

WHEN WE CONTEMPLATE THE SUFFERING AND THE DEVASTATION in this world of ours and ask what God's will is and what his goals are, cherishing the hope that we shall receive an answer to our question, we find that in the last analysis his purposes are hidden from us. As natural men we never escape the vicious circle of thought in which we ask whether God could not achieve his ends in some other way and how in a war, for example, he can allow both the sanctuaries and the gin-mills to be reduced to the same hideous ruins. For the same reason the Cross of Christ has always been for disciples and worldlings of all times either a crisis or a manifestation of faith: Could not God have achieved his great goal of reconciliation in some other, less bloody way? Why do we always have to go through blood and tears to reach the divine shore?

These questions lead us directly into the problem of providence and history, which is again a part of the great complex of the doctrine of creation and therefore of the first article of the Creed, which is the basic theme of this book.

Luther's classical explanation of this first article of the Creed in his *Small Catechism* begins with the idea that creation is not something in the past, not merely a unique, nonrecurrent act at the beginning, which is concerned only with the ancient figures of Adam and Eve, but rather that creation is an ongoing, constantly recurring event of immediate concern to me. A quick review of his explanation will make this immediately clear.

I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given and still preserves to me my body and soul, with all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with my

raiment, food, home, and family, and all my property; that he daily provides me abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me and guards me against all evil; all of which he does out of pure, paternal, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I am in duty bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true.

That statement declares that there are two ways in which God's act of creation is related to me and the present:

1. *I was created by him*—and therefore not only my “first parents” Adam and Eve, so that the act of creation touches me only through the mediation of all the generations preceding. No, I am directly related to my Creator.

2. God continues to preserve my life, which he created, by providing me with all the requirements for existence, including everything from “reason and the faculties of my mind” to “raiment” and “food.” But in saying this about “me,” Luther is regarding me as representative of everything that happens in the universe, over which God here and now holds his sustaining and directing hand.

And that applies, in the first place, to the *historical* sector of this total life of the world. Nobody can show us this better than the Old Testament historians and prophets, who differ from all the other historians in world literature in that they constantly and rigorously relate all historical events (victories and defeats, birth and death) to God, the Subject of history. God alone is the unconditioned Actor.

But in the second place, this also applies in exactly the same way to the realm of *nature*. Psalm 104, for example (cited earlier on p. 71), describes the processes of nature not as a self-contained, autonomously functioning mechanism, but rather as a drama in which God is acting at every single moment; and without his sustaining preservation and intervention the world would immediately collapse and, to speak in modern terms, the laws of nature would disappear.

Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys . . .
 From thy lofty abode thou waterest the mountains;
 the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work . . .
 When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed;
 when thou takest away their breath, they die . . .

When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created;
and thou renewest the face of the ground.

In the eyes of this ancient contemplator nature can be described, so to speak, only in prayer, only as we address the Creator who is acting. He can describe nature only by describing the Thou who creates and sustains it. But even this he cannot do in the form of an objective description, but only as he addresses him. We can talk about the mystery of the world only on the basis of an immediate and personal I-Thou relationship to the Creator, that is to say, only on the basis of *faith*.

Now the question arises how Luther, and before him those ancient historians and psalmists, arrived at these convictions concerning God's providence and preservation of the world. Did they arrive at them through observing life? Did they look at life and find there a just and meaningful apportionment of the burdens of life between the good and the wicked? Did they find in actual life that the good prosper and the wicked always lose out? Did they see, therefore, that a just and meaningful will rules life, to which one could apply the term "providence"? In everything that happens, whether it be the earthquake of Lisbon, the destruction of cities in war, or a poor widow's winning of the lottery, can we say what reasons and purposes of fate are to be found in them?

By no means!

When we look at *history*, no matter whether it be the history of the world or of our own life, viewing it with our natural eyes, it appears to be an inextricable tangle of sense and nonsense, and it would seem to be only a matter of temperament or other background which of these two elements I see more emphatically, the sense or the nonsense.

Hegel, the philosopher of idealism, saw in history a self-unfolding of the world-spirit and thus also thought it possible to find an inner logic in the course of history; therefore in all its stages—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—it has meaning and purpose.

