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RISKY BUSINESS? A DEFENCE OF THE NO RISK VIEW OF PROVIDENCE¹

Melvin Tinker

God's fatherly providence, the doctrine that nothing falls outside his control and plan, is regularly misunderstood and rejected as pastorally and biblically indefensible. This article deals with these objections to show how the absence of risk in God is both credible and vital for Christian faith and life.

Introduction

Here is part of an account of an incident involving General Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson's chaplain, the Confederate officer, Dr Robert Lewis Dabney:

Dr Dabney rode with General Jackson into the very thickest of the fight, on many a hard fought field. The men used to say of their soldier-preacher, 'He does not mind it any more than we do.' The gallant Major Nelson frequently met Dr Dabney and discussed with him his doctrine of 'Special Providence,' and when on one occasion he heard him directing his men who were under heavy fire to shield themselves as far as possible behind trees and a convenient stone wall he rode up to him and with a graceful military salute said, 'Major Dabney, every shot and shell and minnie *strikes just where the Lord permits*. And you must excuse me, sir, for expressing my surprise that you are directing your men to shelter behind trees and a stone wall and to put such things *between themselves and Special Providence*.' But Dr Dabney promptly replied: 'Why Major, you do not understand the doctrine of "Special Providence." I believe it and teach it with all of my heart but *I look upon the trees and that stone wall as a very "special Providence" for the men at this time* and I am simply acting on the doctrine when I direct them *to avail themselves of these "Special providences."*' Major Nelson was convinced and accepted the doctrine of 'Special Providence' as Dr Dabney expounded it.²

This account, which may seem rather quaint today, reveals two things about the doctrine of 'Special Providence.' First, how common a view it was at that time (although not necessarily in such an Augustinian

¹ Thanks are to be expressed to Mark Lanier for the use of his excellent facilities at the Lanier Theological Library, Houston, in the writing of this paper.

² John William Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, (Richmond, Va.: B.F. Johnson & Co, 1887), p. 252, italics original.

form) and second, how misunderstood it was then, as now, as being a Christianised version of Stoic fate, a kind of ‘*Che sara, sara.*’ Major Nelson was under the misapprehension that the doctrine would lead to idle thinking and idle action (both, interestingly, denied by the Stoics³) and it took Dr Dabney’s answer to show him that the reverse was true—it energised believers.

The view still persists, however, that a ‘strong’ doctrine of providence is hardly distinguishable from fatalism. God is reduced to a cosmic puppet master,⁴ his goodness is compromised and man’s free will effectively rendered illusory. What is more, it is claimed, the Bible itself is not allowed to be decisive, for the Scripture speaks of God as ‘repenting’ or ‘relenting’ as a result of people praying (Exod 32:14) which, it is argued, is incompatible with a view of providence where God decrees all things according to the ‘counsel of his will’ and ‘who knows the end from the beginning.’⁵ It is therefore argued that a more ‘open’ or risk-oriented

³ Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 182–217. Because the arrangement of things in the world is of a causal teleological order (for certain things to be achieved other things have to occur to ensure their achievement), we can’t be idle or slapdash if they are going to be achieved. Thus using the language of fate, if Jean is fated to be married then she is fated to have a man to be married to as it is logically not possible for a woman to be married without a husband. This is a matter of *logical* necessity. Instances of *causal* necessity are demanded by this view too: if Jean is fated to have indigestion next Tuesday she is fated to eat a meal next Tuesday.

⁴ ‘God’s decision to create a cosmos that was capable of love and that was, therefore, populated with free agents was also a decision to create and govern a world he could not unilaterally control...What it means for God to give agents some degree of morally responsible say-so over what comes to pass is that God’s say-so will not unilaterally determine all that comes to pass.’ Gregory Boyd, ‘God Limits His Control,’ in *Four Views on Divine Providence* (ed. Stanley N. Gundry; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), p. 190.

