

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VI.

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES GOD REIGN?

BY THE REVEREND JAMES MUDGE, S.T.D.,

MALDEN, MASS.

FEW questions penetrate further into the roots of theology than this, few have a closer grip on practical affairs, few have more intimate relations with religious enjoyment. The doctrine of Divine Providence, Dr. Charles Hodge has said, "is confessedly the most comprehensive and difficult in the compass either of theology or of philosophy." And nothing but a thorough knowledge of this doctrine can properly answer the query propounded above. Therefore that it is difficult to answer it with complete satisfaction may well be admitted. And the difficulty will, of course, fully account for the great diversity of theories which have been set on foot in regard to the matter. Men have differed and debated about it from time immemorial; they will differ and debate about it till time shall be no more. Hence, in attempting here an explanation of that which has occupied so many wise heads, we do it with no hope of securing universal agreement. We believe, however, that the argument here presented cannot be successfully assailed, and we are sure that unspeakable comfort comes to those who find themselves able to receive it, for it brings God into closer connection with our days than any other scheme and fills the devout heart with perpetual bliss.

The art of always rejoicing rests on a twofold foundation:

We must make our will one with God's will, and we must identify God's will with the occurrences of each moment. If both these things be done, evidently our will is thus brought into perfect accord with every event, precluding all friction, insuring perpetual peace and triumph. If we behold and hail a living, loving will of our Heavenly Father in every minute happening of each second, we are in a constant attitude of welcoming gladness and genuine exuberance as we greet the day's unfoldings. It is only with the second part of this double identification that any one can, theoretically, have trouble; for all admit that we should submit to God, but all do not seem able to comprehend how God is in everything. To this we accordingly address ourselves.

All must see its deep significance. For what boots it to say, with St. Paul, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God," if we balk at the weighty word "all," and except from its scope those things which are mingled with human malice or mistakes, either other people's or our own? The profoundest necessities of the most practical piety require a distinct, unequivocal recognition of the absolute sovereignty of God in the affairs of the world. Not otherwise can there be that constant perception of the Divine Being as always appearing, even in the smallest events, which is so essential to any close walk with him. There cannot be that direct dealing with him so promotive of entire deliverance from the distresses that come when the provocations of men and the perversity of things fill the eye of the soul. God's promises cannot afford a sufficient basis for our trust unless his power to carry them out to the very letter under all circumstances is put beyond question. Prayer will find its pinions clipped if any doubt whatever is cast upon the ability of the Father to succor his children. Our peace will suffer

irretrievably if there is any loophole, even the slightest, for the possible defeat of God's purposes concerning us. Christian resignation under the minor adversities and little trials, as well as the greater troubles, of life, becomes practically impossible unless we are quite sure that the hand of God, and not the hand of man or the devil, sends the calamity; and we can hardly be thus sure in any instance unless we are in every instance. Only he can rejoice always, without the possibility of being pronounced a fool or a fanatic, who knows that always what touches him is a manifestation of the blessed will of his loving Father. This surety is the source, and the only source, of the deepest peace, the highest exultation, the warmest gratitude, the clearest hope, the strongest trust, the profoundest patience, the completest calm, and the supremest beauty that can crown the religious life. It is the firm foundation of all personal piety, the unfailing fountain of the sweetest, noblest, truest devotion.

To grasp this truth we need to be convinced of just two propositions: The first is that God is the source of all motion in the physical universe. It may be said, we think, with confidence, that this is now the practically unanimous conclusion of those best qualified to have an opinion on the subject, or at least of all Christian theists, if not of all who recognize the existence of God at all. They are substantially agreed that there must be a Power working through the mechanism of the universe, and that this Power is the Being we call God; that he is the only ultimate force in material matters, and hence the sole responsible author of all physical action. This view, not a very recent one, has been constantly strengthening its hold on the men of the learned world for a long time. Weighty names in abundance might be quoted to this effect.

They affirm that the whole universe is the will of one supreme intelligence, that all the phenomena of nature reveal the universal presence and ceaseless agency of the Deity. He is *in* creation, not on the outside of it. Matter has no existence apart from the continuous energy of the Divine will, upholding all things by the word of his power. The cause of the uniformities of nature is to be found in the will of the omnipotent intelligence whose plans are changeless because his wisdom is perfect from all eternity. Not an atom of matter has ever changed its position but in obedience to his will. Therefore no sinful purpose can obtain objective fulfillment, can be consummated in external action, except by the agency of God, which means, of course, except the result contribute to the advancement of his eternal plans. What we call nature (including, of course, the bodies of animals and men) is but the form and product of God's ceaseless activity. In him "we live, and move, and have our being." God is the life of everything that lives, the motor of everything that moves, the fountain of all force. Providence is not an exceptional interference with the course of nature; the course of nature is itself providence; and nothing is too small to be included in it. If there is purpose in anything, there is purpose in everything. All objective things, all things in the material realm, are mere causal points where God is and where he works, are activities of the living God. The universe is nothing other than God in action. Thus God, it will be manifest, is the responsible author of each occurrence in the physical or material world, whether that occurrence be in connection with human activity or entirely divorced therefrom; and every event is, in the strictest sense of the term, a providence. a godsend.