The opposite pole in the interpretation of history is represented perhaps by the Jewish philosopher of history, Theodor Lessing, who in the twenties wrote a book with the title, *History as Giving Meaning to the Meaningless*. In this book he presents

the thesis that what we call history is only a conglomeration of accidents and thus a confused chaos without reason, goal, or meaning. It is only the man who observes this chaos of historical raw material, or even attempts to describe it as a historian, who performs in his thinking an organizing function upon this raw material and forms from it a meaningful structure. But, mark you, this meaning does not lie *in* history, so that we might objectively lift it out of it; the meaning is rather brought to it from the outside and introduced into it.

A remarkable intermediate position between these two views is one that Schiller could sometimes take, for example in his well-known passage: "Know that the sublime spirit" (meaning the man with a great mind) "puts the great things *into* life; he does not seek them there."

So different, therefore, can be the impression that history makes upon the observer that these two extreme interpretations are possible. Nor is there any objective arbitration that can decide between these two possible interpretations. The fact is that for the natural eye meaning and meaninglessness lie indistinguishably side by side in history.

It can also be expressed in this way: history contains within itself the most extreme *contradictions*; at one time these contradictions suggest the conclusion that there is a providence fashioning meaning in this world; at another time (perhaps even the next moment) they make us doubt it all over again.

As an example I give you two such contradictions.

First pair of contradictions:

Proposition *a*. We all know the proverbs: "Pride goeth before a fall," or "Honesty is the best policy," or "Lies have short wings."

All these proverbs, which have come out of observation of life, are statements about certain laws which obtain in the world and which we cannot violate with impunity. In the last analysis they point to a kind of "moral world order" which sees to it that lies are unmasked and maintains the value of honesty. And here it is not absolutely necessary to identify the moral order with a "personal God"; it is quite possible to think in terms of a world economy that regulates and keeps itself in balance. This economy weeds out all disturbing elements. This view also constitutes a fair outline of the metaphysics of classical German tragedy.

These observations of life then suggest the conclusion that there is a meaningfully operative *providence*. And Bismarck, starting from a similar point of view, said that the revisions of history are more exact and precise than those of the "Prussian Chamber of Audits." Every crime, every injustice, and also every stupidity in historical action—he was saying—must be paid for. But this is just what seems to bring *meaning* into history and to give us a glimpse of something like *providence*.

Proposition *b*. In contrast to these observations there is the observation that completely meaningless and incomprehensible things happen in this world. I have already referred to what we saw happening in the last war: sanctuaries and gin-mills collapsing indiscriminately to the ground. It can happen—and to my knowledge, did happen—that of two neighboring houses, one belonging to a greatly esteemed citizen who had lost three sons in the war and the other to a shameless speculator and profiteer, the home of the decent citizen is destroyed by a direct hit while the other is left unharmed. Staggered by such occurrences, we feel we have to say with Schiller, "Haphazard strikes the lightning," and conclude that there is no providence either.

When we compare these two points *a* and *b* with each other we see at once that they cannot be resolved into a smooth formula, but rather stand in irresolvable contradiction to each other. Hence it is impossible for our natural observation to break through to an assured, demonstrable concept of providence.

Second pair of contradictions:

Proposition *a*. People say, "Every man forges his own fortune," and correspondingly also his own misfortune. Here again the assertion is that fortune and misfortune are not accidental but are the result of a very meaningful and just apportionment, namely, the individual's ability to "forge," my own energetic efforts, my ability, and my singleness of purpose.

Proposition *b*. On the other hand, our generation has experienced in full measure the kind of "fate" that circumscribes or even strangles all our own will and action with relentless, overwhelming power. The tragic poets of Greece can tell us dreadful tales about that, and the Germanic religion had its Norns, spinning the fabric of fate at the spring of Wyrd. And like the Greeks, the Germanic peoples also knew that in the end even the gods

are subject to the doom of fate, and are even now approaching the twilight of the gods.

In our own day perhaps Oswald Spengler has most impressively set forth the laws of fate that govern peoples and cultures, laws by which even the macrocosmic realms of national and racial civilizations have "their time" and are helpless to prolong their reprieve by any exertion of will or effort. Fate seems to be completely unaffected by our "forging," our merits, and our passing away. Even the greatest of the world's strong men are subject to it (just as are the gods in the Germanic religion) and they rattle their chains in vain when their hour comes. Goethe expresses this with reference to the fate of Napoleon in his drama *Epimenides*.

Who boldly from the abyss arose
 May, by a fate severe and stern,
 On half this earth his will impose;
 But to the abyss he must return.
 Fear even now boils to the brim,
 In vain will he that dread forestall;
 And all who still would cling to him
 With him to rack and ruin must fall.¹

Thus Napoleon, who rose like a meteor from the depths of obscurity and flashed brilliantly across the sky, must fall precipitously to his ruin. Neither genius of will or of mind can alter in the least this parabola of fate: "to the abyss he must return."

