it is never divine.²

In this chapter it is not denied that miracles can happen; but more important than their occurrence is what miracles mean to the persons who experience them.

A miracle is an event brought about by spiritual power which could not happen otherwise. Both supernatural healings and nature miracles are recorded in other religions as well as Christianity, in the past and in the present. If we can understand the workings of spiritual powers in miraculous events, and explain them as extensions of natural law, then we will find that there is no sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Miracles are not irrational breakthroughs or violations of natural law, but extraordinary manifestations of the consistent laws operating between two worlds.

C. Prayer

The New Testament urges Christians to pray without ceasing. It also commands us to pray in the name of Jesus Christ. This means to pray in his spirit, or to pray as he did. To imitate the prayer life of Jesus forbids prayers which are only selfish requests or magical efforts to control God's power.

Prayer is our human aspiration to achieve contact with God. But this is only half the story. In prayer, God is able to come close to man. God reaches out to us, as we reach up to Him.

Prayer takes many forms: adoration, thanksgiving, communion, confession, repentance, as well as petition. Prayer should be thought of as conversation with God. We talk with Him exactly as we would talk with a close friend or loving parent. Naturally, in such intimate dialogue, we express our concerns.

The ultimate purpose of prayer is to place ourselves in accordance with God's will. The best prayer, as Jesus taught, is to ask that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. It is a mistake to think that our prayers will change God's mind. It is our will rather than His will which needs changing.

Through prayer we acknowledge God as the living and loving God. Prayer is the finest example of the divine-human encounter which is at the heart of the Christian faith. If we fail to converse with God regularly in prayer, it is obvious that we are not serious Christians.

Through prayer an individual becomes an intimate member of God's family. Prayer is our way to relate to God in a direct manner. It enables us to open our hearts and minds to the truth of God's Word and will. By means of prayer, we establish an I-Thou relationship with our Creator.

Prayer also gains us a new world. As individuals, we have narrow views and a restricted outlook on life. Through prayer,

God is able to cleanse us of our imperfections and biases. We gain a new perspective on ourselves, and a broader vision of our world. Prayer enlarges our horizons, and deepens our sympathies for others. Through prayer, God is able to correct our attitudes toward our fellow men and toward the creation as a whole.

We should never forget that prayer is always corporate. No individual prays to God alone. He is always part of the total community of human beings who pray. We pray to God, our Father. He is not just my God or your God, but our God. So no one can really enter by himself into the presence of God, because He is everybody's God.

The effectiveness of prayer is not based upon our subjective state; it is not dependent upon how we feel. We should not think of prayer as a form of religious enjoyment. Prayer without ceasing involves the totality of our existence. There is a place for prayer no matter how we feel. Probably the time when we feel least like praying is the very time we are most in need of prayer.

Of course, prayer should lead to action. It is not supposed to be an escape from the world and all our troubles. Prayer is a way to obtain the energy needed to face and solve our problems. True Christian prayer is never just introspection, because all prayer is summed up in the phrase "Thy kingdom come."

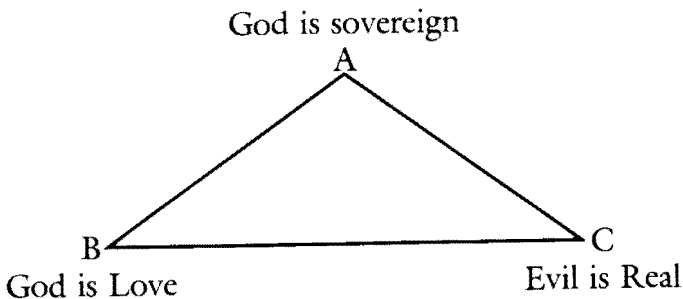
Finally, there is the question about the efficacy of prayer. Does God answer our prayers? He does; we can be sure of that. But the answer we get may not be the one we expected or hoped for. Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane has a great lesson for us. Jesus prayed that he would not have to suffer arrest, trial, sentencing and death; that prayer was not answered. But Jesus also prayed, "Not my will but Thine be done." Whatever we pray for, we can be certain that God's will shall be done, sooner or later, on earth as it is in heaven.

