Doctrine of Providence

This document contains either direct quotes or summaries of the ideas contained in the books in the Bibliography as indicated at the end of each bullet point.

- The doctrine of providence summarises God’s ongoing relationship to his creation. God is actively involved in creation at each moment but creation is distinct from him (contra deism and pantheism). [Grudem, p.315]
- The word ‘Providence’ comes from the Latin *providere* which literally means to foresee. [Erickson, p.413] [Berkhof, p.165]
- The word ‘providence’ is also a formal way of referring to the fact that God provides. [Helm, p.18]
- Definition of Providence: *God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he*

  1. *Keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them (PRESERVATION)*
  2. *Cooperates with created things in every action, direction their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do (CONCURRENCE)*
  3. *and he directs them to fulfil his purposes (GOVERNMENT)* [Grudem, p.315]
- Whilst we distinguish between the three elements of providence (preservation, concurrence and government) we should remember that they are never separated in the work of God. [Berkhof, p.167]
- Concurrence is an expansion of the idea of preservation and so some theologians collapse preservation and concurrence into one category (eg. Calvin). [Grudem, p.317] Others collapse governance and concurrence into one category (eg. Erickson)
- Whilst preservation has reference to being, concurrence to the activity and government to the guidance of all things, this should never be understood in an exclusive sense. In preservation there is also an element of government, in government an element of concurrence and in concurrence and element of preservation. [Berkhof, p.167]
- Useful distinctions in the will of God. The moral will (or revealed will) – God’s moral standards / commands about how we should act rightly before him. The providential will of God (or his secret will) – all the events in history that God has ordained to come about. What *is* may or may not coincide with what *ought to be*. The mere fact that it *is* tells us nothing about what *ought to be*, for to know what *ought, or ought not, to be* we must consult not what *is*, but the command of God. [Grudem, p.332] [Helm, p.131-137]
- Theologians generally distinguish between general and special providence. The former denoting God’s control of the universe as a whole. The latter his care for each part of it in relation to the whole. These are not two different kinds of providence but the same providence exercised in two different relations. Special providence can have a more specific meaning in terms of God’s care for his rational creatures. Some even speak about special providence in reference to those who stand in the special relationship of sonship to God. Special providences are special combinations in the order of events, as in the answer to prayer, in the
deliverance out of trouble and in all instances in which grace and help come in critical circumstances. [Berkhof, p.168]

- Providence covers every detail of life from the smallest to the largest. There is the danger that we neglect this fact and we only tend to think of divine providence in terms of special ‘providential’ occurrences. [Helm, p.18-19]

The theological method used in setting forth the doctrine of providence

- The data from which the doctrine will be constructed will be drawn from scripture (God’s special revelation). The data from which the doctrine is constructed is scattered around scripture. Scripture is not a ready made book of doctrine but an account of God’s activity in the lives of people. The data must be drawn together in a consistent whole. [Helm, p.27]

- In any treatment of scripture there must be elements of ‘induction’ (particular events of providence to general conclusions about providence) and ‘deduction’ (general statements about providence leading to conclusions about particular events). [Helm, p.28]

- It is an axiom of the Christian faith the scripture is self-consistent. So it follows that contradictions or inconsistencies among the data must be capable of resolution. [Helm, p.28]

- The challenge of human reason is to avoid imposing a doctrine upon the data in an a priori fashion, muffling and silencing the testimony of Scripture by deciding, in advance, what scripture must and must not say. [Helm, p.28]

- We need to allow the data of scripture to control the whole of our understanding of divine providence. Preliminary ideas of divine providence need to be refined successively by allowing the data of Scripture (in its full range and variety) to modify it. [Helm, p.29-30]

- We are aiming for a model of God’s relationship to his creation and not a theory. In science a good theory explains the occurrence of certain data in a simple and economical way which enables predictions of future occurrences to be made. These explanations provide understanding and enable the scientist to control the future to a certain extent. This is not the same with Christian doctrine. Theological data are not repeatable or naturally occurring. The data are given as a result of divine revelation. The data in so far as they concern the relationship between God and his creation are without precedent or parallel in human experience. Theological doctrines are not scientific in the sense that they cannot predict future events. Theological doctrines are therefore models, distinct in two ways: 1) They draw together data in as consistent and coherent fashion as possible. We are aiming for an exactness of summary. 2) They prevent or discourage false inferences being drawn from the data they summarise. [Helm, p.30-33]
Preservation (Also known as sustenance)

- God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties which he created them. [as per Grudem]
- Hebrews 1:3 – Christ is upholding the universe by his word of power. In greek ‘Upholding’ = carry, indicates a purposeful action eg. carrying books from one place to another. In greek present participle is used implying Jesus is continually carrying along all things. [Grudem, p.316]
- Colossian 1:17 – in Christ all things hold together. After a statement about the role of Christ in creation, Paul links him to the continuation of creation as well. This means all created things (see v16) continue to exist because Christ keeps them existing. [Grudem, p.316] [Erickson, p.414]
- Acts 17:28 – In him we live, move and have our being ie. our existence comes from God [Grudem, p.316]
- Nehemiah 9:6 – God preserves all that he has created. [Grudem, p.316] [Erickson, p.414]
- 2 Peter 3:7 – the heavens and earth that now exist are being kept until the day of judgement [Grudem, p.316]
- Job 34:14-15 (cf. Psalm 104:29) – God continues to keep us existing and if he didn’t ‘man would return to dust’. [Grudem, p.316]
- Other verse directly showing divine preservation of all things can be found in [Berkhof, p.169-170]
- The above passages deny that any part of creation is self-sufficient. Some people tend to think of God’s work as ending with creation. In their view, after creation all things have remained in existence simply by virtue of some innate power. Scripture rejects this. Both the origination and continuation of all things are a matter of divine will and activity. [Erickson, p.414]
- God in preserving all things he has made also causes them to maintain the properties with which he created them eg. water continues to act like water [Grudem, p.316]
- Preservation does not regard created substances as self-existent, since self-existence is the exclusive property of God and all creatures have the ground of their existence in Him and not themselves. From this it follows that they continue to exist, not in virtue of a merely negative act of God (ie. that he doesn’t destroy creation), but in virtue of a positive and continued exercise of divine power. The power of God put forth in upholding all things is just as positive as that exercised in creation. [Berkhof, p.170]
- The precise nature of God’s work in sustaining all things in being and action is a mystery, though it may be said that, in His providential operations, He accommodates Himself to the nature of his creatures. Preservation never runs counter to creation. God does not violate in providence what He has established in creation. [Berkhof, p.170]
• If our idea of divine providence were confined merely to God preserving what he has made, it would be inadequate when measured against the biblical data. On this view, God would keep things in existence, but what those things did while existing (what they planned, and how they carried out their plans, for example) would be outside the care of God. He would watch what they did, but nothing more. [Helm, p.22]

