

ARTICLE 13

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

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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. Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them. 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. 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.

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.

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.

CENTRAL

The doctrine of God's providence forms the cornerstone of reformed, Biblical thinking. The God in whom we believe (see Article 1) is not far away or uninterested in the world He once created. Instead, this God is so close by and so intimately involved in the world He made that not a traffic light turns red without the direct involvement and will of this God. He is not interested only in salvation, but for Jesus' sake cares for His children (and the world in which they live) so totally that every hair and every flea is completely in His control. In the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: "*God's providence is His almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand*" (Lord's Day 10). The doctrine of God's providence makes the reality and presence of almighty God so inescapable; each leaf I see and each insect I hear—rightly understood—confront me with evidence of the nearness and the mightiness of *my* God.

Since the topic of God's providence touches upon the daily, ongoing works of *Almighty God*, there will be much in this topic that I cannot understand. I am but a finite creature, broken too as a result of the fall into sin, and so I shall never understand the Creator's omnipotence and omniscience as it becomes evident in His providence. So we need to consider God's revelation on the subject with humility, and respectfully repeat after God what He tells us in Scripture.

DeBRÈS AND US

As with all the other articles of this Confession, Guido deBrès himself penned the material of Article 13. This observation gains added colour when we remember the circumstances in which deBrès lived. He was greatly hated by the Roman Catholics, and persecuted much. He had to visit his congregation in the secrecy of darkness, and constantly concern himself with the question of safety. Yet he penned the words of this Article, and included them in the confession he prepared for his congregation. The article gives no hint of frustration on his part with the uncertainty of each day, but rather breathes an atmosphere of peace and comfort. Here's a sense of being perfectly safe in the hands of his gracious, wise and sovereign God – even as the eye saw

much danger and deBrès constantly had to be on the alert for those who sought his harm.

This God has not changed. In the covenant He established with believers and their children –including us– this God has promised to “*provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit*” (“Form for Baptism”, *Book of Praise*, p584). This promise assumes His sovereignty, and His total control over every creature and event that will intersect with my life. To appreciate the comfort God gives in this promise, I need to learn to repeat after God what He tells me about His providence.

PROVIDENCE: GOD UPHOLDS HIS CREATION

What did God do after He had completed His creating work? Did He return ‘home’, desert His creation, and busy Himself with another project? The Scripture is emphatic that that is not the case. In fact, the world God made is dependent on God for existence itself. If the Lord were to withdraw His supporting hand, the earth and all that’s on it would collapse again into the nothingness it was before God called it into existence. Elihu says it like this: “*If He should set His heart on it, if He should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust*” (Job 34:14,15). The Psalmist makes the same point: “*You hide Your face, they are troubled; you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth*” (Psalm 104:29,30). Paul tells the men of Athens, “*in Him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). God’s world is dependent daily on God for existence itself!

Over the years there have been those who deny the world’s dependence on God. Some who will grant that God in fact created the world insist that the Lord deserted the world He made, and lets it run according to laws He once built into it. These are called ‘Deists’, and follow in the tradition of the Epicureans mentioned in Article 13. They compare God to the clockmaker who has completed a new clock, winds it up, and then leaves it on the shelf to tick by itself while he himself goes home. One hears echoes of this sentiment in today’s Intelligent Design theory – where it’s argued that the world shows evidence of intelligent design at its inception, but the Designer is not credited with upholding it today. DeBrès rejects this sentiment as a “*damnable error*”, because it contradicts what he reads in the Bible. “*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.”

PROVIDENCE: GOD GOVERNS HIS CREATION

Sovereign God not only keeps the world in existence, but also keeps causing things to move and to happen. Indeed, unless this God wills something to happen, it simply will not occur; such is the far-reaching extent of His sovereignty (see Psalms 93, 95-99). The Holy Spirit insists that before God began creating in Genesis 1 He had already determined all that would happen. He moved Paul to speak of “*the eternal purpose*” which He accomplished in the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:11). David worded the same sentiment like this: “*My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them*” (Psalm 139:15, 16). From eternity the Lord determined who David’s parents would be, determined that he would be a shepherd, that he would kill a lion, that Saul would persecute him, that he would sin with Bathsheba, that Absalom his son would rebel against him. In David’s life God governed in such a way that whatever He planned in fact *did* happen. Nothing came upon David by chance, and nothing in David’s life surprised God either. That is why Job could challenge his friends, “*But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you; and the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will explain to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this, in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?*” (Job 12:7-10). Inasmuch as God does not change, deBrès could echo the same sentiment in relation to the world of his day: “*according to His holy will He so rules and governs (all things) that in this world nothing happens without His direction.*” That’s why deBrès could write those heart-stirring words in his letter to his wife shortly before his execution, “*Remember too, that it was not by chance that I fell into the hands of my enemies, but through the providence of my God.... My God, You have let me be born at a time and hour determined by You, and through all the time of my life You have preserved and protected me in the face of unimaginable dangers, and You have fully delivered. And now, if the hour has come in which I must leave this life in order to go to You, Your will be done*” (see further Article 1).

CHALLENGES TO THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

All in the western world once acknowledged the doctrine of God's providence. Since God was acknowledged as being the Almighty, no one denied that He upheld and governed the world He made. Our day no longer believes the doctrine of God's providence. This is due to a combination of factors, two of which are most significant.

1. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the development of science and technology, so that people began to understand why such things as thunderstorms or earthquakes happened. The modern mind looked to science for answers, and the doctrine of God's providence was judged unnecessary.
2. The twentieth century has witnessed much evil. One need only think of the horrors of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. Advanced communications technology lets today's people see an almost unlimited amount of gross evil occurring in the farthest corners of the globe – be it the ravages of war or of tsunamis or of sickness or of demented minds, etc. In the face of so much suffering, people have concluded that a God of love is obviously not in control; otherwise all this evil would not happen.

It is not only unbelieving people who stumble over the evil we witness and experience in our day. Godly people, too, puzzle over a sovereign God letting bad things happen to good people. There are devout Christians who are confused about whether God is really sovereign – or good, or both. Add to the puzzle the role of human responsibility, and the matter becomes seemingly impossible to unravel. So we do well to examine Scripture more carefully on the point.

GOD CONTROLS ALL

The Holy Spirit moved David to speak of rain, growth and crops. *“You visit the earth and water it, You greatly enrich it; The river of God is full of water; You provide their grain...”* (Psalm 65:9). Elsewhere the Holy Spirit says, *“He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes; He casts out His hail like morsels; Who can stand before His cold? He sends out His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow, and the waters flow”* (Psalm 147:16-18). Solomon picks up on what we consider the flukiest thing: *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD”* (Proverbs 16:33). That's why Jesus could say, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered”* (Matthew 10:29,30). How

amazing: not a hair got stuck in the comb this morning without the will of our heavenly Father!

Does God's control, though, extend also to presidents' palaces and terrorists' lairs? Young Joseph was on the receiving end of considerable jealousy on the part of his ten brothers. They conspired against him in an effort to be rid of this scourge in their lives (Genesis 37:18), and finally agreed to sell him to slave traders (Genesis 37:25-28). It takes but little imagination to appreciate that Joseph, as he trudged behind his new masters across the sands to Egypt, felt totally used and abused. His brothers had distinctly done the dirty on him; their actions and motives were evil beyond words. Yet, when the brothers twenty years later had to purchase grain in Egypt, and Joseph as ruler recognised his brothers, he had but one word for them. "*Do not ... be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here,*" he told them, "*for **God sent me** before you to preserve life.... So it was not you who sent me here, but God...*" (Genesis 45:5-8). After father Jacob died, Joseph explained the matter further to his brothers, "*But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive*" (Genesis 50:20). His point: the reality of human evil takes nothing away from God's sovereignty. As Joseph trudged to Egypt and agonised in prison there, he learned by God's grace to see and confess the sovereign hand of a wise and faithful God – a God without whose will not a plan was made or carried out.

The prophet Isaiah must confront Israel with the same reality in their distressing circumstances. The dreaded Assyrians had surrounded the city of Jerusalem, the same terrible armies that had captured and looted and pillaged and raped so many cities around them. In the midst of the people's anxiety, the Lord sent Isaiah to instruct His people. "*Woe to Assyria,*" the prophet had to say, "*the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge ...*" (Isaiah 10:5,6). How striking the formulation! Assyria is but a stick in God's hand, sent to punish straying Israel?? Granted, Assyria doesn't admit they are but a stick in God's hand. Vs 7: "*Yet he does not mean so, nor does his heart think so.*" As far as this superpower is concerned, they act independently of any divine control, and Jerusalem is just another city to subjugate, as happened to Damascus and to Samaria and to Carchemish and to so many more.... But God lets Israel know the truth: "*Shall the axe boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against*

him who saws with it?" (10:15). No, the superpower of Isaiah's day is in God's hand as an axe is in the lumberman's hand; neither the axe nor Assyria ultimately have anything to say. The people of Jerusalem, then, were not to worry their minds about Assyria the axe; they were to busy their minds with the One who swung the axe – and take God seriously.

A third example drives the point home. Peter on the day of Pentecost gives God's version of what happened on Good Friday. It's not simply so, he tells the Jews, that "*you have taken [Jesus] by lawless hands, have crucified, and put [Him] to death*"; no, Jesus was "***delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God***" (Acts 2:23). Behind their murderous deed was the sovereign hand of God Most High.

EVEN EVIL?

