

## “Nothing Happens Without His Direction”

### A Sermon on Article Thirteen of the Belgic Confession.

*Texts: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 104:1-24*

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#### Article 13 - The Providence of God

We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance,<sup>1</sup> but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction.<sup>2</sup> Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them.<sup>3</sup> For His power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly.<sup>4</sup> And as to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us,<sup>5</sup> and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.<sup>6</sup>

This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not one hair of our head - for they are all numbered - nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father (Mt 10:29-30). In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without His permission and will.<sup>7</sup>

We therefore reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not concern Himself with anything but leaves all things to chance.

<sup>1</sup> Jn 5:17; Heb 1:3 <sup>2</sup> Ps 115:3; Prov 16:1, 9, 33, 21:1; Eph 1:11-12; Jas 4:13-15 <sup>3</sup> Jas 1:13; 1 Jn 2:16 <sup>4</sup> Job 1:21; Is 10:5, 45:7; Amos 3:6; Acts 2:23, 4:27-28 <sup>5</sup> 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Rom 1:28; 2 Thes 2:11 <sup>6</sup> Dt 29:29; 1 Cor 4:6 <sup>7</sup> Gen 45:8, 50:20; 2 Sam 16:10; Rom 8:28, 38-39

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**C**reation and providence are two doctrines which fit together like hand and glove. God created all things visible and invisible from nothing (the doctrine of creation), and God sustains the world he has made and so rules over it that all things fulfill the ends for which they have been created (this is the doctrine of providence). Christians believe God is distinct from the world (unlike the pantheists, who confuse God with the world), and while yet distinct from the world, nevertheless, we believe and confess that God is intimately involved in every aspect of the world he has made. In believing this, we reject all forms of deism, which teach that after creating all things, God steps back (so to speak), allowing human history to simply run its course.

Articles twelve and thirteen of the Belgic Confession address the closely related doctrines of creation and

providence. As we have seen throughout our study of articles eight through eleven of our confession, which deal with the Trinity and the deity of the Son and Holy Spirit, the Triune God creates and sustains all things. This means that the Christian view of creation and providence is quite different from other monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam, both of which deny the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, as well as their respective roles in the creation of all things.

We have also seen that the Christian conception of creation is very different from that of the various Eastern religions, as well as from New Age thinking and paganism, all of which identify God in some way directly with the creation (pantheism). Not only does this deny the creator-creature distinction (the teaching that God is transcendent—“other than”—and is not to be identified with creation), it also makes created things themselves sacred, confusing the created order with the one who created it. To use an old expression, God makes the green leaf and gives it meaning and purpose. God is not “in” the green leaf, as though the green leaf were itself a manifestation of God and therefore somehow sacred. The misguided notion that the earth is our mother, or the view of native Americans and other earth-worshipers that plants, animals and the stars and planets are manifestations of the divine (the great spirit), are utterly pagan and completely incompatible with biblical teaching. God is completely distinct from his creation and stands above creation as its creator.

Then we have the opposite error seen in those dualistic conceptions of God and the world, in which God is identified as pure spirit while matter is considered as the opposite pole, so that the material world is therefore inferior (because it is material) to the spiritual world. In such schemes, the ultimate reality is the unseen, that which is closer to spirit rather than to matter. When people view the world through this lens, the ultimate struggle between good and evil is the struggle between angels and demons, those invisible combatants whose unseen warfare dramatically effects those of us bound to the visible world. Yes, God creates all things visible and invisible, but the doctrine of creation tells us that God assigns to each realm its order and appropriate purpose, so that we need not be preoccupied with unseen spiritual combat between angels and demons (like a Frank Peretti novel). Rather, we must be concerned with the visible, with the material world and with the drama of redemptive history which plays out in that world in the events of ordinary human history. As John Calvin puts it, the creation serves as the grand theater of God’s glory, that place where the great drama of human redemption from sin is played out. This is why we as Reformed Christians place so much emphasis on redemptive history (the seen) as opposed to the spiritual world of angels and demons, which, while real, is not the realm with which we have to do.

One of the main points made in article twelve is that God not only creates all things, whether they be visible or invisible, but that God determines the form and the purpose for everything he has made. The created order has great value because of this very fact. Not only does the creation in some sense reflect the glory of the creator, but when God finished his work of creation in six days, he rested on the seventh—not because he was tired, but because he was enthroned to rule over all that he had made. And then while enthroned, God blessed all that he had made, pronouncing it “very good.” The well-known quip from C. S. Lewis is certainly *apropos* at this point—“God likes matter, he invented it.” The creation has value then, not because it is a manifestation of God, or a part of God, but because God created all things and declared them to be good. This is why God’s people are forbidden from worshiping and serving created things, rather than the creator, and why idolatry in all its forms is such a great sin.