⁵ There are passages which state categorically that God does *not* repent or change his mind (1 Sam. 15:29 and Num. 23:19) and so one needs to coordinate these passages with others which do suggest a change of heart on God’s part in such a way that Scripture is not presented as contradicting itself or misrepresenting God’s nature and his relation to the world. For one such helpful presentation see, Steven C. Roy, *How Much does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), ch. 4, ‘A Different View of Divine Foreknowledge,’ pp. 125–194. It should also be noted that the Hebrew word translated ‘repent,’ *n am*, could be rendered ‘relent,’ as is often the case in the NIV. This casts a different shade of meaning on what is happening in such cases. Rather than God changing his purpose it can be viewed as God changing his *attitude* towards those he has warned and prayer is instrumental in this.

view of providence is needed to preserve the Christian faith's integrity in these matters.⁶

This paper proposes that it is in fact a no-risk view of providence which alone can retain the integrity of the Christian faith in terms of its internal coherence and the comprehensive respecting of the biblical data regarding God's sovereignty. Here are just a few sample texts which affirm God's absolute rule, and any proposed view of providence must account for them satisfactorily: the entire universe (Ps 103:19; Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11), all of nature (Ps 135:6–7; Matt 5:45; 6:25–30), angels and even Satan (Ps 103:20–21; Job 1:12), all of the nations (Ps 47:7–9; Dan 2:20–21; 4:34–35), every human person and his/her choices (Exod 3:21; 12:26–36; 1 Sam 2:6–8; Ezra 7:27; Gal 1:15–16), every animal and its choices (Ps 104:21–30; 1 Kgs 17:4–6), all events that appear to be 'accidental' (Prov 16:33; Jon 1:7; Luke 12:6), all the sinful acts of man and Satan (Gen 45:5; 50:20; 2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chr 21:1).⁷ Whatever texts the 'risk' proponents of providence might point to as affording difficulties for the non-risk theist, they are minimal compared to a whole host of texts (and themes) which the risk view cannot deal with sufficiently.⁸

What is Providence and Why is it Important?

Both the definition and the pastoral entailments of the classic doctrine of providence are set out in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563):

Question: What do you understand by the providence of God?

Answer: The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, and rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty and everything else come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

Question: What advantage comes from acknowledging God's creation and providence?

Answer: We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and trust our gracious God and Father for the future,

⁶ Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: a Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Baker Publishing, 2000) and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1998).

⁷ For a thorough and judicious presentation of the biblical material, see Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?*

⁸ For a critique of the risk view of providence as represented by Open Theism, see Melvin Tinker, *Intended for Good: The Providence of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), pp. 171–176.

assured that no creature can separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand, that without his will they cannot move.⁹

David Fergusson gives four reasons for tackling the subject of Divine providence in the current context. First, it is a central article of the Christian faith, necessary for relating the doctrines of creation and redemption. Second, the problem of evil brings into question the divine ordering and an account of providence is required to provide a resource for understanding this and the manifest opposition to it. Third, the way the doctrine has been appropriated by civil religion and political rhetoric (sometimes under the guise of ‘destiny,’ for example, Adolf Hitler’s appeal to *Schicksal*) with the need for an account which is distinctive and would alert us to possible abuses of the topic. And fourth, it is a subject of great pastoral significance and so requires responsible theological comment.¹⁰

Fergusson’s first point should alert us to the fact that both the shape and content of the particular doctrine of providence that one holds will be derived from, and reinforce, other key doctrines which form the web of beliefs constituting one’s faith. That is, one’s theology (i.e. one’s view of God) and anthropology (one’s view of man) will largely be determinative of whether one adopts a risk-free view of God’s providential activity or a risk-view. For example, if one holds to a libertarian view of human freedom defined as, ‘An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action’¹¹ then such human beings *must* have power to act contrary to God’s purposes and ultimately be able to thwart them. If this is a determinative principle, then for the sake of consistency and coherence this would require a God who would ‘respect’ such freedom and limit himself accordingly. This is the position of ‘Open Theism.’¹² Alternatively, if one adopts a voluntarist (or

⁹ The doctrine of providence is often conceived as a subset of the doctrine of God’s sovereignty which Bruce Ware describes as:

‘God exhaustively plans and meticulously carries out his perfect will as he alone knows best, regarding all that is in heaven and on earth, and he does so without failure or defeat, accomplishing his purposes in all of creation from the smallest details to the grand purposes of his plan for the whole of the created order.’ Bruce Ware, ‘Prayer and the Sovereignty of God,’ in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honour of John Piper* (eds. Sam Storms & Justin Taylor; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), p. 128.

¹⁰ David Fergusson, ‘The Theology of Providence,’ *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 2009: p. 95.

¹¹ William Hasker, ‘A Philosophical Perspective,’ in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), pp. 136–137.

¹² Let it be said at this juncture that the presupposition of the libertarian view is far from proven, and this has been well demonstrated by Roger Nicole:

Edwardsian view of human freedom, named after the eighteenth century American theologian Jonathan Edwards), where we choose according to our nature, that is, we do what we simply *want* to do, this would be logically compatible with an understanding of God who is absolute sovereign and wholly omniscient.

One's view of cosmology also frames the debate to a significant extent. If one is essentially anthropocentric in outlook, viewing the universe as primarily for our well-being and the forum in which we exercise our libertarian free will, one will have a rather attenuated and generalised construal of providence which allows little room for the kind of 'special' or 'meticulous' providence held by Dr Dabney. But if, with John Calvin, one views the universe as the 'theatre of God's glory,'¹³ and a God 'for whom and through whom everything exists' (Heb 2:10) with the church itself as central to God's cosmic purposes (Eph 1:22–23), then a no-risk conception of providence is not only reasonable but required.

Furthermore, it would seem self-evident that the prefix 'omni-' when applied to God's attributes of power and knowledge (omnipotence and omniscience) suggests maximality, extending to all situations, eventualities and possibilities. It is difficult to see what meaning such terms have within a risk-view of God's action in the world beyond rhetorical flourish. A no-risk view, however, allows the terms to exercise their full semantic weight and range.

How Might that Look?

For the no-risk conception of providence as classically understood, the belief is that God, who is infinite, outside space and time and so not subject to the limitations we experience, is also personally and intimately

'Just about everyone agrees that in heaven there will be no more danger of apostasy. Does this mean that in glory men will be deprived of that freedom which constitutes the distinguishing character of humanity, the gift that stands so high that even the sovereign purpose of God must be viewed subordinate to it? Surely not. But if in glory perseverance is not inconsistent with freedom, why should it be thought incompatible on earth?' Roger Nicole, 'Some comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,' in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. G. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 357.

¹³ 'After the world was created, man was placed in it as in a theatre, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author.' John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* (vol. 1 of *Calvin's Commentaries*; trans. John King; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003), p64. 'Meanwhile, being placed in this most beautiful theatre, let us not decline to take a pious delight in the clear and manifest works of God.' John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.14.20.

involved in space and time with the creatures he has made. He sovereignly rules over all while being God-in-relationship. We see this truth being expressed, for example, in Prov 16:4: ‘The Lord [Yahweh] works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.’¹⁴ This means that the affairs and plans of men are known to him and will be used by him to serve his sovereign purpose. Thus his plans are never ultimately stymied by our cleverness and cunning; even wicked people come under his sovereign sway. Furthermore, no matter how powerful particular people may be, they do not lie outside the orbit of his eternal decrees: ‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases’ (Prov 21:1).

Fundamental to the no-risk view is that God’s governance of the universe is a purposive means-end governing. This is ‘positive government’ not a mere ‘responding’ to events, but a superintending of all events to achieve the purposes divinely intended. The ends are brought about by the particular means ordained by God.¹⁵

God’s meticulous personal superintending¹⁶ also covers what we might call ‘chance’: ‘The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord’ (Prov 16: 33). Sometimes ‘Chance’ (with a capital ‘C’) is put forward as an alternative causal explanation to God. But this is really a false alternative. Chance is simply a word we use to describe events—like tossing a coin or the mutation of a gene—which either have no discernible order or no discernible cause which we know. This does not mean that such matters are not known to God. ‘Chance’ is not some metaphysical ‘Other,’ a positive force which is to be pitted against God and so can be thought of as a God-substitute. To suppose such a thing would be to make a logical blunder. Chance is not an alternative to God—rather, what we call chance comes under God’s care and design just as much as all the other things which we can predict more accurately like the rising and setting of the sun. He is Lord of all.¹⁷

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NIV 1984.

¹⁵ Paul Helm, ‘Evil, Love and Silence,’ accessed 11 March 2014. Online: http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2008/02/evil-love-and-silence_01.html.

¹⁶ Using the term ‘superintending’ as we do here has the disadvantage of suggesting a certain relation between God and the world which implies ‘manipulation’ thus reinforcing the ‘puppet master’ analogy beloved by opponents of the no-risk view of God’s sovereignty. Kevin J. Vanhoozer posits a different conception which underscores the personal activity of God, not as a ‘causal agent’ but as a *communicative agent*, so rather than God superintending or even supervening, God ‘advenes.’ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Effectual Call or Causal Effect’ in *God, Scripture and Hermeneutics: First Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.; Inter Varsity Press, 2002), pp. 96–124.

¹⁷ See, ‘God or Chance?’ in Donald M. Mackay, *The Clockwork Image* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), Ch. 5.

Furthermore, the risk-free view of providence implies that there are no unforeseen 'by-products' of God's plans. In the case of human beings, unforeseen and undesired side effects (what some might call 'collateral damage') are inevitable simply because we are locked into space and time and so not able to foresee all the consequences of our actions, although some may be anticipated. However, such limitations do not apply to God. Some writers, however, do think that God is limited in the sense that although he may want some things to happen, his plans can be thrown off track by rebellious human beings and other circumstances which lie beyond his control or knowledge, with the result that he is forced to resort to alternative plans. Here a distinction is sometimes made between God's antecedent will (what he wishes to happen before an event) and his consequent will (what he wishes to happen in response to that event). But this can hardly be applied to the Almighty Creator who is Lord of heaven and earth. As P.T. Geach rightly says, take 'the merchantman's captain who throws his wares overboard in a storm: antecedently he wills to bring them into port, consequently upon the storm he wills to throw them overboard. But the captain only does not will rather to allay the storm because this is not open to him; he is not one whom wind and sea obey.'¹⁸

The risk view of providence, however, involves *real* risk, as it adopts a view of God more akin to the merchantman's captain mentioned by Geach, but the captain writ large. Here there is the possibility and actuality that things might not turn out in the way intended by God. This is not simply to say that moral agents act in ways which are contrary to God's moral will (in that sense they do act in ways not intended by him), but that due to a limitation of God's knowledge and/or power, some of God's specific designs and purposes are not fulfilled in his world.

This position would appear to wreck the climax of the story of Joseph; Gen 50:19–21, 'Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in

¹⁸ P.T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 34. C.S. Lewis makes a similar point,

'I suggest that the distinction between plan and by-product must vanish entirely on the level of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. I believe this because even on the human level it diminishes the higher you go. The better a human plan is made, the fewer unconsidered by-products it will have and the more birds it will kill with one stone, the more diverse needs and interests it will meet; the nearer it will come—it can never be very near—to being a plan for each individual. Bad laws make hard cases. But let us go beyond the managerial altogether. Surely a man of genius composing a poem or symphony must be less unlike God than a ruler? But the man of genius has no mere by-products in his work. Every note or word will be more than a means, more than a consequence. Nothing will be solely for the sake of other things...The great work of art was made for the sake of all it does and is, down to the curve of every wave and the flight of every insect.' Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Fount, 1984), pp. 57–59.

the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid, I will provide for you and your children'" and render toothless the great promise of Rom 8:28, 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' The first statement could not be asserted for it *could* have turned out otherwise and the second cannot be made for things *might* turn out otherwise.

Objections and Qualifications

There are two main objections levelled at the no-risk view at this point.

The first has already been mentioned, namely, that this leaves little room for human agency. How can a single event involve both divine and human intention if the former inevitably trumps the latter? Are not humans reduced to automata, despite objections to the contrary?

At least two things can be said in response to this.

The no-risk theist, by adopting the compatibilist understanding of the relation between God's sovereignty and human responsibility (together with a voluntarist understanding of decision making), affirms human agency.¹⁹ The fact that no explanation can be given as to *how* divine agency is related to human agency in no way diminishes this claim. This is the position of Augustine in his *Enchiridion* as he speaks about God's relation to evil, 'In a *strange and ineffable fashion* even that which is done against his will is not done without his will. For it would not be done without his allowing it—and surely his permission is not unwilling but willing—nor would he who is good allow the evil to be done, unless in his omnipotence he could bring good even out of evil.'²⁰ Paul Helm's comment is particularly apt, 'God's relation to the universe he has created and that he sustains and directs is a relation without parallel. It is unique, incomparable, *sui generis*.'²¹ Elsewhere Helm amplifies this point:

While this move is philosophically unsatisfactory, since philosophers like to have answers to their questions, it is nevertheless highly appropriate.