• How do we square the idea of God ‘resting’ in the early chapters of Genesis with the idea of preservation? How can God be resting if he is upholding the universe? Certainly God cannot be said to rest if by ‘rest’ is meant inactivity and unconcern. What resting means in the early chapters of Genesis is that creation has taken place. God does not continue to create. But he does uphold what he has created, not by creating it again and again but by sustaining it. Not only does he rest (Genesis 2:2) but he works (John 5:17) and does not slumber or sleep (Psalm 121:4). Any emergence of new things (people being born, airplanes etc.) in the universe after this point is not strictly a creative activity. Rather it involves the forming of new individuals and substances out of what already exists, not a creation from nothing. [Helm, p.88]

Preservation – Errors to be avoided

• Preservation IS NOT continuous creation. God does not create new atoms etc. for every existing thing every moment. God does not recreate creation anew every moment. Creation is not continually ceasing to be, meaning that God has to call it continually back into existence. Rather he preserves what he has already created. There is a real creation which is distinct from God and he preserves it. This gives the basis for scientific exploration. God has made and continues to sustain a universe that acts in predictable ways. The idea of continuous creation has a major flaw in that it makes all God’s working direct, denying that he employs means to achieve his ends. Nothing that exists at that moment can cause any effect at a later moment, since what exists at that moment immediately ceases to exist and is replaced another momentary universe, the product of immediate divine power. [Grudem, p.315] [Erickson, p.417-418] [Berkhof, p.171] [Helm, p.84-86]

• Preservation is against the idea of Deism. Deism = God made the world, established its patterns of action and allowed the world to go on its own way, creation then remains unless God acts to terminate it. In the Biblical model creation would cease to exist apart from God’s continuing willing it to persist. Creation has no resident or inherent power of existence. God is directly and personally concerned about and involved with the continuation of his creation. [Erickson, p.417] [Berkhof, p.167]

• It would be wrong to assume that God approves of all he upholds. God may uphold what he does not approve of and scripture teaches that he does this. [Helm, p.100]
Concurrence

- God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinct properties to cause them to act as they do. [as per Grudem]
- Ephesians 1:11 – God accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will. ‘accomplishes’ indicates God works or brings about all things according to his will. Nothing in creation falls outside the providence / will of God. [Grudem, p.317]
- Inanimate Creation eg. weather, coming of morning / even, motion stars etc. – Many things we think of as natural occurrences, scripture says that God causes them to happen. Job 37:6-13, 38:12, 38:32; Psalm 104:14, 104:14, 135:6-7, 148:8; Matthew 5:45 [Grudem, p.317-318] [Erickson, p.416-417]
- Animals – God is seen as feeding animals. They don’t die without God’s say so. Job 38:39-41; Psalm 104:27-29; Matthew 6:26; Matthew 10:29. [Grudem, p.318]
- ‘Random’ or ‘chance’ Events – Casting lots, the outcome is seen as being determined by God. Proverbs 16:33 [Grudem, p.318]
- Events fully caused by God and fully caused by the creature as well. It is possible to give a natural explanation for all the above eg. grass growing, throws of the dice. It could even be possible to give a minute explanation of how the events came about. However just because we can give a rational explanation of why things happen it doesn’t meant that God is also the cause. Events are not partly caused by God and partly caused by things in the natural world. Biblical view is that such events are entirely caused by God yet also are entirely caused by factors in creation. The doctrine of concurrence affirms that God directs and works through the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results we see. We can therefore affirm that events are 100% God cause and 100% creature caused as well. [Grudem, p.319]
- All aspects of our lives – Dependence on God for food, Matthew 6:11, 25. God plans our days before we were born, Psalm 139.16; Job 14:5; Jeremiah 1:5. All our actions are under God’s providential care – in him we live and move (Acts 17:28). The steps we take each day are directed by God – Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 20:24; Proverbs 16:1; Proverbs 16:9. Talents and abilities are from the Lord – 1 Corinthians 4:7; Psalm 18:34. God influences rulers decisions – Proverbs 21:1; Ezra 6:22; Ezra 1:1; Psalm 33:14-15. God guides the desires and inclinations of believers – Philippians 2:13. [Grudem, p.320-321] [Erickson, p.415]
- As God’s children we are inseparable from his love and keeping – John 10:27-30; Romans 8:35-39 [Erickson, p.416]
- See also [Berkhof, p.172]
Concurrence – Primary Causes and Secondary Causes

- ‘Concurrence’ affirms that God directs and works through the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results we see. Events are fully cause by God but also fully caused by the creature as well. Divine and creature causes work in different ways though. [Grudem, p.319]
- Divine Cause works as an invisible, behind the scenes, directing cause. It is the ‘primary cause’ that plans and initiates everything that happens. [Grudem, p.319]
- Created things bring about actions in ways consistent with creatures own properties. These are the ‘secondary causes’. [Grudem, p.319]
- The primary cause is the divine upholding. The secondary causes are the causal powers of created things. The primary cause is the enabling and sustaining cause, making possible secondary causes and setting bounds to them. [Helm, p.86]
- The primary cause is not an event in time, as secondary causes are, but it is an eternal cause which has the whole of creation as its effect. [Helm, p.86]
- Concurrence therefore implies two things: 1) That the powers of nature do not work by themselves, that is simply by their own inherent power, but God is immediately operative in every act of the creature (contra deism), 2) That second causes are real and not to be regard simply as the operative power of God. [Berkhof, p.172]
- It is only on the condition that second causes are real, that we can properly speak of a concurrence or cooperation of the first cause with the secondary causes. [Berkhof, p.172]
- The work of God in concurrence is previous and predetermining, not in a temporal way but in a logical sense. There is no absolute principle of self-activity in the creature to which God simply joins His activity. In every instance the impulse to action and movement proceeds from God. There must be an influence of divine energy before the creature can work. God causes everything in nature to work and move in the direction of a predetermined end. So God also enables and prompts his rational creatures, as second causes, to function, and that not merely by endowing them with energy in a general way, but by energising them to certain specific acts. Ephesians 1:11 – All things are worked according the counsel of his will. [Berkhof, p.173]
- Concurrence is simultaneous. After the activity of the creature is begun, the efficacious will of God must accompany it at every moment, if it is to continue. There is not a single moment that the creature works independently of the will and power of God. (Acts 17:28 – In him we live and move and have our being). The divine activity accompanies the action of man at every point, without robbing man in any way of his freedom. The action remains the free act of man, an act for which he is held responsible. There is no
identification of the primary cause and the secondary cause. [Berkhof, p.173]

• On the fact that distinguishing between primary and secondary causes does not solve any of the questions as to how divine sovereignty and human responsibility work together see Helm, p.177-182

**Concurrence – Errors to be avoided**

• *That concurrence consists merely of a general communication of power without determining the specific action in any way.* Divine concurrence is seen as only a general and indifferent co-operation, so that it is the second cause that directs the action to its particular end. The primary cause quickens the secondary causes to action in a way that is entirely indeterminate. It stimulates the second cause but leaves it to determine its own particular kind and mode of action. If this was the case though it would be within the power of man to frustrate the power of God. The first cause would become subservient to the second cause. Man would be in control and there would be no divine providence. [Berkhof, p.172]

