**Who Needs Theology?**

**Providence**

**Class #9**

-Providence is the doctrine of God’s sovereign rule over all that happens.

-This doctrine has equally brought great comfort and great confusion to many people.

-If God is in control of everything I do not have to worry about tomorrow.

-But if God is in control of everything, do my choices even matter?

-But if God is in control of everything, what about war, starvation, poverty, famine, abuse, torture, and genocide or other “acts of God.”

-In regards to the doctrine of providence all Christian of all persuasions throughout history have agreed together with the following:

1. God is the good and just governor of nature and history in that he created, sustains, guides, provides for and judges everything.
2. Nothing can happen in either nature or history that God does not at least allow.
3. God’s sovereign governance of nature and history is both general and specific.

-Within these statements there is plenty of room for diversity.

-Unfortunately, some Christians have made taking a certain position on the details of this a dogma.

-This has become one of the most divisive issues within Protestant Christian circles today and throughout her history.

-The whole issue of God’s sovereign control and human freewill has come to be known as the Calvin / Arminian debate.

-Although Calvin and Arminius were not the originators of their positions, but merely the names that have become connected with these theological positions.

Calvinism

-A recovery of Augustine’s doctrine of predestination.

-God foreordains and controls every detail of everything that happens.

-Calvinists would reject Olson chapter title “Limited and Detailed’ but would say that God’s providence is unlimited and detailed.

-Belief in *meticulous* providence.

-God *controls* every detail; even every decision that humans make for or against him (doctrine of *limited atonement*: Christ died only for the elect – we will get into this more in the chapter on *Salvation*).

*-Monergism –* God does all the work.

John Calvin, *Institutes*: 3, 21, 5 & 7 (206, 210)

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every person. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others are preordained to eternal damnation. Each person has been created by God for one or the other of these ends. People have been predestined to life or to death.

Scripture clearly proves that God by his eternal and immutable (unchanging) counsel determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure to one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction.

-Calvin and Calvinist deny that this makes God the author of sin, but critics of Calvinism have said that the logic of his position leads one there.

-Calvin and Calvinists acknowledge that it may seem that this makes God the author of sin, but that it doesn’t and we don’t know how it doesn’t (that is part of the mystery of God).

-May Calvinists believe that to take any other position is to deny the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and to give people too much power.

-“If people can *choose* God's gift of salvation,” they will say, “then people end up saving themselves.”

T - Total Depravity

U - Unconditional Election

L - Limited Atonement

I - Irresistible Grace

P - Preservation of the Saints

Historical and Contemporary examples of Calvinists:

Augustine, Zwingli, Calvin, Spurgeon, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, John MacArthur & Charles Stanley

Arminianism

-Believe in the total sovereignty of God.

-Nothing can happen without God’s *permission*, but God limits himself in order to *allow* for free will.

-*Limited* providence (God’s chosen self-limitation - because of God’s goodness and love God chose not to foreordain every detail of his universe and therefore, he opened the door to human free choice, and opened the door to the possibility of evil).

-God will still bring everything to completion according to his divine plan.

-God’s foreknowledge means that God knows everything that is going to happen and knows what decision everyone is going to make for or against him, but he does not make people choose – (as in Calvin’s *irresistible grace*).

-Evil and suffering are due to our choosing the wrong instead of the right.

-Why does God allow it to continue if he knows what we will choose?

-Because to not allow this would be to rob us of our free choice.

-Synergism: God initiates everything (including our salvation), but we must choose to respond to him and not resist him.

Jacob Arminius (*Arminian Theology,* paraphrase – Olson, pp. 143-144)

In his sinful state, people are not capable, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; it is necessary for them to be regenerated and renewed in their intellect, affections, and will, and in all their powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. From this statement it should be obvious that I do not, as it is reported of me, attribute too much to free will. The question is, ‘Does God only extend grace to some people who then *must* choose him, as Calvin and his followers assert, or is God’s grace extended to all people who can then either accept or reject it?’ I believe, according to the scriptures, that many persons resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace that is offered to them.

