



Principle Approach® Education

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Over a hundred years ago, January 5, 1876, to be exact, Rev. S. W. Foljambe of Malden, gave an election sermon before the Massachusetts Commonwealth, with the title—“The Hand of God in America’s History.” I wish every Christian college, Bible Institute, and Seminary in our land would have as a requirement for graduation this assignment: “Prepare a paper on The Hand of God in American History.” Could you do it?

Rev. Foljambe says:

The more thoroughly a nation deals with its history, the more decidedly will it recognize and own an *overruling Providence* therein, and the more religious a nation will become; while the more superficially it deals with its history, seeing only secondary causes and human agencies, the more irreligious will it be. If the history of any nation is the development of the latent possibilities existing in its special nature, it is also the record of a Divine Providence furnishing place and scope for that development, creating its opportunities, and guiding its progress. History is not a string of striking episodes with no other connection but that of time. It is rather the working out of a mighty system, by means of regularly defined principles as old as creation, and as infallible as divine wisdom. With this truth in view, we approach our chosen theme, The Hand of God in American History. Not inappropriate do we deem it, that we trace along the line of our history how God was with our fathers, and recall and reaffirm in this presence the truth of our increasing dependence upon him for the continued prosperity of our country and people.

Observe the Hand of God in the wise and beneficent timing of events in the dawn of our history. The events of history are not accidents. There are no accidents in the lives of men or of nations. We may go back to the underlying cause of every event, and discover in each God’s overruling and intervening wisdom. It has been said that history is the biography of communities; in another, and profounder sense, it is the autobiography of



him who is graciously timing all events in the interests of his Christ, and of the kingdom of God on earth.

So spake Rev. Foljambe to the lawmakers of Massachusetts over one hundred years ago. What has happened to the providential approach to history during the last one hundred years so that in the year of our Lord, 1979, there are very few Christian educational institutions teaching history—world history, or American history, from the Providential point of view?

If you canvas the publishinghouses of college texts, can you find history books dealing with Ancient, Medieval, English, or American history written from the Providential interpretation? If there are few such volumes available, it would seem to me there is no demand for such texts, otherwise publishing houses would stock such an item. They operate under the economic law of supply and demand—no demand, no supply. As one scans the “reprint” catalogues, the nineteenth century volumes with the Providential emphasis are few and far between, and very expensive. Again—no demand, no supply.

It would not be expected that secular educational institutions would desire history texts written from the Providential interpretation, but the question is, why don't the Christian higher education institutions want such textbooks? Why are they using the same texts as the state colleges and universities?

No one in this audience would say the “Doctrine of Providence” is outmoded theologically, I am sure; yet if one suggests relating or extending it to include the philosophy of history which emphasizes Christianity's westward movement to America, and America with her unique form of government is seen as a result of this westward movement—there is a strange reaction among Christian educators. The Providential interpretation of history has long been discredited and discarded by secular historians in favor of the various man-made theories explaining man's progress, but why should Christians follow them and overlook, ignore, or even oppose the Providential philosophy as the basis for teaching history?

Thirty years ago, during the period when American history courses were being absorbed into the progressive education term “social studies,” Professor Kenneth Murdock addressed himself to analyzing the Providential interpretation of History as something of academic interest, but quaint.

Professor Murdock describes the Providential interpretation accurately, and then through various terms, discredits it. He says,

The doctrine of providences was a commonplace of theology, not only in colonial New England, but elsewhere in the seventeenth century and before. In the simplest terms it held that every event was manipulated by God. A man might make a fortune, a city might burn, someone might be saved from death, or a prince might fall—in each case God brought about the event. Sometimes, to be sure, misfortunes came to one of His own, and sometimes sinners lived unmolested, but when this happened, it was to be assumed that man's finite intelligence was simply unable to grasp the ends toward which the Almighty worked, and that the duty of the pious was to accept the fact, confident that



divine providence was carrying out a divine purpose. Miraculous occurrences, strange happenings, curious upsets in human affairs, and such mysterious apparitions as eclipses and comets, were striking instances of God at work, rewarding, punishing, or warning mankind and reminding mortals that His all-powerful hand was ready to smite those who displeased Him.