• *That concurrence means man does part of the work and God does the other part.* In reality each deed is entirely both a deed of God and a deed of the creature. It is a deed of God in so far as there is nothing that independent of the divine will and in so far as it is determined from moment to moment by the will of God. It is a deed of man in so far as God realises it through the self-activity of the creature. [Berkhof, p.172-173]

• *That concurrence means that the work of God and that of the creature are brought together.* The work of God always has priority, for man is dependent on God in all that he does. “Apart from me you can do nothing”. [Berkhof, p.173]

**Government**

• God has a purpose in all that he does in the world and he providentially governs or directs all things in order they accomplish his purposes. [as per Grudem]

• The emphasis is more fully on the purposive directing of the whole of reality, and the course of history to God’s ends. [Erickson, p.420]

• Governance is about the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign in his government – this means that he alone determines his plan and knows the significance of his actions. [Erickson, p.429]

• Psalm 103:9 – His kingdom rules over all [Grudem, p.331]

• Daniel 4:35 – He does according to his will in the world and no one can stop his hand [Grudem, p.331]

• Romans 11:36 – from him and through him and to him are all things [Grudem, p.331]

• 1 Corinthians 15:27 – God has put all things in subjection under his feet [Grudem, p.331]
• Ephesians 1:11 – God is the one who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will [Grudem, p.331]
• Ultimately all will bow the knee before Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord – Philippians 2:10-11 [Grudem, p.331]
• Examples of God’s governance: Elijah who told Ahab that it would not rain except for the word of God and it didn’t rain for 3.5yrs; Mark 4:39; Luke 8:25; Daniel 2:21; Isaiah 10:5-12; 1 Samuel 2:6-7; Luke 1:52; Psalm 75:6-7, 9-10 etc. [Erickson, p.421-424]
• God’s governing activity is universal (ie. it covers all matters, both good and evil. See Psalm 22:28-29; Psalm 103:17-19; Daniel 4:34-35; 1 Timothy 6:15). God’s providence doesn’t extend merely to his own people (Matthew 5:45), although there is a special concern for the believer (Luke 15:3-7; John 10:11; Matthew 10:30). God is good in his government (ie. he always works for the good, sometimes directly or sometimes countering or deflecting the efforts of evil towards good). [Erickson, p.426-428] [Berkhof, p.176]
• Divine providence is thus directed, or purposive. In bringing to pass the whole matrix of events, and in sustaining it in all its complexity, God has a certain end or ends in view. These ends will certainly be accomplished, even though it is part of the puzzle of divine providence that it is often extreme difficult to see how what is happening now contributes to those ends. [Helm, p.23]

If nothing happens outside God’s will, do human beings have real choices?

• God’s providential direction as an unseen, behind the scenes, primary cause should not lead us to denying the reality of our choices and actions. Scripture affirms that we really do cause events to happen. We are significant and responsible. We do have choices and these are real choices that bring about real results. Just as God has created water with the property of wetness, so God has made us with the property of willing choice. [Grudem, p.321]
• God causes all things that happen but he does so in a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices, choices that have real and eternal results and for which we are accountable. Exactly how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices scripture does not tell us. [Grudem, p.321]
• We cannot say that our choices are not determined in someway by God because of the number of passages which affirm the providential control of God. There would be the formidable difficult of how to reinterpret passages which suggest God is not providentially in control. We need to be faithful to the teaching of scripture, rather than deny God’s providence or the reality of human choice. [Grudem, p.321]

Is God the author of sin?

• For human beings to be genuinely free to make a willing responsible choice, there has to be an option. The option is to obey or disobey God.
in the case of Adam and Eve, the tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolised that choice. The serpent’s temptation appealed to the desires that were not evil in themselves (fruit was pleasing to eye and good to eat), but could be expressed and actualised in the wrong way (by disobeying God). When that was done a twisted and distorted relationship to God resulted. It is clear that God did not create sin. He merely provided the options necessary for human freedom, options that could result in sin. It is human beings who sinned (and before that the fallen angels) and God is not the author of sin himself. [Erickson, p.453-454]

• BUT does not a ‘no-risk’ view of providence make God the author of sin in such a way as to compromise his righteousness? It would be unwise to argue that since whatever God does is morally right, that it would be morally right if he were to be author of sin. Such a defence separates God from morality either by separating his will from his moral character, or in some other way. The question is not what, in purely abstract terms, God or god might will, but what the God revealed in Scripture might will. In the case of the God of Scripture it is impossible to divorce his will from his character. The answer to the question ‘Could the God of scripture will what is morally evil because it is evil, in order to do evil?’ the answer must of course be ‘no’. Some people say that if God ordains whatever comes to pass, and there are morally evil human actions, then God is morally culpable author of these evil actions. But the theist will argue that this is false. Indeed, if God is necessarily all-good, as he maintains, not only is it false, it is necessarily false. God could not be morally culpable for any moral evil occurs. [Helm, p.184]

• Some might claim that if one agent (God) causes another person to do a morally evil act, then that agent does moral evil. Whatever the evil that the agent (God) performs, he does not perform the evil which the person performs, since it the person who performs it, and not God. Furthermore, whether or not God is guilty of moral evil is presumably a matter of what rule or law he has broken. But it is not obvious what law has been broken by God. Furthermore, it might be that the justification for God’s action is that it is in furtherance of some greater good for which the evil act in question, assuming it is an evil act, is a necessary condition. [Helm, p.184]

• The last two bullet points could be summed up as: The God of scripture could not will evil in order to do evil himself, but is possible that he could will evil, not done by himself, for some higher purpose. If God wills the existence of evil he does not do it himself and therefore he cannot be said to be the author of sin.

How does God relate to sin?

• He can prevent it. He can at times deter people from sin eg. Abimelech thinking that Sarah was Abraham sister rather than his wife took her to himself but God warned him in a dream (Genesis 20:6). David prayed that God would keep him from sin (Psalm 19:13). [Erickson, p.424]

• God does not always prevent sin. Sometimes he wills to permit it. By not preventing sin that we are determined to do, God makes it certain that we will commit it BUT he does not cause us to sin or render it necessary that we action in this way. Examples of God permitting sin = Acts 14:16;
• **God can direct sin.** Whilst permitting some sins God directs them such that good comes out of them eg. Joseph – his brothers wanted to kill him but God (whilst not approving their desires) allowed their desires to be played out with a slight modification. Peter saw the crucifixion in this manner – Acts 2:36 (see also Romans 11:13-15, 25). God redirects the evil efforts of sinful human beings and Satan in such a way that become the very means of doing good. [Erickson, p.425-426]

• **God can limit sin.** There are times when God does not prevent evil deed but restrains the extent or effect of what evil humans, the devil and demons can do eg. Ezra 5:5; Job 1:12; Job 2:26; Psalm 124:1-3; 1 Corinthians 10:12. Even when God permits sin to occur, he imposes limits beyond which it cannot go. [Erickson, p.426]

• Sinful actions are always under divine control and occur to God’s predetermination and purpose BUT only by divine permission so that he does not efficiently cause men to sin. [Berkhof, p.174]

