

God's Providence in Missions

The Canons of Dort are a clear and practical exposition of what has come to known as *The Five Points of Calvinism* although not specifically arranged in that way or order. There are clear statements about God's sovereignty in salvation, but the sovereignty of God embraces all of life, what we call 'Providence'. This is one of the most practical doctrines, and distinguishes the lifestyle of those who believe it from others who at best neglect it. One of the first books I recommend to new converts is John Flavel's *The Mystery of Providence*.

In October 2018 Trinity Baptist Church Nairobi commemorated its 40th. anniversary. I was privileged to speak on that occasion in which I reflected on so many providences of God during those 40 years and even in preparation for them. Both before and since 1978 many unplanned things took place without which the church would not have developed as it has done.

The doctrine of the Providence of God is such an important one, especially to those of us who call ourselves Reformed, i.e. heirs of the Protestant Reformation. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapter 5, section 1 defines it.

God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.

It is a doctrine that can only consistently be held by those who believe that God is absolutely sovereign in creation, providence and redemption. It must fundamentally influence a Biblical view of missionary work.

Missions in the New Testament

Getting out of Jerusalem

Jesus gave His apostles clear instructions in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). There is no evidence that they had planning seminars as to how to fulfil it. How could they? From day one there were 3000 souls to care for. It seems only a short time and persecution was their lot (Acts 4). They met in homes with no central place of their own to gather in. No effort to go outside Jerusalem is recorded. It seems that only when, at the time of Stephen's martyrdom, "there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1), did they move. It was as if they were forced to move. All Christians except the apostles scattered and for the first time we read about Judea and Samaria (8:2, see 1:8). But they did know what to do; they preached the gospel! It was not so much planning but God's providence in bringing persecution that started the wheels of mission in motion to the ends of the earth. Some of those so scattered reached as far as Antioch in Syria (11:19). Exactly who they were and why they travelled in this direction we are not told. But the stage was now set in God's providence for the Gentile mission to be spearheaded by Saul.

The First Missionary Journey

It was at Antioch that the gospel was first preached to non-Jews, Greeks (or Hellenists), and there was great success (11:20). Then we read that the church leaders (prophets and teachers) in Antioch were “worshipping the Lord and fasting” (13:2). Clearly they had something about which they needed help from the Lord. We can only guess what it was as we are not specifically told. But because the Lord’s answer was to choose Barnabas and Saul and send them out “for the work to which I have called them” (v. 3), it seems reasonable that they were praying about the Gentile mission. We assume their hearts had been thrilled at the reception of the gospel by the Greeks and they wanted to know from the Lord how that gospel could be taken yet further. The only thing that is recorded is earnest prayer and God’s decision. Their two long-standing leaders were to be sent off, Barnabas and Saul. At this early stage we are not even told the specific nature of the work to which they had been called! It seems they naturally went first to Cyprus, probably because this is where Barnabas came from (4:36). Then they went north to the mainland, the nearest land mass away from Antioch, in modern day Turkey. In city after city persecution was experienced so they had to flee, in Antioch (13:50), in Iconium (14:5-6), in Lystra (14:19-20). Why did they turn around and go back after having ministered in Derbe? Because they had left hurriedly they wanted to strengthen the disciples and establish church order (14:22-23). They must have felt it was time to go back to Antioch and report back and report “how God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:28). The Great Commission was being fulfilled.

The Second Missionary Journey

The 2nd. missionary journey arose out of a natural desire to see how the churches established on the 1st. were getting on (15:36), and to deliver the decisions that were reached in Jerusalem. They first went through Syria to Cilicia (15:41), in which Paul’s home town of Tarsus was situated (see 9:30). Then as they tried to go forward the Holy Spirit made it very clear where they were *not* to go (16:6-7). They were ‘forced’ to wind up in Troas for in His providence God had somewhere specific for them to go to – Macedonia. This was made clear to Paul in a vision (v. 9). What they were to do was now clear, whether or not they had thought of it before.