The texts quoted above require us to say more than that God controls all things. Through passages as these the Lord teaches that even evil does not happen without His involvement. That Joseph's brothers sold him to slave traders was manifestly evil. But Joseph confessed the hand of God in the evil actions of his brothers. The brutality of the Assyrian army was fearsomely grotesque, but this barbaric army was a tool in God's hands to accomplish His purpose. The Jews' act of crucifying righteous Jesus was lawless to the extreme, but it all happened according to "*the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God*" (Acts 2:23). In the same vein God Himself says concerning Pharaoh that "*I will harden his heart, so that he will not let My people go*" (Exodus 4:21; cf 7:3; 9:12). Behind Israel's oppression in Egypt and the need for the devastating plagues upon that land lay the hand of God; not even evil happened without His will and permission. That some people believe the gospel is because of the will of God, and that some people do not believe is also because of the will of God. "*He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens*" (Romans 9:18). DeBrès puts it this way, "*He so rules and governs them that in this world **nothing** happens without His direction. Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed....*" This last sentence makes clear that deBrès includes 'sins' when he confesses that "***nothing happens without His direction.***"

UNDERSTAND?

We seek to understand how a holy and righteous God can control all things totally, and yet permit evil to occur in our lives. Given that He

hates sin, and loves His children, ought He not to pull out all stops to prevent bad things from happening to His people?

The Holy Spirit tells us that God-fearing people wrestled with this question many centuries ago. Job *“was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil”* (Job 1:1). He also had *“a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East”* (1:3). In one day this righteous man lost all his material possessions and his children also. On another day this impoverished man lost his health and even his wife –who was to be his helpmeet– told him to *“curse God and die”* (2:9). On a third day his friends sought to rattle his faith, for they insisted that God would never let evil happen to a good man, and so it follows that Job must confess his hidden sins (Job 4,5,8,11). Alone and forsaken Job struggles to come to grips with how the Lord can let so much evil wash over a God-fearing man. *“Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which He would answer me, and understand what He would say to me. Would He contend with me in His great power? No! But He would take note of me”* (Job 23:3-6). It’s Job’s conviction: God’s actions in Job’s life are not fair, and God will have to answer to Job for permitting all this evil to beset him.

How remarkable, then, is God’s reply. God’s answer (Job 39-41) is notable for what it does *not* say. For the Lord does *not* give Job an explanation for why the evils happened in his life! Rather, the Lord’s answer draws out His greatness and His majesty, and contrasts it starkly with human finitude. God challenges Job to consider his contribution to the creation of this world, and to consider whether he is able to reorganise the stars or to make clouds appear and determine where and when it will rain (Job 38). God sets before Job the habits and characteristics of mountain goats and wild donkeys, oxen and ostriches, battle horses and hawks, and questions whether Job can control these creatures, let alone determine when they will bear their young and how they will feed them (Job 39). When Job begins to recognise that he’s too small to challenge God (40:3-5), the Lord confronts Job again with His majesty: *“Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me: Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God?”* (40:7-9). God paints for Job a picture of His majesty; before this God even the largest of creatures are but so many playthings. Job would dare to challenge

the actions of such a God?? Job wants such a God to give an account of His decisions to puny man?? It hits Job like a brick: *“I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes”* (42:2-6). That Job place himself above God and insist that God explain to him why He permits evil to happen in Job’s life is sin, arrogance. *“But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”* (Romans 9:20).

God told Adam in Paradise already that if he would eat of the forbidden tree death would enter the world (Genesis 2:17). Despite God’s warning, our forefather ate of the tree, and died spiritually. God pronounced the curse, telling the human race that pain and suffering, thorns and thistles, sweat and tears would characterise their existence from now on. In moments of adversity let no one fault God for bringing about in our lives what He announced in response to our disobedience in Paradise. We are in no position to call God on the carpet.

MAN’S RESPONSIBILITY

What, then, of man’s responsibility? If God is one hundred percent sovereign, if He controls all things totally, did Joseph’s brothers have no blame in selling their brother to slave traders? Were the Assyrians free of guilt when they pillaged cities and ravaged women? Were the Jews not responsible for crucifying Jesus since their actions occurred *“by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God”*? (Acts 2:23).

My finite mind tells me that if God controls totally all that happens, people have no more responsibility than a puppet; the puppet’s actions are the responsibility of the puppet master. Total sovereignty on God’s part rules out total responsibility on people’s part.

The Lord, however, speaks differently. He created man in the beginning to be responsible for what he does, and gave him the wherewithal to make responsible decisions. He could take care of the Garden’s plants and animals, and do it in a way that reflected what the Lord God was like (see Article 14). There would be no tension between the sovereignty of a good and holy God, and the conduct of the free and upright creature man. The human race would accurately reflect what God was like.