Recall that article twelve of our confession not only addresses the subject of the creation of all things visible, it also addresses the creation of the spiritual realm and those invisible spiritual beings which inhabit it, the angels. Angels have been created by God for specific purposes and while unseen, are nevertheless quite real. However, given the fact that angels are invisible, they have become the object of unfortunate and wide-spread speculation. Therefore, we must be careful not to develop our view of angels from the images of the Renaissance or our own pagan culture which is pre-occupied with angel

mythology. Rather, we must return to what the Bible actually has to say about these divine messengers if we are to understand the spiritual world and the purposes for which God has made it.

Article twelve also deals with Satan and the demonic, summarizing the biblical teaching that demons are fallen angels and that they, together with their master, seek the destruction of Christ's church. It is not a question of *if* Satan will attack the church, it is only a question of *when* and *how*. Despite popular sentiments to the contrary, demons cannot put evil thoughts in our minds, they cannot possess a Christian, nor can they cause us to sin against our wills. But demons do seek to destroy the church and its members through heresy and schism, since they do the will of their master, who was a liar from the beginning. So while Satan and his legions hate the gospel and seek to stop its spread through false doctrine and the fomenting of division, we oppose these enemies of Jesus Christ through the preaching of Christ crucified (the means, John tells us in Revelation 20:3, by which Satan is bound). Darkness always hates light. This is why the gospel sets us free, because truth exposes error for what it is. The best way to expose a lie, is by proclaiming the truth.

Our confession closely connects the doctrines of creation and providence. Accordingly, article twelve sets out a basic definition of God's providential care over the world that he has made: "We believe that [God] also continues to sustain and govern [all things] according to His eternal providence and by His infinite power in order to serve man, to the end that man may serve his God." God does not create all things out of nothing only to then step back and watch as things play out, as the Enlightenment deists insisted, often speaking of God as a kind of cosmic watch-maker. God not only creates all things, but he continues to sustain all things. He also governs them so that they fulfill the ends for which they have been created. But while very closely related to the doctrine of creation, God's providence is not merely a continuation of creation, since the creation account of Genesis 1 indicates that when God finished his work of creation in six days, he rested on the seventh.<sup>1</sup> But make no mistake about it, God is just as involved with the world today through sustaining and governing it, as he was at the moment he created the heavens and the earth out of nothing.

This bit of background then brings us to article thirteen of our confession, which spells out the doctrine of God's providential care and governance of the world that he has made, mentioned almost in passing in article twelve.

There are four main points made regarding God's providence in articles twelve and thirteen. First, as we have seen, in article twelve, our confession simply sets out the fact of God's providence. Second, in article thirteen, our confession describes God's government over all aspects of creation in such a way that while God ordains all things which come to pass, God is not the author of evil. Third, our confession speaks of the wonderful comfort we are to derive from this doctrine. If this is our father's world, then all things do indeed work together for good, even if we cannot yet see nor understand how this can be the case. And then, finally, our confession points out certain errors which have been made regarding the doctrine of providence, which are to be rejected by God's people. God is not an absentee landlord, nor does he leave the outcome of things to chance.

As to the first point—the fact of providence—simply set out in article twelve, our confession makes a broad and rather general statement to the effect that God both sustains and governs all things. Even as God creates all things by the power of his word, so too, he sustains all things he has made by that same power. This is clearly taught throughout the Bible. As we read in Ephesians 1:11, God works out everything (not just some things) in conformity with the purpose of his will. If God works out all things as he wills,

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<sup>1</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 107.

what is left to chance? Nothing.

The Psalmist tells us in Psalm 103:19: “*The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.*” God’s rule extends to all things—not just some things. This point is further elaborated by the prophet Daniel, who tells us that from God’s perspective,

*All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. [The Lord] does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’*

Despite the angst this notion of God’s absolute sovereignty over things generates for many American Christians—as though God’s control over all things he has made is a bad thing—the Bible everywhere resounds with the teaching that God is absolutely sovereign over all of creation, precisely because he created all things, and has ordained both the end and the purposes of the things he has created. To say that God creates all things, is to say that God sustains all things. While to be distinguished, creation and providence cannot be separated.

The second main point our confession makes about God’s providential care over all things is set out in article thirteen, and which in many ways is an elaboration of the general statement made back in article twelve. The first line of article thirteen reads as follows. “We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction.” The proof-texts listed in the confession clearly demonstrate that this is, in fact, what the Bible teaches.

We should not overlook the fact that so many of these verses used as proof texts are taken from the Book of Proverbs, the purpose of which is to give God’s people true wisdom. Indeed, biblical wisdom is, in part, found in the fact that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, that he is sovereign over all things. In Psalm 115:3, we read: “*Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.*” It is hard to evade the meaning of this text! But many Christians try. Then, in Proverbs 16:9 we read; “*In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.*” In other words, even as a man makes plans and executes them, God ensures that the man’s course ultimately fulfills God’s own purposes. In fact, God’s governance over all things extends to the most seemingly insignificant of events. According to Proverbs 16:33, “*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*” But God’s divine superintendence of the world also extends to things we consider to be of much more significance, the affairs of nations and their rulers. In Proverbs 21:1, we read, “*The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*” Each of these verses, then, teach what theologians speak of as “divine concurrence,” which is the idea that God’s divine power ensures that all created things act according to the purpose for which they are created.<sup>2</sup> Thus men and creatures act in line with the natural abilities given them (choosing and deciding), and while doing so, bring to pass the very things which God has ordained.

At this point in our discussion it is very important to offer certain qualifications, namely to the effect that while God is sovereign over all things, yet, as our confession puts it: “God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them.” This, too, is clearly taught in the Bible. In James 1:13, we are told, that “*When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.*” God does not tempt us. While Satan may deceive us,

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<sup>2</sup> Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 171. Cf., Kim Riddlebarger, “Human Sin and God’s Purpose: Some Thoughts on the Doctrine of Divine Concurrence,” in Modern Reformation, Volume 11 (September/October 2002).

James goes on to say that the cause of sin lies within each one of us: “*but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.*” This same personal responsibility for sin is taught by the apostle John. In John’s first epistle we read, “*For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.*” Thus, while God may have ordained all things to come to pass—including human sin—God is not the author of these events, nor the specific sins that bring God’s purposes to pass. The creature is.

Our confession goes on to offer a further qualification regarding divine concurrence. “For [God’s] power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly.” The famous story in the Book of Genesis of Joseph and his brothers bears this out. Joseph’s brothers threw him in a well and watched as he was hauled off into captivity in Egypt—glad to be rid of him. Years later, when Joseph had become one of the most important men in Egypt and his brothers discover who he was, Joseph explained the situation as follows: “*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*” (Genesis 50:20). Joseph’s brothers plotted and acted freely throughout the whole sordid mess, and yet their sinful acts brought to pass the very thing God ordained.

Furthermore, the Bible speaks of this divine concurrence in other ways as well. In Isaiah 45:7, God declares, “*I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.*” In Amos 3:6 we read, “*When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?*” And then we have the cross of Jesus Christ—the most despicable act in human history, in which the sinless Son of God, is put to death by his own sinful creatures without any justification whatsoever. Yet, without the cross, there is no salvation from sin. Therefore, in Acts 2:23 Luke sets out the human responsibility for the death of the Son of God, along with God’s sovereignty in ensuring that this came to pass. “*This man [Jesus Christ] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*” Luke makes the same point just two chapters later. In Acts 4:27-28, we find this remarkable assertion:

*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*

Notice the fact that human freedom and divine sovereignty are set side by side in both Acts 2 and Acts 4, without any attempt to resolve the apparent difficulties with the fact that God not only decrees that certain things come to pass, and that the people involved, acting sinfully and freely, actually bring to pass what God has decreed.

This is what Scripture teaches and we probably ought go no further and try and fill in the blanks—which is the course laid out for us by our confession. “And as to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.” Indeed the Scriptures very clearly exhort us in Deuteronomy 29:29, that “*the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*” Therefore, we must be willing to proclaim those things the Bible does, but be careful and humble enough to leave the secret things alone.

The third point made by our confession is that the doctrine of providence, properly understood should bring us great comfort. “This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that

nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not one hair of our head - for they are all numbered - nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father (Matthew 10:29-30). In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without His permission and will." While there is much we can say at this point, the *Heidelberg Catechism* addresses this subject so eloquently that we ought to just read questions 26-28 and the answers which it gives.

**Q 26.** What do you believe when you say, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth"?

**A.** That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father because of Christ his Son. I trust him so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and he will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

**Q 27.** What do you understand by the providence of God?

**A.** Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand.

**Q 28.** How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?

**A.** We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from his love. All creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.

Given this eloquent summation of the biblical teaching from our catechism, it escapes me as to why so many American evangelicals find the doctrine of providence so problematic. Of course, they are afraid this might take away human freedom. But it would be nice to just once hear such people defend God's freedom. After all, not only is God the creator and free to do as he wishes, but one of things he has freely determined to do is to make us as men and women, free creatures, whose free decisions and actions bring to pass the very things God has decreed. If God is not in control of whatsoever comes to pass then who or what is? It is not a comforting thought to think that man might be in charge of his own fate as well as the fate of the universe. And this leads to a final point.

Our confession speaks to the rejection of a particular error, which, while prevalent in the ancient world and again at the time that our confession was written, continues to resurface in our own age. "We therefore reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not concern Himself with anything but leaves all things to chance." If God does not sustain, govern and superintend every aspect of the world that he has made, then things are left to chance. The whole idea of chance comes to us from Greek mythology and the notion of the Fates—three women, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. One spun the

thread of life, one measured it, while the third cut it—but all three were blind-folded.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the notion that the universe is in constant chaos, or governed according to fate, or left to chance, is a denial of the doctrines of creation and providence. Christians do not believe in luck, karma or destiny. We believe in the creator God, who ordains whatsoever comes to pass, precisely because God does concern himself with everything in his creation as the Scriptures clearly teach.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us as we consider the doctrine of God's providence?

First and foremost, God not only created all things from nothing, and ordained the ends for which these things were created, he also sustains his creation and so governs it, that creation will indeed fulfill his purposes. Thus we need not fear a nuclear war or an asteroid impact which will do to the human race what happened to the dinosaurs—kill us all. God has promised to redeem his people even while he brings judgment upon the world. Nothing will happen to this world that was not ordained by God. No renegade molecule (as R. C. Sproul likes to put it) will somehow get loose and ruin everything. No evil machine nor monster computer will arise to conquer the human race. Our creator is also the sustainer.

Second, this means that we can see good and evil for what they are. Even though God has ordained that men sin and that the Son of God be crucified, God is not the author of sin, since all creatures act according to the powers and abilities which God has ordained. Sinful acts are still sinful because they originate in the sinful hearts of men and women, even if God uses these sinful acts to fulfill his purposes and even if God alone can turn evil to good. When tragedy comes, when disaster strikes, these things are still tragedies and disasters, and horrible things, even though they come to us through the will and according to the purposes of the sovereign God. We are not Stoics, bravely enduring what fate sends our way. We are children of our heavenly father, who has promised never to give us more than we can bear, who always provides a way of escape, and who at the end of the day can and will turn suffering and evil into good. But evil is still evil. It is the result of the fall. But somehow and in someway, it is a part of God's purpose. We are not left to suffer without knowing that God has a purpose for our suffering.

Finally, this doctrine gives us great hope. God is in absolute control of all things. Everything which happens, good or bad, happens for a reason. We are not left on our own, nor to impersonal forces such as chance, fate or karma. History is moving toward a definite and final goal ordained by God, when the Son of God puts all his enemies under his feet. And while in this life we may not know what the reason for these things is, and we certainly don't have to like the things which God ordains for us, nevertheless, we do know that God is working all things out according to his eternal purposes and nothing happens to us apart from his will. Just as with the death of his sinless son—crucified at the hands of wicked men to suffer unspeakable pain and agony and yet, an event ordained by God—God will turn our suffering into good. Yet, before our Lord's resurrection and exaltation, there was a cross and a tomb. It is the same for many of us whom God has called to suffer. We are refined into pure gold, only through the means of the refiner's fire. But what glory awaits us—the same glory which awaited Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday after he endured Good Friday.

Therefore, the Triune God who created all things is likewise in control of all things. Yet, because his own dear Son has suffered for us, we do not serve an indifferent, disinterested Savior. Furthermore, God pours out the blessed Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we are united to Jesus Christ and call this creator God our Father. Our confidence is not in our endurance when we suffer, but in the goodness of God, who created all things, sustains and governs all things, and who redeems us from our sins. For all things do indeed work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. For

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<sup>3</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 112.

the creator and sustainer of all things, is also our redeemer.