From these details recorded in Acts we can discern the following **principles for Missions**:

1. God’s will for Missions is absolutely clear in the Great Commission, variously revealed in each of the Gospels, and Acts. This is the church’s responsibility until the end of the age. It is not a matter of resources, personnel or even perceived opportunity. It is a work to which we must be fully committed.
2. Prayer must be earnestly offered for the fulfilment of this Commission. Specific needs are brought to our attention in God’s providence, through personal contact, local church, internet, etc. There are specific examples of prayer in Acts 4:23ff. where they pray to continue to speak the word with all boldness; and Acts 13:2 where the leaders of the Antioch local church worshipped with fasting.
3. God’s providence in bringing opportunities (persecution, vision), may be totally unexpected. Open doors are generally to be pursued (1 Corinthians 16:9, Colossians 4:3, Revelation 3:8), although not always if there are other priorities (2 Corinthians 2:12). Surely where God purposes to bless is where He will open a door for the messenger of the gospel.

4. Grabbing opportunities by faith, not on basis of planning or available resources. This is not to deny the need for planning, but rather to bring to the forefront the providence of God. For example, a person representing a specific group in your area walks in to the service 'out of the blue' as it were. It is to be pursued with prayer and planning.
5. Go where you already have knowledge and contacts – Paul to his home area of Cilicia, Barnabas to his home on Cyprus, revisiting previously established churches. God will show the way forward when we are actively pursuing the mission, e.g. Macedonia only when they were already moving.
6. One plan we must always have is that we will pray constantly, and preach the gospel wherever there is an opportunity.

My experience of God's providences

I went to Kenya in 1968 directly from College to teach in a secondary school. In 1975 I returned with my wife and baby to help in the ministry of the Bible Fellowship Church in Thika. In 1978 we started Trinity Baptist Church Nairobi. Almost all turning points can be seen as a result of specific providences.

(1) Going to Kenya as a Pastor/Missionary

1. How was it that I wanted to be a preacher of the gospel? When I went to College (Aberystwyth) my room-mate was a clear Christian, through which I was converted. How gracious was the Lord to put me with Brian when humanly speaking it could have been with any number of non-Christians. I had been religious as a teenager but had never clearly been taught the gospel in the Methodist Church. Up to that time I would have been incredulous if you had suggested that I would spend my life as a public speaker. I was far too shy and retiring. Yet I obviously had a strength of character that thrust me into leadership roles. So it happened that I found my preaching in the Methodist Church and leading Bible studies. And some people were converted!

2. How was it that I went to Kenya in 1968 to teach? In our Hall of Residence there were many from Africa and, for reasons I cannot remember, I often sat with them at meal times. I joined a Christian Union Prayer Group for Africa. How could one keep on praying for people and needs there and not say to the Lord, 'I am willing to go if it is your will'? I remember one Saturday evening after the meeting flicking through books on the missionary bookstall (are there such things today?) and on two occasions the word *Sudan* jumped up from the pages. It was largely unreached with the gospel but was closed to missionaries in late 1965. But I continued my interest in Africa. I sought advice about the way forward. Apply to be a teacher in newly independent Kenya and see how you get on there was what I was told. I found it to be good advice and was sent to a rural Protestant sponsored school, and had great ministry opportunities far and wide.

3. How was it that we first went to Thika to minister? A few years before I even became a Christian (1964) it seems the Lord was preparing the way. And probably before Geoffrey Thomas knew anything much about Kenya in 1961 at Westminster Theological Seminary his

room-mate just happened to be a Kenyan! It was this contact that enabled us to go to serve the Lord in church ministry in Kenya for the first time in 1975.

(2) The Planting of Trinity Baptist Church Nairobi

4. The relocation to Nairobi. While in Thika I had often said that we need to plant a church in Nairobi, the capital city, from where we can spread the Biblical truth throughout the country. Sadly, difficulties arose in 1977 and I was summarily dismissed, and it looked like it was all over. But Geoffrey Thomas knew the then Pastor of Nairobi Baptist Church and that church agreed for us to work under them in a newly-developing part of Nairobi, which work was started in early 1978 with contacts both from teaching days and from the Thika ministry.

5. The registration of the Church. All Churches in Kenya must be registered with the Government and this is not automatic. So when by mutual agreement we sought for such independence the application for registration was refused (1979). This was a surprise as the Baptist Church was well-known and I believe the Attorney-General used to attend there. So on appeal, we were directed to discuss things with the National Council of Christian Churches. We have no idea if this was a common way for the Government to deal with appeals. However, if it recommended us all would be well. As is so often the way in Kenya, if you know someone who knows someone you can seek to get what you ought to get. A good friend of mine 'just happened' to be good friends with the Deputy General-Secretary, and both fine Christians. The rest is history and the church was registered in 1981.

6. The obtaining of a plot and a permanent building. It has never been our policy to campaign for money. We had a church that sent us to work in Kenya, Alfred Place Baptist in Aberystwyth. It was enough for them to know the situation. But getting a suitable piece of land in the part of Nairobi where we lived (Eastlands) was difficult. The Government provided 'church plots' for free where there were new developments, but although we were the first church in the area, we did not get the one set aside. The Jewish developer of the area had constant visits from us and proved very positive. They actually helped us care for a street boy who hung around the petrol station nearby. Eventually they offered us a good-sized plot which had been earmarked for flats on the plan, and at a reasonable price. It was a lot of money in those days. As a small group we did what we could to raise money but it was only a tiny fraction. The Lord used our friends and churches, many with whom we had never had any previous contact, to raise all that was needed, so that in 1989 the auditorium was officially opened.

(3) Some special ministries begun

7. Training of Pastors. In December 1980 I was invited to Kisumu to speak at the gathering of delegates from all over East Africa for the Central Council of the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC). Someone must have known me, although I cannot remember who it was. The Bishop of the Church of Christ in Africa (CCA), an African Independent Church, talked with me about the young men he sends abroad to train for the ministry but who never come back to work in the church. I replied that I will help him by setting up a study course and come for a few days each month so that such students do not go abroad. So what is now known as the Trinity Pastors College began. It was extended to contacts in Nairobi and about 150 men have gone through it over the decades. Although it was

something that I knew would have to be done, the Lord chose that it start in this way and very early on.

8. Church planting outside Nairobi. Paul became part of the church when we were small and meeting in our house. While he was on leave from work in 1981 I decided to visit him at his home very far away in Thimlich, the south-west corner of Kenya. Little did I suspect that a group of leaders there would request the planting of a church in their area. We later sent Paul back home to lead the church plant and this was the first church planting effort we made. But Paul was untrained and no one in the area had Biblical knowledge despite there being so many churches. How could we bring the truth here? Training Paul was one way. But we decided to start the Grace & Truth publication, just a two-sided foolscap in the local language, Dholuo. I had to compose it in English first for it to be translated. Hence the English magazine Grace & Truth saw the light of day and the most recent no. 130 had 60 pages. It became all the more necessary as people came into our church in Nairobi then wanted a similar church back in their home area. Many used articles in the magazine for preaching.

9. Pokot North. This is an area in north-west Kenya that began to receive Christianity in the 1970s. The work was founded by some of the sons of George Kendagor. When the church with which they were working joined the National Council of Christian Churches they left to form their independent church in opposition to ecumenism (1980). But they could not get registered with the government and so approached TBC Nairobi to work under us (1990) as they were being threatened with action against them. Why us? Well, one of the sons had visited the U.K. and one of the churches known to us, and so the connection was made. This was all in God's providence. There are now 13 established churches, more than 300 baptized believers, primary and secondary schools that are sponsored, with 6 ordained leaders, 3 of whom are 'missionaries'.

10. Somali. A civil war erupted in Somalia in 1991 and many Somalis began to relocate to Kenya. There are about 3 million indigenous Somalis. As some came to live around us a few of us began to pray for a witness to them, as there are no public Christian churches in Somalia. Then suddenly it happened! When I responded to the knock on the church office door there was Adan. 'Please help me to teach my people English as so many of them are going to America without a knowledge of the language.' I would normally have employed delaying tactics before agreeing to such a request, but I immediately saw the hand of the Lord in this and provided what he needed. He soon professed Christ and was arrested at the instigation of his community on false charges and put in police custody. As with Joseph, they meant it for evil, but God was working for good. The local Imam announced at Friday prayers that a certain sum of money needs to be raised (a bribe) so that the police will proceed to prosecute this our brother who has rejected the faith. Two named Abdi heard this, were not happy that their religious leader could so publicly promote bribery, and went to visit Adan in the police cell. He directed them towards us and after a while they became Christians. Thus began a ministry amongst Somali refugees who are from a totally Islamic country. A few have professed faith. Abdi now broadcasts the gospel to his people over a very wide area and is very much a leader of Somali Christians worldwide, of whom there are still very few. But the story of God's providence does not end here.