The human race fell into sin, and so became sinful. Despite our self-inflicted depravity, however, sovereign God continues to hold us responsible for all we do. In fact, so great is His majesty that there is no more clash today between the sovereignty of holy God on the one hand and our evil conduct on the other than there would have been before the fall into sin. We cannot get our minds around how a good God can let people do unspeakable evil to other people. We cannot comprehend how God is totally sovereign over all that happens, and man is at the same time totally responsible for all he does. It is good that way, for a God we are able to understand is not worth serving.

We need to let those two realities – God’s total sovereignty and man’s complete responsibility – stand side by side. Despite our fall into sin God continues to hold us responsible according to the gifts with which He created us in the beginning. That is why we need to give account before God for all the sins we have ever committed – even though not one of them occurred outside God’s eternal plan. It equally is why Joseph’s brothers were guilty before God (and they knew it!) for the evil they did to their brother. It is why the Lord God declared to Israel through Isaiah that “*it shall come to pass, when the LORD has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that He will say, ‘I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks’*” (Isaiah 10:12). Indeed, all whose sins are not forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ will taste eternally the weight of God’s judgment on their evil deeds. Holy God always holds people responsible for all their deeds!

That is why vengeance is not for people to mete out. “*Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; their foot shall slip in due time,*” God had Moses say to Israel (Deuteronomy 32:35). Paul repeats the matter: “*Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to [God’s] wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord*” (Romans 12:19). God is sovereign, and at the same time each person is responsible for his conduct. When another hurts me, then, I need not take retribution into my own hands. God holds the other responsible, and so He will punish – perhaps in this life (maybe through the government – Romans 13:1-7), perhaps in the life to come, perhaps through the suffering Jesus endured on the cross. However that may be, I may believe that God takes people’s responsibility seriously. My responsibility is that I respond humbly and obediently to whatever God in wisdom sovereignly puts on my path.

IS GOD RESPONSIBLE FOR EVIL?

Another question arises. If the Lord God is indeed sovereign so that nothing happens without His will, must we somehow insist that God is responsible for the evil that happens in this world – or at least shares responsibility with people for the evil that happens?

The question has already been answered in part through the observation made above about the fall into sin. God created man good, and able to reflect perfectly what God was like. God did not create evil; it is we, through our disobedience, who brought sin into the world. One cannot blame God for that.

Further, we need to remember God's answer to Job. When Job challenged God to explain why He let evil happen in Job's life, the Lord did not explain to Job; instead, He paraded His majesty. The point is that with this question we come to the limit of what we can ask and understand. A number of facts are clear:

- Evil happens in our lives.
- God is fully sovereign and therefore evil does not happen without His will and permission.
- God is good, and does no evil.

No, we cannot grasp what the exact interplay is between these points. Though we are curious and wish to understand, at the end of the day there is no need for us to understand. The matter is in God's hands, and His ways –thankfully!– are beyond our ways. If I could understand this God, if I could grasp the interplay of the points above, I would have no reason anymore to entrust myself to His care – for He would not be such a great God after all.

DeBrès chose his words carefully as he sought to echo in his confession what he learned on the matter from God's Word: *"...He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction. Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them. 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. 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."*

COMFORT

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, upholds and governs the world He once made. He resolutely moves history forward according to His eternal plan adopted before the foundation of the world. In that plan He had place for Auschwitz and Hiroshima, had place too for 9/11 and other terrorist plots. Yet I need fear no evil. This God has given His Son to pay for my sin, so that I might today be –and always remain– His child. All things are so fully in His hands that He will never permit “*death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing ... to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38,39). Such is the providence of my God!

That is why I eagerly, day after day, cling to deBrès’ inspiring formulation of the gospel of Scripture: “*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. 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*” (Article 13). Indeed, here is comfort!



Points for Discussion:

1. Explain the philosophy of the Deist. To what degree do you think of God as actually involved in every detail of what happens in your life? Would you see God’s hand behind the fact that there is a slow driver in front of you when you’re running late? How does the reality of God’s providence colour your attitude to that slow driver?
2. In Lord’s Day 10 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the church confesses that the doctrine of God’s providence leads to patience in adversity and thankfulness in prosperity. Discuss and explain how providence leads to such patience and gratitude.
3. Explain what miracles are in relation to God’s providence.

4. If all things are totally in God's hands, I can't do anything that has not already been determined by God. Does that not mean that I should not ultimately be held responsible for my deeds? Explain.
5. We all know of terrible things that have happened to decent people. Is God's hand behind such disasters? If yes, is God 'not good'? Why does He allow an evil to happen?
6. Much pastoral work results from evil things people have experienced in the past, e.g. abuse. How can an elder or other caring person use God's revelation about providence to comfort the afflicted, and help them cope with the wounds they have received?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 9.26; 10.27,28; 46.120,121;
50.125

Prayers #2,7,8,9,11,12, *Book of Praise*.