### Does the doctrine of providence imply fatalism?

• If all events are under God’s control, if past, present and future are all alike real to God, what place can there be for significant action of any kind? How can what anyone does influence the outcome of anything? Does not the doctrine of providence mean that everything is fated? [Helm, p.137]

• Of course divine providence does place certain restrictions upon what a person can do. But this merely to say that this doctrine has certain logical consequences ruling out certain matters just as surely as it ensures others. The doctrine of providence has the consequence that no human decision can change the divine will in any respect. What God has ordained will come to pass. Inability to change God’s will would be a disadvantage if the divine will were less than perfect, but it is not. [Helm, p.137-138]

• Let us suppose that in view of divine providence God’s will (what he has decreed) cannot be changed. Is this equivalent to fatalism? It would be fatalistic only if God decreed ends without decreeing any or all of the means to those ends, or if God’s will was itself fated. Then whatever we did would wouldn’t be able to change the ends. However scripture teaches not just a general providence, but a particular providence – not only the ends are ordained by God but also the means to the ends (eg. not sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge, he has the hearts of kings in his hands etc.) [Helm, p.140-141]

• Is not ordaining the means and the ends fatalistic also? Let us assume that God has decreed us to do a specific event in our lives. God in decreeing this event also decrees that it happens at a particular time and in a particular way. The natural causal powers that I have are not overridden, or by-passed, but they are employed through the providence of God in a way that does not impair their voluntariness or spontaneity, my powers of reasoning or my own personal responsibility. Exactly how God does this is not clear from what the scriptures teach, but that he does do this is established from the what the scriptures teach about the nature and extent of God’s providence. But if I am destined to do this particular event, how
can I have choice in the matter? The answer is that God has ordained that I choose the specific event and reject other ways of spending my time. We do not know we are destined to do this specific event and so we do not feel compelled or constrained in anyway. For us we are making a willing choice based on beliefs, wants, the commands of God etc. [Helm, p.140]

- The concept of secondary causes are important for understanding divine providence. The powers of secondary causes in humans are to do with intelligence, reason, making up our minds etc. These different powers are real, not phantom. God, in bringing to pass what he has ordained, typically works through these powers and not against them or in spite of them. The importance of causal agency in the production of certain events marks Christianity off from fatalism. [Helm, p.140-141]

Do we have free will?

- If God exercises providential control over all events are we in any sense free? This depends on what we mean by the word free! Scripture nowhere says that we are “free” in the sense of being outside God’s control OR of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything. Scripture doesn’t say that we are “free” in the sense of being able to do right on our own apart from God’s power. BUT we are free to make willing choices that have real effects. We are aware of no restraints on our will from God when we make decisions. [Grudem, p.330-331]

- We must insist that we have the power of willing choice otherwise we fall into the error of fatalism. The kind of freedom that is demanded by absolute “freedom” (ie. not determined by anything) cannot be squared with the Biblical idea that Jesus is continually carrying all things by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3). To be outside providential control doesn’t exist in Biblical thinking. [Grudem, p.331]

- One view of ‘freedom’ that writers sometimes use is that: We are ‘free’ in doing an action only if we could have decided to do otherwise, with every circumstance in the universe remaining the same. In other words the entire history of the universe up until the point of decision is consistent with us performing the action or refraining from the action. The universe is the same whatever choice we make. However this view of freedom is incompatible with any type of determinism at all eg. we are determined by our beliefs, desires, goals etc. [Helm, p.43]

Human Responsibility

- God has made us responsible for our actions, which have real and eternally significant results. In all his providential acts God will preserve these characteristics of responsibility and significance. [Grudem, p.333]

- The claim that choices ordained by God cannot be real choices is an assumption based on human experience and not on specific texts of scripture. We read in scripture that God works through our will, our power to choose and our personal volition therefore on what basis can we say that a choice brought about by God is not a real choice? It is better to say that God says our choices are real and therefore we conclude our choices are real. [Grudem, p.344]
• From scripture we have to conclude that God made us in such a way that he ordains all that we do and we exercise our personal will and make real voluntary choices. Just because we can’t understand it this doesn’t mean we should reject it. [Grudem, p.344]

• Calvin distinguishes between ‘necessity’ and ‘compulsion’ regarding our wills. Necessity doesn’t automatically mean compulsion. Unbelievers necessarily sin but no compulsion forces them to sin against their will. God necessarily does good and satan necessarily does evil, but this doesn’t mean their acts cannot be willing [Grudem, p.344]

• The maintenance of human responsibility is crucial for a Christian understanding of providence. Without personal responsibility for human failure there is no personal sin, and personal sin is an essential precondition for the very idea of redemption. [Helm, p.185]

• Personal responsibility can be understood in terms of the question of whether the individual is the one to whom the action is due ie. Did the person perform the action in question? [Helm, p.185]

• Responsibility is a causal concept. Under what conditions does the causal link between the movements of a person’s body and the action justify the ascription of responsibility to that person? [Helm, p.186]

• Knowledge or awareness. A person who brings about an action, but with no awareness of what he is going, is to that degree not a responsible agent. They have reduced understanding of the description of what they are doing, what sort of act it is (morally speaking), and what its likely outcome it. Actions must be knowingly exercised for responsibility [BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SACRIFICE NEEDED FOR UNINTENTIONAL SINS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT??] [Helm, p.186-187]

• Consent. Consent is also needed to link knowledge and responsibility. Those who bring about some action, or fail to do so, must, in order to be responsible for that action, identify themselves with it. They must make it their own in the sense that it is the action, and the sort of action, that in these circumstances they overridingly want to do. Compulsion is of issue in consent but it is the attitude of those that are compelled which makes a significant moral difference. We either disown the act as not being the sort of action with which we wish to be associated OR we identify with it. Addicts may be willing or unwilling in their addiction. One may be responsible for doing X though there is nothing that one could do to prevent oneself from doing X. The absence of the power to do otherwise is not an automatic ground of exemption from moral responsibility eg. We can be willing in our addiction or not, even though we don’t have the power to do otherwise. [Helm, p.187-188]

• Control. In order to be responsible agents should have control over what they do. The sort of power or control that is in view here is the power of the agents to do, or to have done otherwise in a situation if they had chosen to do so; it is a hypothetical power. Had X wished or willed to do A, an action over which X has power, then X could have done A. But the fact is that in that particular situation, X did not overridingly wish or will to do A, therefore did B. X could have chosen A had his preferences, desires or intentions had been different from what they were. [Helm, p.188-189]
Objection: The verses cited as examples of God providential control are exceptions and do not describe the way that God ordinarily works

- The scripture references to God’s plans are said to have in view a particular event or limited series of events. The acts of providence are special acts of providence and not a general principle. [Grudem, p.339]
- The examples of God’s providence in scripture are so numerous in scripture that they seem to describe the ways in which God works all the times. God does not just cause some grass to grow, he cause all grass to grow. He doesn’t just keep some sparrows from falling to the ground without his will, he keeps all sparrows from falling to the ground without his will. He has not just chose the Christians in the Ephesian churches to holy and blameless before him, he has chosen all Christians to be holy and blameless before him. Scripture is given to us to tell us the ways of God and we have dozens of examples of God’s providence in scripture so it is reasonable to conclude that God always works in this way. We also have many verses that speak of God’s providence in a more general way eg. Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17; Acts 17:28; Ephesians 1:11; Philippians 4:19; Proverbs 20:24 and so on. [Grudem, p.342-343]