This brings us to the second of the propositions referred

to above, namely, sin resides only in the will. It is a wrong volition, an evil choice, a decision to disobey God. This must be firmly grasped to save us from the diabolical conclusion, that, since God is the author of all physical motion, he is therefore the author of sin. This latter thought is put forever out of the question just as soon as we form a clear conception of what sin is. Sin, it is certain, cannot consist of any mere external action, no matter what that action may be, any motion of bones or muscles. These outward movements have no moral character whatever. They may be produced by a galvanic battery. The sin lies back of the outward act, and resides in the motive or intention. Two persons may do precisely the same outward act, the one of them doing it sinfully, and the other with perfect innocence. Nay, the same person may at different times do the same thing with directly opposite ends in view. Two men may each give money to a third, precisely the same external act in both cases, but the first man gives it to relieve distress, the second to procure murder; and it is plain that the different moral character of the two men would be indicated, not by the outward action, identical in the two, but by the different intentions which lay behind. A good man may administer arsenic to a person as a medicine to heal him; a bad man may administer arsenic to a person as a poison to kill him. One preacher may declare God's truth from the love of it, or from devotion to its divine Author; while another may declare the same truth, perhaps in the same words, moved by love of personal praise, or the selfish desire of preferment.

The idea is by no means novel, and yet it proves to be one hard for the average, or untrained, mind to grasp and hold in the face of appearances and of the common usage of human talk. We are so accustomed to hearing the actions of

men ascribed to their unrestrained, uncontrolled power, and to hearing these actions called sinful, that we are much startled when the correctness of these expressions is challenged, and we are told that things are altogether different from what they seem. It takes us quite a while to get accustomed to the thought that, strictly speaking, there are no sinful actions but only sinful volitions or sinful persons, and that man is responsible for the volitions only, while God alone is responsible for the actions.

It is a fact, however, that the terms moral and immoral, innocent and guilty, can be applied with entire propriety only to men and women, to free moral agents; they cannot be applied to deeds except in an accommodated sense, by a convenient figure of speech. We cannot ordinarily do without the figure, and in popular discourse it is proper enough to use it; indeed, we must use it if we are to be understood. But when we wish, for scientific precision of language, to get at the exact truth, the figure must certainly be discarded. We observe this rule in many other matters. For example, everybody says that the sun rises and sets. And in the loose, popular, colloquial sense, it does. Men will always speak of it as so doing, and properly enough; such speech is sufficiently accurate for ordinary usage and is perfectly understood. But in the strict, scholarly, scientific sense, of course, it is not correct; and when men are using language of precision they speak of the earth's motion, and not of the sun's, as the cause of our day and night. The rotundity of the earth and the swiftness with which it and we are whirling through space, are similar truths which we constantly ignore in common language. In like manner the strict truth that men are responsible only for their volitions, and not for outward acts and events, cannot, as a general thing, be made much use of in

ordinary conversation or preaching. But it is very important that it be held firmly in mind by those capable of understanding it, and be presented where it is likely to do good. Especially is its perception important for those desiring to apprehend the doctrine of Divine Providence, and to get from it the consolation which it holds for distressed humanity. For this blessed doctrine seems inextricably bound up with this distinction, and stripped of much of its power where the distinction is denied or overlooked.