¹⁹ This viewpoint has been clearly presented by Paul Helm in *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993) and D.A. Carson, *How Long O Lord* (2d ed; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), ch. 11, 'The Mystery of Providence.'

²⁰ Augustine, 'Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope, and Love,' accessed 11 March 2014. Online: www.tertullian.org/fathers/augustine_enchiridion_02_trans.htm#C4. Trans. Albert C. Outler, italics mine.

²¹ Paul Helm, 'The Augustinian-Calvinist View of Divine Foreknowledge,' in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (eds. James K. Beilby & Paul R. Eddy; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001) p. 167

For, after all, the divine-human relation is *sui generis*. What could be more extraordinary than the relation between the transcendent Creator and Lord of all and his creation, including his human creatures? If God is *sui generis*, then any relation between anything else and God looks likely to be *sui generis* as well. Surely any imaginable relation between any two or more of God's creatures is likely to be more tractable to the human intellect than that between the Creator and any intelligent creature?²²

Secondly, this does not entail that *nothing* can be said about this relation, albeit speculatively. Thus in the account of Joseph and his brothers cited above that in one and the same event two contradictory intentions can be involved has been explored by Austin Farrer in terms of the paradox of 'double agency':

Everything that is done in this world by intelligent creatures is done with two meanings: the meaning of the creature acting, the meaning of the Creator in founding or supporting that action. Subjectively considered, there are two doings; physically there is but one event.²³

This does not mean that God was 'forcing' the brothers to behave in the way they did, which was wicked (otherwise God would be implicated in evil); they freely chose this course of action (in a voluntarist fashion), with malicious intentions. Nonetheless, through such human choices God achieved his primary and specific intention of establishing Joseph in a place of responsibility in order to bring blessing upon the wider world. In other words, the meaning and purpose of the primary agent (God) is to be found in the secondary agents' (the brothers') action, even though there was no guarantee that they were meaning or intending the same thing. We find the same principle operating in Acts 2:23 as Peter addresses the crowd, 'This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge [the action of the primary agent]; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross [the actions of secondary agents].'²⁴ And so we have two actions and meanings in one event—the crucifixion.

The second main objection to the risk-free conception of providence is that in some cases (e.g. Augustine and Calvin) it leans in a Stoic and determinist direction such that, 'In practical terms, it leads to an account of providence in which too much is attributed to a positive will, at the expense of rendering God inscrutable and impersonal.'²⁵ It is not at all

²² Helm, 'Evil, Love and Silence.'

²³ Cited in Vernon White, *The Fall of a Sparrow: A Concept of Special Divine Action* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985), p. 111.

²⁴ NIV 2011.

²⁵ Fergusson, 'The Theology of Providence,' p. 99.

clear why inscrutability should be considered a difficulty or why it should render God impersonal. To offset any claim that such a position leads to an impersonal view of God it is important to stress with the Heidelberg catechism that God's dealings with his creatures is 'fatherly'.²⁶

As was noted at the beginning, even if there were links between Stoicism and Calvin as Fergusson suggests, the 'Idle argument' ('it does not matter what we do because it is going to happen anyway') is refuted by Calvin:

But with respect to future events, Solomon easily brings human deliberations into agreement with God's providence. For just as he laughs at the dullness of those who boldly undertake something or other without the Lord, as though they were not ruled by his hand, so elsewhere he says: 'man's heart plans his way, but the Lord will direct his steps!' (Prov 16:9). This means that we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will. The reason is obvious. For he who has set limits to our life has at the same time entrusted us to its care; he has provided means and helps to preserve it; he has also made us able to foresee dangers; that they may not overwhelm us unaware, he has offered precautions and remedies. Now it is very clear what our duty is; thus if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if he makes remedies available, not to neglect them.²⁷ [Dr Dabney evidently understood Calvin clearly at this point!]

In other words, God has ordered his world in such a way that there is a close link between means and ends, consequently we have every responsibility to act intelligently and prudently taking due cognisance of that ordering and will be held to account by our Maker as moral agents.

Furthermore, from a practical (and one may even say, psychological) viewpoint, Calvin enjoins people to *act as if the future has not been decreed by God*:

²⁶ This is recognised by Fergusson himself, 'Divine providence is purposive, particular and parental and not to be confused with fate or fortune.' In 'The Theology of Providence,' p. 99. This was not lost on Calvin either, 'We are forced to conclude that whatever he orders, is the best thing we could desire.' We have a kind Father and a sovereign Lord, so that we submit because he is sovereign, and we trust because he is our loving Father working for our good. Losing this, as the Open Theists have, is a pastoral disaster. As Calvin puts it: 'Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.' Gary Williams, 'John Calvin in the Valley of the Shadow of Death,' *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Aug/Sept 2009 issue.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.4, p. 216.

Yet since the sluggishness of our mind lies far beneath the height of God's providence, we must employ a distinction to lift it up. Therefore I shall put it this way: however all things may be ordained by God's plan, according to a sure dispensation, for us they are fortuitous. Not that we think that fortune rules the world and men, tumbling all things at random up and down, for it is fitting that this folly be absent from the Christian's breast! But since the order, reason and end, and necessity of those things happen for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion, those things which it is certain take place by God's will, are in a sense fortuitous. For they bear on the face of them no other appearance, whether they are considered in their own nature or weighed according to our knowledge and judgement.²⁸

Here we have the issue of different epistemic standpoints. From our standpoint as participators in God's world as cognitive agents, the future is epistemically open to us and so we are to act, operationally *as if God has not decreed the future*. From God's standpoint—the one who knows the end from the beginning—the future (such temporal indexicals refer to *our* future) is not open.²⁹

David Fergusson draws attention to the Trinitarian nature of God's relation to the world which is not only to be conceived asymmetrically but also covenantally.³⁰ Having surveyed some of the scriptural allusions to divine foresight and provision he says that

[it] is misleading to restrict the doctrine of providence to a sub division of the doctrine of creation. Its standard textbook locus has not served an account of providence well. It is a feature of all three articles and suggests the need for a differentiated account of providence. A Trinitarian account of providence might usefully assist us in this respect by presenting it in ways that are not dominated by a single model appropriated to the first person.³¹

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.9, p. 208.

²⁹ This also has implications regarding those prophecies which appear to be 'unconditional' but in fact do have a conditional element attached, e.g. Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 20:1–11; Isa 38:1–8). For a cogent case for what is called 'logical indeterminacy,' the openness of our future and prophecy see, C.G. Tinker, 'God's Foreknowledge and Prophecy: A Case Study in Logical Indeterminism and Compatibilism,' *Churchman* 118/1, 2006.

³⁰ Fergusson, 'The Theology of Providence,' pp. 105–110 and Fergusson, 'Epilogue' in *The Providence of God* (eds. Francesa Aran Murphy & Philip G. Ziegler; London: T and T Clark, 2009), pp. 326–333.

³¹ Fergusson, 'The Theology of Providence,' p. 108.

This is a helpful corrective. There is a unity in God's creative-redeeming purposes which have an eschatological dimension with their fulfilment in Christ: 'God placed all things under his [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything, for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way.' (Eph 1:22–23). God's providential work in the whole creative order is not detached from his salvific work in Christ applied by the Spirit in the church.

...as we have seen with respect to the Hebrew Bible, the rule of God is not confined to the Israel or the church. It extends from this central action to the entire world. In this respect the distinction between works of special and general providence may have a place. The work of salvation determines not only the community of the faithful but the whole cosmos, and this must include the natural world and our rootedness in it.³²

It is not clear what Fergusson means by 'rule of God' here. If it is the 'kingdom of God,' the sphere in which there is salvation in Christ, then, yes, there will be a 'moving outward.' If, however, it is referring to God's general and specific rule over all things now mediated through Christ (his mediatorial reign), then it is difficult to see how such a 'centrifugal movement' of God is sufficient. If God is going to achieve his saving purposes in what is referred to as 'salvation history' (*Heilsgeschichte*), he must *also* be exercising meticulous providence over *all* history (*Historie*), i.e. there is a 'centripetal movement' of God too. To illustrate: for there to be a Pontius Pilate to try Christ, his detailed personal history has to be providentially ordered by God together with the whole of Roman and world history of which his particular life is a part. This principle applies to us all.³³

A model for helping us understand the relation between God's providential rule of the world and his central saving work is provided by Karl Barth.³⁴

Barth argues that God's activity in the world has a centre and circumference. The centre is the coming of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ, the circumference around this centre is God's gracious providential rule of all things. When it is asked what activity of man reflects God's activity at the centre, the answer is service. Barth takes his cue from the action of Jesus Christ as the Servant, giving himself for the sake of the world and for the Father's glory; Christians are first called to be servants. Our life of service is to be understood within the community of God's people—the

³² Fergusson, 'The Theology of Providence,' p. 109.

³³ Tinker, *Intended for Good*.

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III : 4 (56) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), pp. 565ff.

church, whose life is geared to announcing God's kingdom in Christ to the world. Here we would have the centrifugal movement referred to earlier.

When asked what activity of man corresponds to God's overruling providence at the circumference, the answer is work. God in his fatherly providence sustains, directs and cares for his world. Therefore; our work is about sustaining, directing and caring for the world too.

This means that as attested to by the writers of wisdom like Ecclesiastes, much in the world can be celebrated without becoming idolatrous for it is ruled and provided for by a gracious heavenly Father (Eccl 3:11 'God has made everything beautiful,' cf. Ps 145:13–16) and yet it is subject to frustration due to sin (it is 'mist' *hebel* cf. Rom 8:19–25) and looks forward to a deliverance which will be in Christ. However, we are not to lose sight of the centre where what is read as significantly providential may appear to be rather weak and foolish as far as the world is concerned (1 Cor 1:23–25, cf. Acts 2:23).

Particular events may also resonate with God's purposes and be received gratefully in this light—birth, marriage, and sometimes death—but their reception as such must always be provisional and tentative. To the extent that they forward Christ's purpose, they can attest God's rule. But our vision is partial at best and our confession at this juncture remains a modest one. Even within the good creation there is also decay, disease and the shadows of life as well as cruel misfortune together with the insidious and widespread effects of sin. Christian faith requires us to think of the same world as both providentially ordered and yet also fallen. In celebrating God's providence, the psalms live with this tension as also does Job, a book too often neglected in the church's theological reflections.³⁵

Not so Risky

The ultimate value of the risk-free view of providence, apart from it being the most coherent and comprehensive account of the Scriptural revelation, is that it is pastorally beneficial. For John Calvin, 'Certainty about God's providence puts joyous trust toward God in our hearts.'³⁶ Similarly, the pastorally reassuring implications of the classic doctrine of providence have been well stated by Dr Broughton Knox:

³⁵ Fergusson, 'The Theology of Providence.' One may wish to clarify this statement by asserting God's providential rule over *disorder* too as witnessed to by the book of Job. See Tinker, *Intended for Good*, Ch. 8 'Providence and Suffering.' The cautionary warning that the Christian must be very restrained in making claims to be able to 'read' providence clearly is, however, to be welcomed.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:14:11.

The doctrine of God's absolute and complete providence and control over every event is a ground for banishing fear from the hearts of the people of God. Thus Jesus reminded his disciples, 'Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; for you are of more value than many sparrows.' In the Old Testament the doctrine of God's sovereignty is the comfort and strength of his people. Thus through the prophet Isaiah God says, 'I even I, am he that comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, and of the son of man who is made like grass; that you have forgotten Yahweh your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth.' The creative power of God which brought all things into being is the guarantee that he is able to sustain us in every detail of life...The infinite power and infinite mind of God, to which the marvels of creation bear witness, mean that he is able to give full attention, care and protection to every person in the world with the same intensity of concern that he would give if he were related to a single individual only. The infinity of God is not overwhelmed by numbers, nor stupefied by detail. God is able to comprehend, and provide for at the same time, the needs of the whole creation. Our heavenly Father gives each of us his undivided attention and his full friendship as though we were his only friend.³⁷

Whatever Albert Einstein meant when he said 'God does not play dice with the universe,' the believer can assert with even greater conviction (and gratitude) that his heavenly Father does not play dice with his people.

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³⁷ D.B. Knox, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Kingsford, NSW; Matthias Media, 2000), p. 57.