How do we explain those verses which seem to show God changing his mind? (Accommodation)

- In scripture we are faced with apparently incompatible data – data which on one hand stress God’s omniscience and the power of his grace, and on the other portray him as changing his mind, and men and women resisting his grace. Which of these apparently inconsistent or incompatible sets of data is to take priority? [Helm, p.51]
- One alternative is to say that the statements about God’s ignorance, about his changes of mind and resistance to his grace are more basic to our understanding of God than the more general statements about the extent of God’s knowledge or the efficacy of his grace. Statements which imply God’s ignorance and powerlessness thus take precedence over statements which do not. Scriptural language which ascribes omniscience or gracious power to God are to be understood as hyperbolic. To ascribe God as omniscient is like ascribing it to a human expert who knows everything about his subject. To say God is gracious is like saying that a generous friend, whose gifts may be spurned, is gracious. [Helm, p.51]
- The other alternative is that general scriptural statement of the omniscience, will and effective goodness of God takes precedence and other language of ignorance and indecision is to be interpreted in the light of these statements. [Helm, p.51]
- Statements about the extent and intensity of God’s knowledge, power and goodness must control the anthropomorphic and weaker statements. Otherwise what results is theological reductionism in which God is distilled to human proportions. [Helm, p.52]
- Why does scripture portray God as ignorant, vacillating or ultimately resistible if this is not literally true? Calvin gives the best answer, namely that God uses such language to accommodate himself to human incapacity or weakness. [Helm, p.52]
Accommodation, the need for God to address mean and women in terms that they can understand and respond to, would seem to be a good general explanation for the occurrence of such language in scripture. Why? It preserves the proper sense of direction. The presence of anthropomorphic language in scripture is not a human attempt to express the inexpressible, but one of the ways in which God graciously condescends to his creatures. God’s description of himself to us “must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us” (Calvin). In Calvin’s eyes the movement of direction is from God to mankind and not vice versa. [Helm, p.52]

It is possible for us to think about God in exact and un-accommodated ways (eg. God as creator). God doesn’t always speak in such a way that he is using a teaching tool as a concession to those of weak capacity. Calvin’s language of accommodation is about recognising that it is because God wishes people to respond to him that he must represent himself as one to whom response it possible, and as one who is responsive, who acts in space and time in reaction to human actions in space and time. Only on such an understanding is it possible to provide for that divine-human interaction which is at the heart of Biblical religion. [Helm, p.53-54]

If dialogue between God and mankind is to be real and not make-believe, then God cannot inform those with whom he converses of what they will decide to do, for then they would not decide to do it, and dialogue would be impossible. [Helm, p.53]

The middle knowledge approach to for explaining the co-existence of divine sovereignty and human freedom

The idea of middle knowledge is an attempt to combine the strong idea of human freedom (ie. that human actions are not determined) with a ‘no-risk’ view of divine providence. [Helm, p.55]

How are we to understand the omniscience of God? One way is to look at the sorts of truth that there are for God to know. Necessary truths are those which could not be false eg. the laws of logic. Their truth does not depend on God willing them to be true, he knows them to be true because he is omniscient. Free knowledge is said to the truths that are true in virtue of the fact that God has freely willed them eg. the battle hastings was fought in 1066. Their truth comes as a result of God’s free decision. There are also the knowledge of all the possibilities that God does not will eg. the battle of hastings in 1660. God’s knowledge of such is called middle knowledge because it is midway between God’s knowledge of necessary truths and God’s free knowledge. The Bible gives clear examples of God’s knowledge eg. 1 Samuel 23:7-13 & Matthew 11:20-24. From these passages there can be no doubt of the fact of God’s middle knowledge, his knowledge of possibilities which are never brought to pass. [Helm, p.56-57]

God then in his omniscience knows propositions which could not be false and propositions which could be false but which are true. He also knows propositions which could be true but which are not in fact true (see Samuel and Matthew passages above). It is from this vast array of possibilities that
God in his wisdom and goodness wills the actual world, the world in which we live. [Helm, p.57]

- What is distinctive about the middle knowledge view of providences is that it is claimed that among the conditional propositions which God knows are those which indicate what would happen if an individual performed a free (ie. non-deterministic) act. (ie. God knows that in circumstances C, if Jones freely chooses between X & Y, he will choose Y.) It is because God knows all outcomes that he is able to create (actualise) just those possibilities (circumstances C) which are necessary for him to fulfil his purposes, and which involve indeterministically free choices. [Helm, p.57-58]

- There is a major problem with this idea though. Jones is supposed to be indeterministically free. This means he has the power, given a set of circumstances, to choose any one of a number of alternatives open to him. The choice of the alternatives is up to Jones and not God. This means that God cannot know that Jones will actually do what he expects him to do because he cannot actualise Jones’ free choice of X in when placed in circumstances C because the choice is Jones’. [Helm, p.58]

- The strength of the middle-knowledge view is that is presents the universe, and innumerable other possible universes, as already having run their courses, albeit in conditional form. From the sum total of these conditions, God selects some of them in order to actualise one universe. BUT this a false picture. For how the universe will be when it is actual is, at least in part, up to the free actions of the agents who are actualised, once God has decide to actualise that universe. God could not steer the course of events in this fashion, given that all the while the individuals in the actualised universe have indeterministic freedom. For the circumstances never ensure one determinate freely-chosen outcome, they only provide the conditions for the free choice of one of several outcomes. God therefore cannot use his knowledge of what a free creature would do under certain circumstances to achieve a desired end. [Helm, p.58-59]

- God’s omniscience is limited by what is knowable. If Jones is indeterministically free, then it is not knowable, either to God or to us or to any other observer what Jones will do when, in a given set of circumstances, he is confronted with a choice. Middle knowledge cannot be used as a way of reconciling divine omniscience and human freedom because ultimately human freedom limits the scope of divine omniscience. [Helm, p.61]

**The antinomy approach for explaining the co-existence of divine sovereignty and human freedom**

- It is acknowledged that the relation between divine actions and human actions is *incomprehensible* – not that is impossible to understand anything whatsoever about that relation, but we can never hope fully to understand or explain how it is possible to preserve both the sovereignty and independence of God, and human responsibility and accountability. [Helm, p.62]

- It is possible to argue, however, that the issue of divine sovereignty and human accountability is such a difficult one that it is unwise to expend
effort necessary to gain even a modest understanding of it. Rather we should simply accept that scripture teaches both and leave it at that. [Helm, p.62]

• Both truths are apparently incompatible but there is no real contradiction. Any antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There is a mystery of how they can be squared together. The difficulty in about reconciling divine sovereignty and human responsibility is due to our ignorance. They are consistent since they are both true, but from our present vantage point is that we cannot see how they can be consistent. [Helm, p.62-63]

• Our ignorance is seen as necessary in this life – either because there are data relevant to reconciliation of the antinomy which are withheld from us, or because our faculties of understanding are constricted in some way in this life (or both of these reasons). [Helm, p.64]

• The antinomy approach has the strength that it takes both sides (sovereignty & responsibility) of the Biblical data seriously. There are some difficulties with the view though. [Helm, p.64-65]

• It is affirmed that certain doctrines (as well as doctrine of providence) constitute antinomies. But by what means is it established that there is an antinomy? It is forced upon us by the facts themselves. But how do we distinguish between facts that are very hard to reconcile, and facts which are antinomic in character? It is not sufficient to say that in one case we forced by the facts to the conclusion of an antinomy and in another case we are not. In order to justify an antinomy it is necessary to say that all reasonable steps have been taken to reconcile the two claims of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and that these have failed. The number of failures of reconciliation must be sufficiently large to generate the conclusion on inductive grounds. But has such an enquiry ever been undertaken. [Helm, p.65]

• There is also the problem of the distinction between an antinomy and a self-contradiction. An antinomy is an apparent inconsistency which, in this life, we shall never be able to clear up. There is no way of effecting a reconciliation, and we know that there is no such way. BUT what is the difference between an apparent inconsistency and a real one? How do we know that what we call an antinomy might not turn out to be a real inconsistency? We could argue that because human responsibility and divine sovereignty are divinely revealed truth they must be consistent because truth is one. Nothing divinely revealed can be inconsistent with another divinely revealed truth. The problem is that such a reply is too permissive. During the history of Christianity numerous nonsensical things have been believed because it is allegedly biblical in character. [Helm, p.65-66]

• These difficulties are not necessarily fatal to the antinomy idea. [Helm, p.66]

Compatibilism as an approach for explaining the co-existence of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

• In the debate of human freedom and responsibility, two contrasting views of freedom have been identified: indeterministic freedom (sometimes
referred to as the liberty of indifference) and deterministic freedom (sometimes referred to as the liberty of spontaneity). The attractiveness of the middle-knowledge approach lies in its assumption that human freedom requires the liberty of indifference. BUT it is possible to build a doctrine of providence around the liberty of spontaneity or deterministic freedom. According to this view people perform free acts when do what they want to do, not when they have to power of self-causation, or some other version of indeterminism. That is, they are not constrained or compelled in their actions, but what they do flows unimpededly from their wants, desires, preferences, goals and the like. [Helm, p.66-67]

• The advantage of this view of human freedom is that, being compatible with determinism, it is also compatible with a full view of divine omniscience and omnipotence, and thus with a ‘no-risk’ model of providence. We therefore define human responsibility in a way which is compatible with divine sovereignty. [Helm, p.67-68]

Models for thinking about the relation between divine activity and human activity in a world of free and responsible creatures upheld and directed by God. ie. Further explanations for How can divine activity and evil co-exist [Helm, p.162]

• These models try to take into account the Biblical data on providence whilst also trying to preserve the idea that God is not the author of sin. [Helm, p.174]

• **Evil as privation** – Everything was created good. This included human beings and their actions. The goodness of original creation was at least in part a moral goodness. Moral evil is therefore a deformation or corruption of the good. Pain and suffering from distorted human relationships are real but proceed from what is negative. Evil is thus corruptions, decay, deficiency etc. In scripture we see sin as represented as a lack: coming short of divine glory (Romans 3:23) and as departing from God (Hebrews 3:12). To say that evil is a lack is not to say that it is non-existent, rather the evil consequences of evil arise from what is essentially a defect. Evil is seen as an absence of good. What determines the evil action are the normal causes of action, human intentions and the like, which God ordains and upholds as he ordains and upholds everything. But what determines the action in so far as it is an evil action is a divine withholding. God withholds his goodness or grace, and forthwith the agent forms a morally deficient motive or reason and acts accordingly. So while God ordains and sustains and foreknows the evil action he does not positively will it, as he positively wills good and gracious actions. Here is an important asymmetry in God’s relation to what is morally good and morally evil.

• **Divine permission** – God allows or permits evil.

• The phrase ‘God permitted the fall’ means, at least, that God knew that the fall was to occur and what its consequences would be. He upheld those involved in it when he could have prevented it. ‘Permission’ in the case of God is every bit as much an action as it ‘performance’. People may give their permission through inadvertence or neglect or an unwillingness to take responsibility; but God cannot. His permission is ‘willing permission’, as Augustine expressed it. To say that God permitted the fall
is thus to deny that he was ignorant of the fall before it occurred or that, knowing that it was to occur, he was powerless to prevent its occurrence. If it is correct to say that God permitted the fall, then with respect either to horrendous evils or the merest peccadilloes, it is also correct to say at least that God permits them to take place, in the sense of ‘permit’ that has just been given. For, if God did not permit evil in this way, then both his knowledge and power would be compromised. Events would occur that God did not know were going to occur; or, if he did know that they were going to occur but did not permit them, this would be because he was powerless to prevent them. [Helm, p.101-102]

- **Permission can be thought of in two ways:** A general permission eg. you can use my car for the next week in whatever way you choose. In general permission God would be affecting our actions (giving general possibilities) but not controlling them (only allowing one specific thing to happen). But general permission means that God gives a person the power to do A, B, C, … and so on. Whatever evil action was performed would be up to the person themselves and God would have to wait so see what the outcome would be. This does not agree with the scriptural data on divine omniscience or providence. [Helm, p.171-172]

- The other view of permission is a specific permission. God ordains all those circumstances which are necessary for the performance of a particular moral evil action. God doesn’t perform the action himself but permits the action to take place. He does not prevent it, to stop it. So the circumstances are ordained and the evil is permitted. [Helm, p.171-172]

- God could have prevented the action in question being performed: by annihilating the person, diverting or distracting the person from carrying out the action etc. Perhaps for all we know God does prevent many evil actions in this way and the world is a much less evil place. God however permits some evil actions to occur. [Helm, p.172]

- **Divine Compatibilism** – When faced with the idea of divine compatibilism, the view that God’s determination of all events is nonetheless compatible with both human freedom and responsibility many have been tempted to conclude that such determination turns God into a manipulator or puppeteer or hypnotist, toys and plays with his creation for his own amusement. This suggests that God’s purposes are sinister but this must be dismissed on the evidence of scripture. A deeper objection to these models is that they are inadequate. The model of God as puppeteer implies that his relation to his creatures is mechanistic. The actions of his creatures are determined by pulling strings. They are not the outcome of their own reasoning processes, moral priorities and emotional responses. BUT in scripture men and women are presented as responsible agents which puppets are clearly not. The model of puppeteer is therefore an inadequate representation of the scriptural data. [Helm, p.174-175]