The trinity that most Christians worship seems to consist of God, Satan, and Nature. They adore the first when he does the things that suit them, or that fall in with their very limited understanding. But when he does what to them appears cruel, evil, or unjust, then straightway the devil takes his place, and to him is ascribed the authorship of events. He is erected into a power quite great enough to justify the trembling worship paid him in pagan lands by millions of frightened devotees, and quite great enough to defeat when he pleases the most cherished plans of the Almighty. To the third person in this trinity is given credit for everything which bears the stamp of regularity and uniformity. Such people have much to say about "Nature's laws," and to listen to them you would surely think that God had nothing to do with the ordinary ongoing of the seasons, or the changes in the weather, or the processes of growth and decay, and such like. And, least of all, do they admit that it is God who produces earthquakes, cyclones, and volcanic eruptions. All of these are most emphatically and exclusively, with them, the work of the mysterious deity they call Nature. Could anything be more destructive of true and habitual communion with God? Far better for us to accept the Bible usage, which ascribes to God the falling of the rain, the springing of the

grass, the clothing of the lilies with beauty, the feeding of the ravens, the satisfying the desires of every living thing. This brings us into fellowship with him at all points, and makes life rich indeed. There need be no confusion in this matter. All is law. All is God. It is not the law that works: it is God that works according to law, that is, according to his own fixed principles and plans and methods. Law does nothing; nature does nothing. God does all. Let us hold firmly to the divineness of the natural, and the naturalness of the divine.

Of course we cannot understand the meaning of all God's ways, nor have we any right to pose as interpreters of his providences. It need cost us no pangs to admit that we are finite while he is infinite, that we are very ignorant while he is all-wise, and that we see but a day while he sees eternity. Surely it is nothing derogatory to the character of God to suppose that he has all-sufficient reasons hidden from us for doing things which, from our standpoint, could not be defended.

What more natural than that many things occur in the wide sweep of his operations which must for the time be dark to us; what more foolish than to demand that he instantly explain to us all his dealings on pain of forfeiting our confidence! We see that earthly parents could not do this to their infant children, and a far greater distance separates the Infinite Being from us than separates us from our little ones. God conceals his purposes, or at least his methods, that we may walk by faith, not sight. His arrangement is admirably adapted to help us in the cultivation of humility and patience and hope and resignation. It is only pride and arrogance that demand to know, instead of trusting. And it is exceedingly strange that any of God's children should jump, as it were,

into the arms of Satan for comfort, when God sends hard things upon them, rather than confess their own ignorance.

Some who are timid in their mental make-up, and not very logical in their processes of thought, find relief in attempting to draw a distinction between God's causative and permissive providences, between what he permits and what he actually does or purposes. They deem it preferable to say, with reference to events that are connected with sin or calamity, that God permits them. They seem to think that the burden of the world's painful occurrences can thus be shifted from God's shoulders, if he be said simply to permit them.

But the distinction, though it has a truth at its basis, and is well enough for popular effect, is not strictly tenable in this form. There cannot be practically any difference of importance between permitting a thing and actually doing it, provided the person who is said to permit it has it in his power to prohibit. If he can prohibit and does not choose, he virtually assumes the responsibility of the action; he says, Under the present circumstances this action is better than any other, and better than inaction. Archbishop Whately, whose keen, calm, judicial intellect was rarely, if ever, befogged by the ambiguities of words, saw this point clearly, and writes, in one of his notes on Bacon's Essays, "Whatever happens must be according to the will of the Most High, since He does not interpose to prevent it." And who will have the hardihood to say, with reference to any calamity whatsoever, God could not have prevented that? The Almighty has such multitudinous resources, such numberless ways of working, that he can never be at a loss to carry out his plans in nature. As Wesley says, "We are assured that whatsoever God wills He can never want instruments to perform, since He is

able even of these stones to raise up instruments to do his pleasure."

It is true that God does not propose ordinarily to work miracles or to stand in the way of so-called natural results; he prefers, for wise reasons of discipline and our training, that natural causes, as we term them, should work to their customary ends. But in so deciding he practically adopts and sanctions the end reached, so that it becomes his own doing, for which he is plainly responsible. The common sense of the world indorses the proverb, that he who does a thing through another virtually does it himself, and whatever a being with perfect power to prevent deliberately permits, thereby becomes as much his own as though no other one were concerned in it.

If I hold securely leashed in my hand a dog whose whole desire is to get at the cat crouching before him, and I, with full power to keep the dog where he is and with full knowledge what will occur if I do not thus keep him, choose to open my hand and let him kill the cat, it is idle to say that I did not myself kill the cat as really and effectively as if I had taken it by the throat and strangled it. Hence it seems wholly proper to affirm that when God, with full power to prevent perpetually in his hands, permits any volition to eventuate in the action desired by the volitioner, he sanctions the action though not the volition, and assumes the responsibility of it. As has been well said, "There is no cause for us to prove an alibi for the Omnipresent. God does not shirk the responsibility for the universe." He does not simply permit the action, he appoints it; he does not merely allow, he orders; he does not only suffer, he sends; so that it comes to pass as he pleases, and promotes his glory.