D. The Problem of Evil

The Bible teaches that the God of love created our world and when He saw it He said it was very good. Such a theology poses the problem of evil. If God is sovereign, all-wise as well as all-good, how can one explain the obvious fact of natural evils like disastrous earthquakes or disease-causing bacteria, as well as human evils like lust, pride and murder?

The ancient Greeks and the Gnostics of the early Christian era could solve this problem by saying that matter is evil, and the good God did not create the material world. God wants to free us from the bondage of the flesh, and so He sends us a divine savior.

Unlike the Greeks and the Gnostics, the early Christian theologians faced grave intellectual difficulties, because they borrowed from the Jews the notion of an omnipotent, gracious Creator of this world. The problem is that, while creation is good, evil thwarts God's intention. Evil threatens the existence of man, destroys the meaning of the world, and fills it with suffering. The problem of the conventional Christian position may be illustrated by a diagram. Christian theology is based on three essential beliefs: A) God is sovereign. B) God is love. C) Evil is real.



In the development of Christian theology, various efforts have been made to solve the problem of evil by eliminating—or at least qualifying—one of these three basic beliefs.

- 1) Some Christians have tried to downplay the reality of evil. That is, they dispose of the problem by explaining it away. Following Plotinus of Egypt (the founder of Neo-Platonism), these theologians have defined evil as non-being, the absence of reality or the privation of good. Augustine was typical of this approach. As a young man, he espoused the moral and metaphysical dualism of Manichaeism, whose founder Mani had held that the good God of spirit is in perpetual conflict with the evil Prince of this world, in order to rescue men from the torments of earthly existence and bring them to the spiritual bliss of heaven. Gradually Augustine turned from this pessimistic dualism to Neo-Platonism. Evil is nothing positive, he decided. It is only a lack of being, a deficiency, a purely negative absence of reality. Evil is merely a privation of goodness (*privatio boni*). This was a standard solution to the problem of evil from Augustine's time onward. Generally, the philosophical idealists have preferred this solution. For them, evil has no ultimate reality. It just looks real from our finite perspective. Or it is a necessary contrast to good. Or it is a means to self-discipline. Or it is a passing phase of man's evolution. Thus, by eliminating the reality of evil, one can believe in God's loving nature and the goodness of creation.
- 2) A second method is to eliminate or drastically qualify the goodness of God. Since God is God, He is the sovereign Lord of nature and history. What right do we insignificant humans have to judge God's actions by our finite ethical standards? As Paul put it, how does the pot dare to criticize the divine potter who created it? Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were inclined to solve the problem of evil in this fashion. It is also the solution found in the Book of Job. Job puts his hand over his mouth and stops complaining once he is overwhelmed by God's maj-

esty. As the later medieval scholastics and many Calvinists have insisted, whatever is, is right, because God wills it. We have no legitimate excuse to question the decrees of the Almighty. Unfortunately, this solution to the problem of evil has serious defects. It turns Christianity into a religious form of determinism. It defines God as a despot rather than a loving Father. And it makes the exercise of arbitrary power more important than moral standards.

3) A third method is to eliminate or qualify God's sovereignty. According to some theologians, God is not omnipotent. He allows evil because He has to. God is engaged in a cosmic battle with Satan, who is the god of this world. Or God cannot keep evil from appearing, because men oppose His will. Numerous modern theologians solve the problem of evil in this manner: Edgar S. Brightman, Charles Hartshorne, Nicolai Berdyaev, Edwin Lewis and—to some extent—Brunner, Barth and Tillich. But if God is limited, how can He still be God?

4) A fourth possible attitude toward the problem of evil has been suggested. We should affirm all three fundamental concepts: God is sovereign; He is good; and evil is real. However, this approach does not resolve the contradictions among the three assertions.

Some would say that there is no satisfactory interpretation of the origin and vast power of evil. Many solutions have been proposed by theologians and philosophers, Christians and non-Christians. However, none provides a complete answer. Evil, like God, remains a mystery beyond our comprehension.

5) However, there are certain insights of Christian theology which bear on the problem:

a) Some say that we have no completely rational explanation for natural evils, like tidal waves, hurricanes and epidemics. These represent the perversion of God's plan for creation. However, such events result from the simple operation of natural laws. Human evil originates in man's gift of freedom; hence it

is moral rather than metaphysical evil. That is to say, evil is not the result of man's finitude, but a consequence of the Fall.

b) Some theologians have said that Christianity does not try to give a philosophical explanation for evil; rather, it offers a way to overcome evil. Despite all its power, evil is weaker than the Creator. Faith gives us the courage to resist and overpower evil with divine help.

c) Also, because creation is good, and finitude is not a curse, there is always the possibility of a new creation fulfilling all potentialities of human beings and nature. Thus, Christians pray for and labor on behalf of the coming kingdom of God on earth. This provides a moral answer to the question of evil.

d) Scripture suggests an explanation of the origin of evil: The first man and woman rebelled against God at the instigation of the archangel and were expelled from God's presence.

e) According to Barth, evil arises out of Nothingness (*Das Nichtige*). Evil is real, dangerous and destructive; yet it has no ontological status. Evil is like a lie. A lie exists but it is not true. It lacks substance. Similarly, the *Nihil* has only a negative ontological reality. At the same time, it has a terribly destructive power. However, in Barth's opinion, God defeats and disarms the *Nihil* at the cross.³

f) Many contemporary theologians do not believe in the existence of a personal Satan or individual demons. Yet all of them recognize the constant threat of impersonal demonic powers such as oppression, sexism, racism, etc. While modern theology does not hypostatize evil, it is very much concerned with how evil works in societal structures. However, the New Testament affirms the existence of an evil supernatural being, Satan, who is now Prince of this world. God's final triumph will come when Satan and all his rebellious children surrender to God's love.

In conclusion, it is clear that the simultaneous assertion of God's sovereignty, God's love, and the reality of evil—as a

mystery beyond human comprehension—is acceptable to few modern-day people. In order to resolve the contradiction, one of the three elements must be qualified in some way. Qualifying God's goodness is unacceptable to most Christians: if God is not a wholly good God, how can He be worthy of our respect and love? Denial of the ultimate reality of evil, though it has strong adherents in this century (Barth and Teilhard de Chardin, for example), in the end is unsatisfactory, for evil is, after all, a genuine part of reality. As William James has pointed out, averting one's eyes from evil—though a viable way of life for some individuals—is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts it refuses to take account of are real; to be comprehensive, a religion or philosophy must give an explanation of them.⁴

More and more, modern theologians tend to qualify God's sovereignty as the best method of resolving the problem of evil. This does not mean a Manichaean dualism, as in the past, with Satan given equal power with God in the battle for man and the universe. Process theologians employ a sophisticated analysis of God's nature which shows how, if man is to have free will, God cannot make everything happen by necessity. God knows all future possibilities; but it is up to man to actualize certain of these possibilities. Thus, since man is not forced to do the right thing, evil can arise. The biblical story of the Fall is an attempt to explain the origin of evil (to be discussed further in Chapter 10).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

- 1 Double predestination: some men are predestined to heaven and all the rest to damnation.
- 2 For additional treatments of miracles, see Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, Vol. II: *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia:

The Westminster Press, 1952), pp. 160-169, 186-192 and Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, pp. 247-253.

3 See Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Is Victor!; Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 39-42. For a new study of evil, see S. Paul Schilling, *God and Human Anguish* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977). Schilling taught at Boston University for many years, and then at Wesley Theological Seminary for a time after retirement.

4 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1925), pp. 162, 163.