**What about God using evil? Why does God use evil?**

- If God causes, through his providential activity, everything that comes about in the world, does this mean that God causes the evil actions that people do? If he does, is God not responsible for sin? [Grudem, p.322]
• There are passages in scripture that do in fact affirm that God did ordain evil events to come about and evil deeds to be done BUT in scripture it is clear that God never directly does anything evil himself. God brings evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures. Scripture also never blames God for evil OR shows God as taking pleasure in evil. Scripture never excuses people for the evil things they do. However we think about God’s relationship to evil we must never cross these boundaries for this would lead to conclusions which are contrary to scripture. [Grudem, p.322-323]

• There are dozens of scriptures which say that God (indirectly) brought about some kind of evil. It must be remembered that in all of these examples evil is done not by God but by people or demons who choose to do it. [Grudem, p.323]

• Joseph’s brothers wronged him (Genesis 37) but later in life Joseph can say that God caused it (Genesis 45:5; Genesis 50:20 cf. Psalm 105:17). Here evil deeds brought about by sinful men who are held accountable for their sin are combined with the providential control of God so that God’s purposes are accomplished. [Grudem, p.323]

• The story of exodus affirms that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. (Exodus 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8). Sometimes it is objected that Pharaoh hardened his heart first (Exodus 8:15, 9:34) and God’s hardening was a response to his free will. BUT God said he would harden Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 4:21) before Pharaoh did it himself (Exodus 8:15). The doctrine of concurrence also means that both human and divine agents can cause the same event. Therefore it is not inconsistent to say that when Pharaoh harden’s his heart that God is causing pharaoh to do this. [Grudem, p.323]

• Paul in Romans 9:17-18 reflects on Exodus 9:16. God had raised up Moses and Pharaoh for the purpose of showing his power in them so that God’s name will be proclaimed in all the earth. Paul infers a general truth from this specific example ie. God has mercy upon whomever he wills and hardens the hearts of whomever he wills. [Grudem, p.323-324]

• The Canaanites who were destroyed in the conquest of Palestine under Joshua. We are told that God hardened their hearts so that they would come in battle against Israel and be destroyed. (Joshua 11:20; Judges 3:12; Judges 9:23) [Grudem, p.324]

• Samson desire to marry an unbelieving Philistine women was from God because he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines (Judges 14:4) [Grudem, p.324]

• The sons of Eli when rebuked for evil deeds would not listen because it was the will of the Lord to slay them. (1 Samuel 2:25) [Grudem, p.324]

• An evil spirit from the Lord tormented King Samuel – 1 Samuel 16:14 [Grudem, p.324]

• When David sinned with Uriah’s wife the Lord through the prophet Nathan said he would raise up evil against David (2 Samuel 12:11-12 fulfilled in 2 Samuel 16:22). Also in punishment of David’s sin we are told that the “Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David” and he died (2 Samuel 12:15-18). Later in David’s life the Lord “incited” to take a census of the people (2 Samuel 24:1). David recognised that this was
sinful and God punished the land (2 Samuel 24:10, 12-17). In 1 Chronicles 21:1 it is made clear that God incited David through satan. God in order to bring about his purposes, worked through satan to incite David to sin but scripture regards David as being responsible for his sin. [Grudem, p.324]

- God raised up adversaries to Solomon after he had sinned (1 Kings 11:14,23) [Grudem, p.324-325]

- God have Satan permission to bring harm to Job’s possessions and children. This harm came through the actions of the Sabeans, Chaldeans and a windstorm. But Job looks beyond these secondary causes to see the primary cause as God. (Job 1) [Grudem, p.325]

- God put a lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab’s prophets (1 Kings 22:23) [Grudem, p.325]

- God sent the wicked Assyrians to punish Israel (Isiah 10:5) [Grudem, p.325]

- Deceiving prophets have been deceived by God (Ezekiel 14:9) [Grudem, p.325]

- Amos 4:6-12 – God reminds that people that he gave them a series of natural disasters but the people did not return to him. [Grudem, p.325]

- Isaiah 45:7 – God creates evil (but it does not say he does evil himself). Lamentations 3:38 – Good and evil proceed from the mouth of God. Isaiah 63:17 – The Israelites say to God ‘why do you make us err from your ways and harden our hearts’? [Grudem, p.326, 328]

- Jonah 1:15 – the sailors through Jonah into the sea in the storm. Jonah 2:3 – Jonah says that it was God who cast him into the see. We see Jonah recognising God’s concurrence in human activity. It is simultaneously affirmed that the sailors threw Jonah into the see and God did it as well. In a way not understood to us God cause the sailors to make a willing choice to do what they did. [Grudem, p.326]

- The Cross is seen as both being caused by God and by human choice (Acts 2:23, 4:27) [Grudem, p.326-327]

- We will now analyse the verses relating to good and evil:

  **God sometimes brings evil and destructions on people in judgement for their sins BUT this is not always the case (eg. Joseph or Job)** [Grudem, p.325]

  **God uses all things to fulfil his purposes and even uses evil for his glory and our good.**

  - Romans 8:28 – God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God. Joseph could say the same kind of thing (Genesis 50:20). [Grudem, p.327]

  - God is glorified in the punishment of evil – Proverbs 16:4. Psalm 76:10 [Grudem, p.327]

  - The example of Pharaoh is (Romans 9:14-24) is a clear example of how God uses evil for his glory and the good of his people. [Grudem, p.327]

  **God never does evil himself and is never to be blamed for evil**

  - Luke 22:22 – Jesus says that the crucifixion is predestined by God, but the moral blame is on those who carry it out. Also compare with what Jesus says about temptation (Matthew 18:7) [Grudem, p.328]

  - James warns us not to blame God for the evil we do (James 1:13-14). The verse does not say that God never causes evil but it affirms that we should
never think of God as being the personal agent who is tempting us or who is to be held accountable for the temptation. We are to resist temptation and blame ourselves or others who tempt us, but we must never blame God. God ordains that evil would come about through the willing choices of his creatures. [Grudem, p.328]