He permits that which is really sin, the inward evil volition,

in a very different sense from that in which he permits the outward action. His absolute, autocratic power exerted on the one, the volition, would affect our free agency in a very different way from what it does when exerted on the other, the action, destroying free agency in the first place but not in the second. Nor can we for a moment imagine God the direct responsible author of a malicious or lustful volition, while we can imagine him, without inconsistency, the direct author of any external action whatsoever, for mere actions have no moral character. It may be said, then, that God in deciding once for all to permit sin, decided to do, in his own special realm of matter, whatsoever this deep unalterable fact of sin rendered necessary for carrying out his grand designs. Hence, in a loose sense, accommodated to the popular understanding, he permits the action to which sin prompts, but in reality he himself does whatever is made necessary by the disturbing hateful presence of rebellious wills.

Can we say, then, "All that is is right"? Not without explanation. The phrase has a truth in it, but is easily misunderstood. The whole scene of the world and human history is not the work of God alone, except in the sense that it is the best he could do with the materials at his disposal. Sin having entered against his will, all that has followed is what that fact necessitates or occasions. All is right in our present circumstances, in view of the discipline needed, and the final adjustment of rewards and penalties. It may be said that sin or the sinner indirectly controls some events by compelling God to do far otherwise than he would if there were no sin. Satan and wicked men, by their evil courses, make it essential for God to punish them, but he keeps the rod and the reins in his own hands. Our volitions, those of men in general, are the occasions for special activities in the world,

which activities, causally considered, are forms of the divine agency.

Events, then, as they meet us from day to day embody the mind or purpose of God in its present phase, so to speak; not as it was in the beginning, nor as it will be hereafter. Heaven before the fall of Lucifer expresses his primal or absolute mind — that which he desires and in which he delights, that which meets his approval and sympathy; earth expresses his present or relative mind, that which is best under the circumstances, that to which he has been forced by the conditions beyond his control, the perverse volitions of free agents independent in their choices. So that the events of life may be said to accord with his relative and actual, though not with his absolute, ideal will. They represent his plans in their present stage of development, but not at all as they will be when his efforts at the renovation of the world are crowned with success. Still they are his plans, and the events are more truly, directly his than they are anybody else's. Neither evil men nor evil spirits have any power to determine or direct the actual course of occurrences, though they may defy omnipotence in the sphere of their wills, and by the sin there perpetrated greatly influence the action of God.

There is a very important difference, it seems to us, between the sinner's directly controlling events himself and his so willing that God deems it best, under the circumstances, to act in such a way. The outward act, to be sure, may often be the same, but the immediate power behind it is very different, and hence the feelings with which we can contemplate the transaction will also be very different. The trust and comfort and joy which fill the devout heart as it is thus brought into immediate contact at all points with its Maker, able to see his loving hand in all, are unspeakably precious.

and very different from the emotions that would arise if the vision had to be confined to human or diabolical agency. We may say that God permits the evil volitions of men and all the accruing ills of the universe, because he created men knowing what they would do, and determined to create notwithstanding the evil that would result, because foreseeing that in the end greater good would be wrought out, and that a world containing sin would be better than no world at all or a world of mere machines without free agency. Sin was permitted, we may say, because to make a universe in such a way as to prevent it, would have necessitated the rejection of a greater good. For the same reason, probably, sinful beings are continued in existence. But in no other way than this can God be said even to permit or suffer that which is really their sin, namely, the perverse rebellious choices of their free wills.

Still another explanation may perhaps relieve the mind of some. It has reference to our own active duties. The grandest truth can be easily turned into the most mischievous lie if it be taken in the wrong spirit or by the wrong handle and used in a perverse way. Antinomianism ever stands over against the truth of God's sovereignty, and seeks to find in it some excuse for its own license, some justification for its own wickedness. Hence it must be carefully remembered that we are held to the strictest accountability for every sinful volition, including every willful omission of duty. The fact that God sanctions the outward act can in no way be pleaded in extenuation of our guilt for yielding to the evil passion which is ours alone. As well might Satan plead God's sanction for his malice and pride because God does not see fit to blot him out of existence. Whatever God may think best to do or not to do with our limbs, which are under his control, does not affect at all our sole responsibility for the wicked tempers

which we cherish and the free consent which we have given to temptation. Hence the truth of God's responsibility for external acts, or, in other words, his absolute sovereignty in the realm of matter, when used as a shield against oppression, a refuge from the storm of persecution, is a sound, sufficient defense, an unfailing solace; but if it should be employed as a sword or a bludgeon by the persecutor or other evil-doer it would be a twisting of the truth into falsity and a wresting of it to his own destruction, because for him the intention is the essential thing, whereby he will be tried and whereby he should try himself.

It will thus be seen that the chief value of the doctrine lies in enabling us to endure, not to do. It has a much more practical connection with our receptivity than with our activity. The latter will not be essentially affected by it. For, while force or physical action is never absolutely at the bidding of human volition, so that it invariably and necessarily follows the course man orders, yet as a matter of fact it ordinarily does so. Man has no power to do (outwardly) just as he pleases in spite of God, but this freedom of external action is not obstructed or circumscribed except in special cases, when there is no other way open to God by which he can carry out his plans. But since this way is always in his power as a final resort it is proper to say that the ultimate authoritative control and responsibility is his alone. And the external act is man's, properly speaking, only in the sense that his volitions gave occasion for the putting forth of this particular power by God at this particular time and place. It is a pre-arranged harmony, even as in the case of prayer, where my special petitioning gives the occasion for the special putting forth of God's power in some ways that would not otherwise be put forth, though the power is still God's, not mine.

It will also be seen, we trust, that it would be a very sad mistake, and a most improper perversion of this doctrine, to suppose that it encouraged inactivity or excused laziness. God is certainly in all events, so that they manifest his present purpose, but we, who are bound to be "workers together with him," have no right to consider anything an *event* until we have done our very best to make it what it should be. The inevitable, that which is the result of our utmost exertions in the right cause, is the only thing which we are justified in regarding as the expressed will of God. Cheerful acquiescence with this is a manifest duty and privilege. But until an event is practically inevitable (the determining of which point must be left to each man's best judgment), no one has any business to bring God's sovereignty into the question, or to plead divine responsibility as a bar to his own faithful exertions.

We must not take further space for elucidating this great and much misunderstood doctrine. If there still seems some mystery about it, let it be remembered that mystery is a necessary accompaniment of such deep matters. We are confident that no other theory so fully secures the freedom needful for personal accountability without interfering with the true prerogatives and powers of the Almighty, preserves the Creator from responsibility for sin without imperiling or shattering his control of the universe, making a place alike for divine and for human sovereignty. It draws the dividing line where the immaterial and the material in man come together, making God sovereign in the realm of matter including the bodies of men and other animals, while man is sovereign in the realm of his own volitions. It makes all physical force in the last analysis simply and solely God's, and makes sin reside alone

in the will, which is beyond the reach of God's control by the conditions of its creation. Combining these two thoughts, we have a consistent, sufficient explanation of how the Creator can govern the world without disturbing the moral responsibility of his creatures. In this way we obtain a firm foundation for an intelligent faith in God's promises without imperiling our conceptions of the perfect holiness of his character. In this way we secure scope for the freedom of the created will without elevating either man or devil into a power able to defeat God's purposes in the world or mock at his authority. For as soon as men's devices take form in word or deed they become the common property of the providence of God, who will have them develop and pass on to the contemplated end of the responsible deviser, or divert them to other ends, or restrain them in part or in whole, as may best subserve the purposes of his moral government. Hence, when any agency, good or bad, reaches us, it is an expression of God's will concerning us; something for us to learn, enjoy, do, or suffer.

We know of no other consistent, workable theory. This one sets forth better than any other, we believe, the respective relations, of God, Satan, and man to the existence of the sins and miseries that infest the world, marking out clearly the different degrees of power they exercise. By making God great it gives the believing soul a sure ground of peace and trust; by assuming and conserving the freedom of the human will it preserves responsibility. We are saved from all concern or fear about wicked men or wicked angels. We are saved too from trouble at what seem the blunders and mistakes of good men, whether our own or other people's. We feel sure that even in them there is a purpose and a meaning; that there is a loving heart behind them and a strong controlling hand upon

them; they are of the "all things" that work together for our good, having uses of admonition, correcting our pride, and delivering us from worse evils than those they bring. The pain which comes in punishment for our careless infraction of some wise law is disciplinary and beneficent, and we can find cause for praising him who sends it. We shall embrace cordially that most wholesome and inspiring truth that "every man's life is a plan of God," and we shall eagerly give our strength to coöperating with the development of God's plan concerning us, rejoicing in the sacrifice and sufferings made necessary by so high and so worthy an end. Our trust will be no half trust, a meaningless mockery, sure to fail when most needed, but a trust of the genuine, thoroughgoing sort, out from which naturally, inevitably, springs the calm and pleasant feeling that nothing can ever come to us which is not in harmony with that perfect will, infinitely holy, wise, and good; a trust which will sweep our faces clean of even the vaguest anticipation of anything not to be desired.