Again the result is that these two statements, *a* and *b*, namely, that every man forges his own fortune and that, on the other hand, fate pitilessly tramples upon his ambitions and achievements, cannot be reconciled and thus foredoom to failure any conclusion that there is a governing providence at work. We can phrase this result as follows:

History has in it *too much sense* for us to be able to regard it as a gigantic playground of the forces of blind chance.

History has in it *too much nonsense* for us to be able to deduce from it a purposeful providence that guides it.

Thus history lies in a strange twilight which we must explore further. In any case, it is not clear and transparent in the light of

¹ Goethe's *Des Epimenides Erwachen* ("Epimenides' Awakening") has not to my knowledge been translated into English, and the reader must be content with this effort. (Trans.)

God (at this point this is the most important thing to realize). It is obvious that still other factors are at work here.

So already at this point we realize that when we Christians talk about "providence" this cannot mean that in every event we are able to ascribe the cause to God. The case of the destruction of churches instead of gin-mills would forbid that conclusion. Nor can we discover any formula in which the contradictions of history are resolved. On the contrary, if at this point we are ready to use the word "God," we find ourselves repeatedly confronted by the *hidden* God whose ways we cannot fathom.

And here we run into the deepest mystery of the problem of providence. Expressed negatively, it consists in the fact that there is no such thing as providence in the sense of a "moral world order" or a self-balancing metaphysical world mechanism. At the place where we look for this mechanism stands the Father of Jesus Christ. It is this *personal God* who "provides," "foresees," "determines," "resolves."

The mystery of the world, therefore, is not resolved in a formula, but rather in a personal decision or decree.

This is an extraordinary shift in our thinking. Let me try to make it easier with an example.

Two countries find themselves at war with each other. The general staff of one of the two countries knows exactly what are the principles of strategy of the other general staff. Moreover, their agents are able to furnish them with the other party's plan of deployment, which has been worked out in precise accord with these principles of strategy. So they know the formulas and principles as well as the practical directives for carrying out these principles. Thus the situation is clear and predictable.

But the situation is immediately changed—really changed and not merely so construed—when the strategic plans are not simply fixed on paper, but rather have their source in the *decisions* of the commander-in-chief, which as such are not "predictable," because the commander-in-chief can always make use of freedom and resort to improvisation. The strategy is therefore no longer a calculable system but rather a matter of personal decisions. But as soon as we enter the personal level, we can no longer determine beforehand what the next step will be. Nor can we explain at first many of the reactions of the enemy commander-in-chief, and at

first many of his maneuvers appear to be meaningless. In other words, I cannot explain for the very simple reason that I do not know what he has in mind, what he is thinking. And often he may even try to conceal his thoughts, so that at first we cannot discern any congruence between his strategic plan and the externally visible realization of it.

All examples, all comparisons are imperfect, especially when we come to illustrate the problems of God's governance by reducing it to earthly proportions.

Nevertheless, the situation is roughly what this example shows: There is no such thing as providence as a "system" of world order any more than there is a battle plan which is set down on paper and intended to be followed in *purely* mechanical fashion. Providence is rather contained within the "higher thoughts" of God that determine his personal decisions. The world and our destiny lie in a "hand"; they are laid upon a "heart" that is concerned about us. So there is profound significance in the fact that here the Bible and the church always have to resort to very "personal" words.

From this there follow two consequences to which we must give further consideration. In concluding this chapter we merely indicate what they are.

1. Providence cannot be reduced to an *objective* formula which would simply solve the mystery of what happens in the world. It rests upon the *personal* decisions of him who "provides" (in the literal sense of that word, which means "to foresee").

2. But then, logically, the only way I can get at the mystery of providence is to enter into a personal relationship with him who "provides." And because I learn to know his heart in Christ and because I trust him, I am no longer irritated by the dark and impenetrable parts of his providence. So we understand the attitude of the author of Psalm 73, who does not get at these dark passages by seeking and finally discovering *reasons* behind the mysterious leadings of God, so that he can then say, "Because of such and such, God did this or that." Rather he confesses and declares (and does so in the face of impenetrable *darkness*): "*Nevertheless, I am continually with thee*"; in thee the darkness is made light, and therefore, if only I have thee, "there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee."