

Is God in Control of Men's Affairs?

The Bible answers, "Yes."

Summary. The almighty God controls, directs, and sustains everything which he has created, including men. This is called his "providence."

Furthermore, as men live, breathe, and work, their Creator acts in them and through them, even when their motives would be sinful, though he will neither concur [work together] in that sin, nor force them to commit a sin (Acts 17:28; Psalm 5:5-6). In fact, without his power men could not act at all (Psalm 104:29-30).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that men are mere machines that are forced unwillingly to do whatever their Creator expects. Men remain moral beings with a freedom from any coercion by their Creator. Just the same, they still are held responsible for their moral acts, not merely by their own consciences, but by their Creator who will judge them on Judgment Day.

Thus from the viewpoint of men everything which they do in human affairs will be done freely. However, according to biblical teaching, all human affairs must proceed according to God's prearranged plans (Matthew 2:15; 26:54).

In regards to God's control of human affairs, God not only operates according to his revealed will which is found in the Bible, which consists of his commands and promises to men, which he has bound men to obey, but also according to his hidden will, so to speak, which he has not revealed, about which he is silent, and which men could not discover (Romans 11:33-34; Isaiah 55:8-9).

At times this hidden will may produce in human affairs events which seem to be unjust and offensive to the mere mortal mind (Matthew 2:13-18; 26:47-56).

Commentary. The Almighty controls, directs, and sustains everything which he has created, including men. God's holy Word testifies, "All things were created by him... by him all things consist" (Colossians 1:16-17). God "works everything in everything" (1st Corinthians 12:6). To what end? "Divine providence centers in the Church. Scripture teaches expressly that all things and all occurrences in heaven and on earth must serve the Church. According to Rom. 8:28 'all things work together for good to them that love God'. According to Matt. 24:14 the world exists solely for the Church. And according to Heb. 1:14 the angels are ministers in the service of the Church."¹

In fact, in God "we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28), the Bible teaches. Without God's power we could not live, move or have our being. "When you would hide your face, they will be troubled; when you would take away their breath, they will die and return to their dust. When you would send forth your spirit, they will be created" (Psalm 104:29-30). Thus God acts in men and through them.

Indeed, "Unless the Lord would build the house, they who would build it will labor for nothing" (Psalm 127:1). Men are one "means through which divine Providence operates. God operates, and the means operate. Ps. 127:1: The Lord builds the house, and the

¹ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, translator Theodore Engelder, Volume I (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), page 485.

builders build the house. But the relation between the operation of the means and the operation of God is this: The operation of the means is not coordinate with the operation of God, but subordinate to it, and subordinate to that extent that the means work only that which God works through them, and they work only as long as God works. For "except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."²

"God not only bestows the power to act on... [creatures] and conserves them, but in an immediate manner enters into the action and the effect produced by a creature, so that the same effect is produced not by God alone, nor by the creature alone, nor partly by God, partly by the creature, but is produced at the same time by God and the creature by one identical, total efficacy, viz. by God as the universal and first cause, by the creature as the particular and second cause'."³

Hence the Bible shows that the Almighty controls, directs, and sustains the lives and the destinies of individuals, notably Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). "The Lord looks from heaven; he sees all the sons of men. From the place of his habitation he looks on all the inhabitants of the earth; he fashions their hearts individually; he considers all their works" (Psalm 33:13-15).

² Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, translator Theodore Engelder, Volume I (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), page 487.

³ William Herman Theodore Dau, *Doctrinal Theology*, Volume I (no place: mimeographed, no date [a few years after 1910]), pages 201-202

Moreover, the Lord also controls, directs, and sustains the destinies of nations. For example, when the Assyrian war lords had planned to go to war against Jerusalem, declaring, "Prepare war against her.... Let us destroy her palaces" (Jeremiah 6:4 & 5), at the same time God moved their minds to bring about this annihilating war, urging them, "For thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Cut down trees, and build a mound against Jerusalem'" (Jeremiah 6:6).

"Concerning the *concurrence* [working together] of God in the actions of moral beings.... As to evil actions, Scripture, in the first place, tells us 1) that God is unalterably opposed to them: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'.... 2) that God often prevents their occurrence, as in the case of Abimelech of Gerar (Gen. 20:1ff.); and 3) that when they occur, they must serve His good purposes, as when Joseph was sold into Egypt (Gen. 50:20).

"But now, in the second place, the question arises: How far does God concur in the performance of sinful actions? The Scriptural teaching on this point may be thus summarized: God concurs [works together] in evil actions in so far as they are acts... for Scripture says that men live and move and have their being in God (Acts 17:28). But God does not concur in the evil actions in so far as they are evil... for Scripture says of God: 'Thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing [falsehood]; the Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man' (Psalm 5:5-6). - We are well aware that this distinction... does not remove the difficulty our mind finds in this co-operation of God. But we also know that for the present, during our life here on

earth, we human beings must confine our thinking to the limits set by this distinction. All explanations that go beyond these limits are based either on self-deception or on a denial of the two factors that enter in here. We shall have to deny either the concurrence of God in the evil acts, as far as they are acts (Pelagius, according to Jerome, did this; he declared that he could move his hand, bend his finger, sit, stand, and walk without God's concurrence...), or we shall have to deny that there is anything evil in the human action; we make God responsible for it and deny human responsibility. Both are against Scripture and against human experience. It is contrary to Scripture. For Acts 17:28 clearly teaches the thief or the murderer cannot perform his acts without God's concurrence; it states that all men, including the thieves and murderers, live in God, move in God, have their being in God. It is contrary to experience, for inevitably the conscience of the thief and of the murderer holds them responsible for their evil actions."⁴

To be sure, "physically two men may perform the same act, yet morally it is not the same. One man picks up a dollar and keeps it, and he is an honest man, because the money is his. The other does the same thing, and he is a thief, because the money does not belong to him. In both cases God concurs in the physical performance of the act; also the thief could not move his hand without God's cooperation. But God has absolutely no part in the sinfulness of the act; for He is not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness, Ps. 5:4. God concurs in

⁴ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, translator Theodore Engelder, Volume I (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), pages 489-490.

the physical part of an evil act, but not in the moral depravity of this act. Why God does not refrain to cooperate in the physical performance of such acts as are morally contrary to His will, we do not know. However, it is blasphemous if on that account we hold Him responsible for our evil deeds. 'Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man; but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed', James 1:13, 14.

"This doctrine of the concurrence of God is by no means an idle speculation, but has practical significance. We pray to this God, and He has promised to hear us, Ps. 50:15. The fact that He concurs in all the functions of His creatures strengthens in us the assurance that He can easily make them serve our needs."⁵

"Does God permit men to sin? This question has often been put. Scripture answers in the affirmative. It describes God's relation to sin also as a sufferance of sin.... Ps. 81:12: 'So I gave them [the Jews] up unto their own heart's lust; and they walked in their own counsels'. Acts 14:16: 'Who in times past suffered all nations [the Gentiles] to walk in their own ways'. The phrase: 'God permits men to sin' is therefore not subject to criticism. It is based on Scripture. But this does not fully describe God's activity in connection with the sins of men. According to Scripture, God in His righteous judgment punishes sin with sin. We read Rom. 1:24-28: 'Wherefore [because of their idolatry] God also gave them up to

⁵ Edward William August Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (River Forest, Illinois: Koehler Publishing Company, 1939), page 36.

uncleanness... unto vile affections... to a reprobate mind'. And 2 Thess. 2:11-12 describes this activity of God in these words: 'And for this cause [because they received not the love of the truth] God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness'."⁶

"Does God do evil by supporting man who in his natural state does evil continually? The essential holiness of God, Ps. 145:17 which is observed in all his ways and works and furthermore manifests itself in His abhorrence of iniquity, Ps. 5:5, and also His immutability, James 1:17 by which He is ceaselessly the Dispenser only of good and perfect gifts, forbid us to assume that God cooperates in the evil works of man, in so far as they are evil. The omnipotence of God supplies indeed the energies of intellect and will, and the physical strength which are necessary for any human action, but the sinful quality of the action is not from Him. This strikingly is set forth by Jeremiah, Lam. 3:35-38. The prophet grants that injustice is practiced by men, but declares that the Lord does not approve of it. Still, he continues, unless the Lord willed, nothing that man proposes can be accomplished (Compare Prov. 16:9). And He adds: 'Out of the mouth of the Lord proceedeth not evil and good'. If the injustice that is done does not proceed from the Lord, and still the injustice could not have been accomplished unless the Lord had willed, the meaning can be no other than this, that the Lord will that there

⁶ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, translator Theodore Engelder, Volume I (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), pages 490-491.

should be in a certain person the power to act and the ability to use it, but not the motive to act as he does, nor the result in which the action terminates. All activity of men would simply have to cease if the Creator should withdraw His sustaining hand, Job 34:13-15. For God to withdraw or to withhold the power from men to act would be tantamount to giving man over to death and dissolution.... The power by which men sin is indeed from Him, who is the Source of all life and of all strength, but He does not bestow it for the purpose of sinning. In this sense, any evil that occurs anywhere may be traced to the Lord, Is. 45:7; Amos 3:6; Deut. 32:39."⁷

Just the same, men are not machines that are "deprived of freedom of will and action. For man often thinks, wills, and does what God would not have him think, will, and do, which plainly shows that man has a will of his own. Hence, according to the witness of his own conscience, Rom. 2:14, 15, and of the Scriptures, Matt.12:36, man, and not God, is responsible for his thoughts, words, and deeds. In agreement with this our Confessions deny 'That everything that man does, even in outward things, he does by compulsion, and that he is coerced to evil works and deeds'. Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II, paragraph 8, *Triglot Concordia*, page 789. 'The human will has liberty in the choice of works and things which reason comprehends by itself'. Augsburg Confession, Article XVIII, paragraph 70, *Triglot Concordia*, page 335."⁸

⁷ W. H. T. Dau, *Doctrinal Theology*, Volume I (no place: mimeographed, no date [a few years after 1910]), page 201.

⁸ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (River Forest, Illinois: Koehler Publishing Company, 1939), page 37.

“It is God’s will and order that we use the means which He has appointed for sustaining and prolonging our lives (the exceptions, i.e., that God can also sustain our lives without means, we leave to Him, Ex. 34:28). As God-appointed means Scripture mentions: work... food... especially a pious life... prayer... also flight from danger (Acts 9:23-25: Paul’s flight from Damascus when the Jews threatened his life); etc. Since these means are appointed by God, they have been made part of the divine providence. That is emphasized Acts 27:31: ‘Except these [seamen] abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved’ - God has made the saving of your lives dependent upon the use of these means.”⁹

“The providence of God is... engaged in opposing the sinner and in defeating his wicked purpose. This is called the divine government of evil. These modes of this government may be distinguished: before, during and after the sinners’ action.... Governing acts of God antecedent and concomitant to the commission of evil are: 1) God’s prescience of the evil contemplated... 2) God’s interference before an evil act is conceived or executed. In a manner which we cannot observe in an empirical way, but which is in keeping with His power and goodness God prevents many evil deeds which might suggest themselves to men from entering their minds. Again, when the evil design has formed in a heart God interposes before the execution. Thus the lewd Sodomites were thwarted in their lusts, Gen. 19:11. The contemplated adultery of Abimelech with Sarah was

not affected, Gen. 20:6.... In these instances God revealed to the parties His disapproval of their design or foiled them in their endeavor by an extraordinary and miraculous use of His omnipotent power, Isa. 37:36. This mode of the divine government of evil is so common with God that the Psalmist declares: ‘The Lord bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: He maketh the devices of the people to none effect’ (Ps. 33:10). Concomitant acts of God by which He governs evil refer to such evil deeds as He permits. In a manner which we cannot understand by observation, but which comports with His righteousness, holiness and goodness God engages to dissuade the sinner from committing his sin even while the latter is engaged in it and to erect barriers which the sinner cannot pass. Jesus would have been slain sooner by the Jews if God had permitted them, John 7:30.... Consequent acts of God by which evil is governed are directed toward the effect of evil already committed. The sale of Joseph by his brethren and his removal as a slave into Egypt was neither suggested nor effected by God.... But the design which they had had in selling Joseph was so completely changed by the course of events in Joseph’s life in Egypt, and another design of which neither Joseph or his brethren had been aware at the time of the sale was put in the place of the wicked design of the brethren, that Joseph’s removal to Egypt is represented later as serving a divine purpose, and Joseph himself ascribes it to God, Gen. 45:5; 50:20.... God employs also wicked agents to accomplish blessed ends and makes the wrath of men praise Him. Luther rightly says: ‘When God wills, even the devil must run His errands’. Accordingly Paul lays down this truth as a

⁹ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, translator Theodore Engelder, Volume I (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965), pages 493-494.

general rule: 'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose' Rom. 8:28."¹⁰

"At times God suffers evil to happen, and permits men to walk in their perverse ways, Ps. 81:12; Acts 14:16; Rom. 1:24. Then again, He breaks up the evil counsel and will of men, as in the case of Saul, Acts 9; Ps. 33:10, or He hinders and frustrates their wicked purpose, 'Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good', Gen. 50:20. He defends us against all danger, as He defended Lot in Sodom and Israel at the Red Sea. Without His will no sparrow shall fall to the ground, and not a hair from our head, Matt. 10:29, 30. He guards and protects us from all evil, Ps. 91:10-12. Even the evil men do is subject to His control, and must serve His purposes: the betrayal of Judas and judicial murder of Christ He used to carry out His plan of redemption, see also Gen. 50:20. He determines the length to which wicked men may go, and so regulates and limits the results of their actions that all things must in the end work out for the good of His children, Rom. 8:28. The 'foreknowledge of God observes its order also in wicked acts and works, inasmuch as a limit and measure is fixed by God to the evil, which God does not will, how far it should go, and how long it should last, when and how He will hinder and punish it; for all of this God the Lord so overrules that it must redound to the glory of the divine name and to the salvation of His elect, and the godless, on this account, must be put to confusion'. Formula of Concord,

¹⁰ W. H. T. Dau, *Doctrinal Theology*, Volume I (no place: mimeographed, no date [a few years after 1910]), pages 202-203.

Thorough Declaration, Article XI, paragraph 6, Triglot Concordia, page 1065."¹¹

¹¹ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (River Forest, Illinois: Koehler Publishing Company, 1939), page 38.