The idea of “providence,” then, has had an enduring vitality, and it would be easy to cite instances of belief in it in various forms today. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was generally held. As Sir Charles Firth put it, the doctrine “that Providence intervened in the government of the world” was accepted by “the Elizabethans in general.” It was not peculiar to New Englanders or to Puritans, but was part of the traditional common stock of Christian belief. It was, of course, highly useful to preachers exhorting and warning their flocks; it also served well the historian looking for some principle by which to interpret the vagaries of historical happenings. It was accepted by writers and readers alike, and so it was agreed “that it was the business of the historian as a teacher of morality”—[and he was commonly so regarded in the days when New England was colonized]—“to point . . . out when he related . . . events” that history taught God’s power and His control of mundane happenings and so far as possible to read in history the active purposes of God revealed in events . . . It was with such ideas, then, that the early seventeenth century historian in England or the colonies, went to work. Whether he was Anglican, Catholic, or Puritan; Londoner, Virginian, or New Englander, he was likely to believe that the first cause of all historical events was God . . .

(I am inclined to ask Professor Murdock, “Anything wrong with that?”) Dr. Murdock continuing,

Naturally, then, New England Puritans stressed the theory that history was primarily a record of God’s providence. They were conscientious in putting down on paper, so far as possible, everything that took place, since God worked in everything, but they often seemed most interested in what they thought illustrated best God’s supreme power in human affairs, and most pleased when a narrative can be interpreted as an example of the operation of divine providence. In Bradford there is clearly put the *theory* that the facts he treats were significant not merely in themselves but as parts of an age-old struggle between God and the devil, and formed a special chapter in Protestantism’s triumphant advance—an advance made possible because of God’s constant providential care.

I submit, that without the Providential approach to American history the young American Christian in 1979 is wondering just what he is supposed to do concerning his nation. Is America really distinct from other nations? Should he be for his nation? Against it? Try to change it? Help it? Ignore it? What is his standard for government, business, economics? Young America is being taught a variety of interpretations—man’s opinions about America, but he is not being taught the Providential interpretation, with few exceptions.



However, consider what might be the attitude of young American Christians toward their country, if they were taught the marvelous way the Lord brought this nation into being under the leadership of devout Christians, from the Pilgrims to the Founding Fathers? What if young Americans believed God reserved America to bring forth the Christian form of civil government for the better propagating of the gospel and for the benefit of all mankind? What if they knew America was not opened up until there was the quality of individual we know as the Pilgrim? Wouldn't they want to know all about them, and why God selected these particular individuals from all the peoples of Europe to set the standard of what it takes to be an American Christian?

INCREASE MATHER

I am now going to give you samples of the seventeenth and eighteenth century historians and writers believing in the Providential interpretation of American history. I am of the opinion and conviction that we would see a remarkable change in American Christians toward their country if they were given the fullness of this early American thought.

First, I quote from a 1684 sermon entitled "The Doctrine of Divine Providence, Opened and Applied," given by Increase Mather, Teacher of a Church at Boston. Rev. Mather's text is Ezekiel 1, and he explains:

In this chapter we have the Prophet Ezekiel his vision concerning a wonderful wheel; whereby we are to understand the wheel of Providence. The changeable scene of affairs in this lower world, is fitly set forth by a similitude of that nature . . . There are three doctrines which this scripture doth present to our considerations. Doct. I. That He who sitteth in Heaven has an over ruling hand of Providence in whatever commeth to Pass in this world. Doct. II. That the Throne of Christ is a glorious throne. Doct. III. That the Man Christ Jesus hath a Providential kingdome appertaining to him, or That the affairs of providence are in the hands of Christ not only as God but as Mediator.