-Arminians deny that choosing God’s free gift is a work and a saving of one’s self.

-Thomas Oden says that Arminius recovered the position of the Great Tradition, whereas Calvinist were basically Augustinian.

-The early church (especially Eastern) was much more comfortable with leaving these truths in tension.

\*Go through Arminian TULIP

Historical and Contemporary examples of Arminians

Chrysostom, Erasmus, Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, C.S. Lewis, A.W. Tozer, Billy Graham, Michael Green, Dallas Willard & Roger Olson.

**Heresies regarding Providence**

1. Fatalism

-Fatalism denies intelligent design (planning, purpose, and involvement by a supreme being)

-Nature and history are controlled by blind forces.

-Whatever happens simply happens.

-History is simply a meaningless course of events without any goal or direction.

-As humans we need to simply adjust and try to enjoy the inevitable.

-i.e. Stoics, reading the stars, etc.

1. Deism – “God” set up all the rules of nature and history and now just sits back and lets them run on their own.

-God programmed the computer and now lets it run by itself (God does not get personally involved).

-Deism was a popular position of many of the American Founding Fathers.

-Thomas Jefferson cut out all of the sections in his Bible that were miracles and only followed the ethical teachings (because God does not get involved miracles do not happen).

1. Process panentheism – God and creation are co-eternal and co-dependent. God and creation grow and evolve together.

-Evil and suffering are not caused or even allowed by God because God is not all powerful.

-Some will say that God persuades toward the good; others deny this.

*Conclusion*

1. Nothing happens or can happen without God’s permission.

-God’s ultimate, ideal, and perfect will can not and will never be thwarted.

-The issue between Calvinists and Arminians is not God’s sovereignty, but *how* God acts in his sovereignty.

1. Scripture points to a paradox of divine-human synergism in history.

-Human beings influence God, but never thwart God.

-God controls human beings but never robs them of their freedom and responsibility.

\*Of interest:J.I. Packer (Calvinist) and Thomas Oden (Arminian) wrote *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (2004, IVP)

-Together looking at 16 theological themes – proving that Calvinists and Arminians can work together. :)

Roger Olson’s Rules of Engagement, *Arminian Theology,* p. 243.

1. Before speaking about another’s theology we make sure we have read it (from them) and are able to understand it and describe it as they would.

(i.e. Before saying, “I disagree” we must be able to say “I understand”).

1. Avoid attributing beliefs to the adherents of a different belief system that they specifically reject.

(i.e. Calvinists are fatalists / Arminians deny God’s sovereignty or are Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian).

1. We should always recognize and acknowledge the weakness of our own theology and recognize that there are mysteries that we do not understand.
2. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Do you agree more with Calvin that *God foreordains and controls every detail of everything that happens* or with Arminius that *God limits himself in order to allow for human free will* (nothing happens outside of God’s *permission*)? (Why?)
2. Do you agree with the ***monergist*** Calvinist position which states that if one can *choose* God’s gift of salvation then they have saved themself because they chose it? (why/why not?)
3. Do you agree with Roger Olson’s ***synergist*** Arminian position which states that *Scripture points to a paradox of divine-human synergism in history?* (why/why not?)
4. How do you account for evil and suffering in this world when there is an all powerful God?
5. How do you find Roger Olson’s *Rules of Engagement* helpful:
   1. Before speaking about another’s theology we make sure we have read it (from them) and are able to understand it and describe it as they would.
   2. Avoid attributing beliefs to the adherents of a different belief system that they specifically reject.
   3. We should always recognize and acknowledge the weakness of our own theology and recognize that there are mysteries that we do not understand.
   4. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love.
6. Which of these rules do you need to work on the most? (How do you specifically plan to do that?)
7. What can we learn from J.I. Packer (Calvinist) and Thomas Oden’s (Arminian) working together?