- 1 John 2:16 – sin in the world comes not from the Father but the world. [Erickson, p.424]
- Scripture affirms that secondary Causes are real (humans, angels, demons etc.). Human beings do cause evil and are responsible for it. Though God ordained that it would come about in general terms and specific details, he is removed from actually doing evil. [Grudem, p.328]
- If we were to say that God does evil we would have to conclude that he is not good and righteous. If we were to say that God does not use evil for his purposes then we would have to say that there is evil in the world that God did not intend, it is not under his control and might not fulfil his purposes. We wouldn’t be able to affirm that all things work for the good. If evil came into the world in spite of the fact that God did not intend it and did not want it then what guarantee do we have that there will not be more and more evil that he does not intend? What guarantee do we have that he can triumph over it? [Grudem, p.328-329]
- God rightfully blames and judges moral creatures for the evil they do
- Many scripture passages affirm this eg. Isaiah 66:3-4, Ecclesiastes 7:29 affirm the reality of the choice to do evil. In scripture the blame for evil is always on the responsible creature who does it and they are always worthy of punishment. In every case we do evil we know we willingly choose to do it and realise that we are rightly blamed for it. [Grudem, p.329]
- Evil is real, not an illusion and we should never do evil, for it will always harm us and others
- Scripture consistently teaches that we never have the right to do evil and we should continually oppose it. We should pray “deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13). We should attempt to bring back those who wander from the truth (James 5:19-20). 1 Peter 2:11 – we should abstain from sin. Romans 3:8 – To the question ‘why not do evil that good may result?’ Paul says ‘Their condemnation is deserved’. [Grudem, p.329]
- In thinking about God using evil for his purposes we should remember that there are things that are right for God to do but wrong for us to do. He seeks glory for himself. He requires others to worship him. He uses evil for his good purposes. Yet God does not allow us to do any of these things. [Grudem, p.329-330]
- There is no promise that believers will be spared danger or trial. The promises are that we will be preserved in the midst of them and they will not prevail over us.
- Jesus spoke of the great tribulation that was to come on the elect but would not over come them (Matthew 24:15-31). Peter spoke of the various trials believers would have to suffer (1 Peter 1:6; 1 Peter 4:12-13) – He warned his readers not to think of these things as strange. We are not to be surprised by trial but rejoice in them as they help us to identify with Christ sufferings and prove the reality of our faith. [Erickson, p.416]
• We can affirm all these things as true but scripture does not tell us exactly how God brings about this situation or how it can be that God holds us accountable for what he ordains to come to pass. We have to accept mystery. [Grudem, p.330]

Greater good defences of “Why God allows evil to exist”

• Many regard the central moral and theological problem of divine providence to be that present by the occurrence of evil: moral evil, which arises as a result of human choices, and physical evil, such as storms and certain diseases, which occur apart from such choices. Such evil is said to be inconsistent with a providential order brought into being by an all-good, all-powerful God. [Helm, p.193]

• We need to address the problem of evil with the Biblical data in mind. [Helm, p.193]

• There are many ideas about how divine providence relates to evil (eg. free will argument, middle knowledge etc.). However, even if we can explain how divine providence and evil can co-exist (or be compatible with each other) this doesn’t explain why God chose to ordain this actual world with all its evils. God could have ordained a world where men and women freely did what was morally right. Why did he not do so? [Helm, p.195-197]

• The answer can only be because God has a reason for not doing so. For it is not possible to maintain that he was in some way incapable of creation such men and women. That reason must presumably along the lines of (knowing that God is declared as good and therefore would only do things which are good): that out of evil a greater good would come, a good that could not have come, or could not have been as great if there had not been that evil. [Helm, p.197]

• The greater-good defence is concerned not so much with the possibility of evil as with its actual occurrence, and asks: given the evil actually occurs (evil which God could have prevented), why did God not prevent it, but rather ordain it? The answer provided by the greater-good defence is: because only in permitting evil (evil which God could have prevented by creating men and women such that they freely only ever did what was right) could certain ends be secured. [Helm, p.198]

• In order for any version of the good reason (ie. God had a good reason) or greater-good defence of evil to be plausible on moral grounds, the evil (its character, amount and incidence) must be a logically necessary condition of the good that is alleged to follow from it. It must be that without which the good could not be achieved, not merely one means among others by which the good may be achieved. Otherwise why did God use evil when other routes were open to him? [Helm, p.201-202]

• The greater good defence has seeds which are present in the NT (eg. Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Timothy 2:12). Suffering works for or produces glory. [Helm, p.203]

• One justification for the permitting of certain evils is that they are a necessary condition for the production of certain goods and evil is allowed simply because it produces these goods. The goodness of the goods outweighs the evils which are permitted. [Helm, p.206]
• The benefits outweigh the evils, a) for everyone equally, b) for everyone not equally but beyond the outweighing threshold OR c) the total benefits outweighs the evils, but these benefits are unequal and some who enjoy the benefits may not do so up to the outweighing threshold. [Helm, p.207]

• There are two problems with this view – does the actual incidence of evil in the universe appear to be consistent with this training or soul making view. We would need empirical investigation. The other problem is that this account of the greater good defence on its own has eliminated from it anything that might be characterised as redemptive which makes it incompatible with a scriptural account of the nature and justification of evil. [Helm, p.208-209]

• A second justification for the permitting of evil is that moral evil, evil actions flowing from human decisions, are permitted by God in part as punishment for other evils. Granted that God is not the author of evil, it follows that one reason he has for permitting it, though not necessarily the only reason is that his justice may be upheld. And the reason why some evil is ordained by God is for the punishment of that first evil. [Helm, p.209]

• It is logically impossible for all moral evil to be punitive in character, since there must be non-punitive moral evil which the later evil punishes. [Helm, p.211]

• We have seen two ways of justifying the existence of evil. One in terms of human growth and development and the other in terms of strict justice. Each of these approaches contains an element of truth which can be combined together to provide a more satisfactory view which agrees with the outlook of scripture. [Helm, p.213]

• The Irenaean approach, preserves the insight that evil, moral evil, is necessary for a greater good. The soul-making aspect of the approach maintains that without the occurrence of evil certain other goods could not, logically speaking arise (without weakness and need, there would be no compassion; without fault there would be no forgiveness). The punitive approach is that of the universe as a moral order in which justice reigns. The universe is a moral order and the Irenaean approach losess sight of this fact and allows any evil which has a growth producing effect. On the other hand the punitive approach is that it can offer no explanation as to why evil was allowed in the first place. Both need to come together. [Helm, p.213]

• Summing up: Some moral evils are a punishment; some moral evils are disciplinary (ie. seeking correction); some moral evils are perhaps both. But moral evils whether considered as punishments or as disciplines presuppose moral evils which are neither. In Christ, evil as punishment and evil as discipline are linked, in that his atonement is both the enduring punishment for moral evil and the source of renewal. Finally, without the permission of moral evil, and the atonement of Christ, God’s character would not be fully manifest. [Helm, p.215] Helm appears to be basically saying that we need the Irenaean and the punitive approaches together and the cross shows this.
Living in the light of God’s providence

- Providence means that we are able to live in the assurance that God is present and active in our lives. We are in his care and can therefore face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance. We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. We can face danger, knowing that he is not unaware and uninvolved. [Erickson, p.413]

- God’s activity and our activity are not mutually exclusive. In the light of scriptural evidence we have no basis for laxity, indifference or resignation in the face of the fact that God is accomplishing his goals. Sometimes humans are conscious that their actions are fulfilling divine goals (Matthew 26:42) and sometimes people unwittingly carry out God’s plans (Luke 2:1) [Erickson, p.428-429]

- We know that everything has significance in God’s plan, but we must be careful not to assume that the meaning of everything is obvious and we should be able to identify that meaning. [Erickson, p.429]

- We need to be careful as to what we identify as God’s providence eg. German Christians who endorsed Hitler as God’s working in history. [Erickson, p.430-431]

- The doctrine of providence doesn’t not answer ‘how’ questions (how God actually governs or preserves the universe) and it does not answer ‘why’ questions (why God wills specific things to happen). From the doctrine of providence all we can say is that God willed it to happen BUT there is no illumination into the reason as to why God willed it to happen. The divine pattern of providence will always be a mystery of faith [Helm, p.33-34]

Bibliography