The Providence of Heaven as to the extent and object of it, is universal. It is extended unto all places of the world. There is a Providence at work in every corner of the earth. Hence Ezekiel's four wheels which had one likeness, (16) To note that there is a wheel of divine providence going in every part of the world. A wheel for Asia, and a wheel for Africa, a wheel for Europe, and a wheel for America too. The providence of God is extended to the least and most inconsiderable things that happen in the world. Heathen Philosophers acknowledged that the God of Heaven was an over ruling providence in the great affairs and concernments of this lower world, but not in lesser matters . . . The scripture teacheth us to Believe that the least as well as the greatest matters are ordered by him whose understanding is Infinite.



Consider the great and wonderful things which God has done for his New-England People. The truth is, that the setting up of Christ's kingdom in this Part of the world, is one of the Wonders of divine providence, which this last age has seen. There was a wondrous hand of God in bringing so many of his People hither; that the hearts of those who dwelt in such remotness from one another should be alike moved and inclined to venture themselves and theirs into a waste and howling Wilderness, that so they might build a Sanctuary for the Lords Name therein. And there was a wonderful providence of God seen in making way for the settlement of his People here. For he cast out the Heathen before them; first by the Plague, and after by the Small Pox, so as that thousands and thousands were swept away by those Besoms of destructions, who else would probably have bin instigated by Satan, so as to have hindred the planting of the Gospel and the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ in these remote corners of the earth. And it is a great and marvellous work of God, that a place should be brought to such Considerableness in so short a Time . . . Hath God assayed to take him a Nation out from the midst of a Nation? Truly the Lord has taken his People here out of the midst of a Nation, and in a few years caused a small number to become like a little Nation. Consider all the outgoings of the English Nation, and you will not see the like.

REV. SAMUEL DEXTER

Fifty years later, in 1738, Rev. Samuel Dexter of Dedham gives a fifty-page sermon on "Our Fathers God, the Hope of Posterity; Some serious Thoughts on the Foundation, Rise, and Growth of the Settlements in New England, with a view to the Edification of the Present, and the Instruction and Admonition of Future Generations." An excerpt gives the flavor.

From the days of Moses, who wrote the first history of the beginning of the world and of Israel, the wise and pious among men have scarce known a more sacred pleasure, nor found a more profitable entertainment, than in tracing the footsteps, and windings of divine Providence, in the planting of Colonies and Churches, here and there through the earth.

Nor let it seem vain in me to say . . . that in the settlement of the New-England Churches and Provinces, there have been some circumstances so like unto those of Israel of Old (after their entrance into Canaan) that I am perswaded no people of God under Heaven, can sing of his mercies and judgments, in the inspired phrase, with more direct and pertinent self application than we can do.



DR. JOHN WITHERSPOON

And as these are the Bicentennial years of the establishment of our nation, I would like to refer you to the sermon preached at Princeton, on the 17th of May, 1776, being the General Fast appointed by the Congress throughout the United Colonies, by Dr. John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He says:

The doctrine of divine providence is very full and complete in the sacred oracles. It extends not only to things which we may think of great moment, and therefore worthy of notice, but to things the most indifferent and inconsiderable: . . . It extends not only to things beneficial and salutary, or to the direction and assistance of those who are the servants of the living God; but to things seemingly most hurtful and destructive, and to persons the most refractory and disobedient. He overrules all his creatures, and all their actions . . .

We have a remarkable instance of the influence of small circumstances in providence in the English history . . . the violent persecution which many eminent Christians met with in England from their brethren, who called themselves Protestants, drove them in great numbers to a distant part of the world, where the light of the gospel and true religion were unknown. Some of the American settlements, particularly those in New England, were chiefly made by them; and as they carried the knowledge of Christ to the dark places of the earth, so they continue themselves in as great a degree of purity of faith, and strictness of practice, or rather a greater than is to be found in any protestant church now in the world . . .

Dr. Witherspoon concludes with this powerful statement, as appropos now as then.

Upon the whole, I beseech you to make a wise improvement of the present threatening aspect of public affairs, and to remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, and to yourselves, is the same. True religion is nothing else but an inward temper and outward conduct suited to your state and circumstances in providence at any time. And as peace with God and conformity to him, adds to the sweetness of created comforts while we possess them, so in time of difficulty and trial, it is in the man of piety and inward principle that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier. God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.

Less than two months after these remarks, Dr. Witherspoon affixed his name to our Declaration of Independence, which concludes in these words:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of *Divine Providence*, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour.



WESTWARD MOVEMENT

The Providential interpretation of history and the westward movement of Christianity cannot be separated if one would have the Christian history of America. There is a definite relation between Christianity and America, and in a full understanding of the Pilgrim story, we have a glimmer of what might be God's purpose in settling America in the manner in which He did.

One neglected facet of the Pilgrims' importance to American Christianity is that they united America with first century Christianity, not theologically, but in the matter of independent church government, which becomes the basis for the freedom of individuals in affairs civil.

In broad strokes, the Christian era has seen first century churches as independent churches; by the third century through compromises with world philosophers and the belief that growth needs external centralized organizations, the Christians allow the congregational form of church government to change to the episcopal form. It then takes over a thousand years to reinstate the independent church; the seed being formed in England, transplanted to Holland, and finally to the good soil of New England which had been reserved for it by God. This is not to say that all Christian churches in America have to be independent, but to say that until the feasibility of a free and independent church, hence the free and independent individual was achieved by the Pilgrims, there was no basis for working out the Christian form of civil government. This is the only form which protects the individual believer, the independent church and the individual citizen, be he Christian or otherwise.

Philip Schaff describes what I am saying:

What is the distinctive character of American Christianity in its organized social aspect and its relation to the national life, as compared with the Christianity of Europe? It is a free church in a free state, or a self-supporting and self-governing Christianity in independent but friendly relation to the civil government. This relationship of church and state marks an epoch. It is a new chapter in the history of Christianity, and the most important one which America has so far contributed.

And this began with the Pilgrims.

In a way, the Pilgrims have an Alpha and Omega aspect; they mark the end of the centuries-old divine right of kings theory of ecclesiastical and civil government with its stifling effects upon the individual, and they mark the beginning of individual Christian liberty and Christian self-government, protected by Christian civil law with its resultant individual freedom and individual productivity of God-given talents such as the world had ever seen before.

E. L. Magoon, in a little book published in 1856 entitled *Westward Empire*, wrote:

By a natural movement, in not one of its great elements has civilization gone eastward an inch since authentic history began . . . Berkeley has suggested a grand outline in his significant stanza.



(Please turn to page 6a in *The Christian History of the Constitution of the United States of America, Volume I: Christian Self-Government*, for the chart which sets forth in graphic form the theme of these remarks. The stanza referred to by Mr. Magoon is found in the lower right hand corner, as follows:)

Westward the course of empire takes its way,
The four first acts already past;
A fifth shall close the drama with the day,
Time's noblest offspring is the last.

Mr. Magoon goes on to say:

The travels of men, and the trade-currents of God, move spontaneously and perpetually toward the West . . . It is not man but God who has thrown these clear lines of demarcation over the entire mass of humanity, as innumerable dates, names, and events will show . . . Veritable history is but an exponent of Providence, a vivid commentary on the one great purpose of the divine mind in the work of redemption, and should be written as it is realized. Providence is making the tour of the world, and every new phase of civilization is an additional proof of a divinely identical plan.

DR. ABRAHAM KUYPER

I close with this quotation from Dr. Abraham Kuyper, Former Prime Minister of The Netherlands, in his lectures at Princeton University in 1898:

There is but one worldstream, broad and fresh, which from the beginning bore the promise of the future. This stream had its rise in the Middle Asia and the Levant, and has steadily continued its course from East to West. From Western Europe it has passed on to your Eastern States, and from thence to California. At present that stream is at a standstill. Its Western course through China and Japan is impeded . . . by Modernism.

I wonder if this has anything to do with why the providential concept of American history is not taught, and why the average American Christian does not see any connection between Christianity and America?