11. Rendille. Before he professed Christ one of the Abdis was a heavy drinker, and his 'drinking partner' was Osman, the self-styled leader of the Rendille community in a slum area called Kwa Njenga. The Rendille are pastoralists in north-central Kenya and 20 years

ago 90% of them were unreached with the gospel. I had travelled around the outskirts of their land in 1970 when I was a teacher with a Land Rover. I was pursuing my interest in unreached peoples. Now in God's providence they were coming to me, not me to them. Many Rendille men come to towns to work for a while as watchmen. Osman told his kinsmen to come to TBC where they will get all kinds of help – this is how so many view the churches. Many came and easily made professions of faith in the late 1990s. We were not at all convinced by their genuineness, until some started saying, under conviction of sin, that we know now we are not Christians. A number were genuinely converted and in the mid-2000s we sent them back to start a church in the main town of Korr.

12. South Sudan. A most amazing providence has been in relation to South Sudan, the place in which I was so interested soon after I became a Christian. This is the story as I have been told it. This group of Christians in the Malakal area, led by their Moderator David decide they want to become Baptists, rejecting their Presbyterian background. They call themselves The Trinity Baptist Church of South Sudan and get formally recognized. What is the next thing to be done? Find help from a church outside, so they look for a Trinity Baptist Church in the early 2000s. James is sent all the way to find this TBC in Nairobi. 20 years ago, with war still raging between north and south this was no simple journey. James did find us and did some training in Nairobi, although his English was very poor. Eventually I made two visits to the South Sudan I had only dreamed of decades before, in 2010 and 2012. Then war intervened again and is only now subsiding. As I write this I have been communicating with James on Facebook. He is now pastoring a church in Juba. A further providence has occurred. A Sudanese family have been attending TBC Nairobi in the last year. The man works for the South Sudanese government, had an extended leave, and is now back in Juba. This should promote the contact with South Sudan.

Practical conclusions

1. Local churches must commit themselves to fulfilling the Great Commission, to “go and make disciples of all nations”. These were our Lord's final words before leaving the apostles. This was the work He gave them, and through them the church, until the end of the age. The apostles are the foundation of the church, so this is corporate and not individualistic because we are not apostles. It is not that one individual here, and one there, is ‘called’ to fulfil the Great Commission. The local church is to fulfil it by its ministry of the word and sending out messengers. The Biblical example is Acts 13:1-3. Of course, the Great Commission is not only for far away but also for near. It was Jerusalem as well as the ends of the earth, everywhere. But equally the emphasis must not only be on the near but to the ends of the earth.

2. The local church must pray for the fulfilment of the Great Commission. Our prayers tend to be very parochial. Yet we are commanded to pray, “Your kingdom come”. Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38). It appears that they became the answer to their own prayers as they are immediately sent out (10:1). Paul urged the Thessalonians to “pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you,…” (2 Thessalonians 3:1). Meaningful prayer is not easy without information, detailed and constant information. Gone are the days when Carey had to scour for information from journals like that of Captain Cook; we

have a surfeit that is just a click away. How much of our praying as a local church is for the discipling of the nations, including our own?

3. Having faithfully explained the word and prayed accordingly, the local church must expect the Lord to give specific direction through providences. We do not cast lots for the continent, country and then specific area/people. We do not just do a statistical analysis and make decisions on that basis as to where our interests will focus. As we faithfully serve the Lord through the local church where we are we can expect things like the following to happen:

- ★ You will be challenged by reading an article like this one!
- ★ You will read about another part of the world in a magazine or on social media. It will challenge you because you know your responsibility in the Great Commission (see 4).
- ★ Someone you do not know may seek to befriend you on Facebook.
- ★ A visitor walks into your service, especially one from a community that is very hard to reach where they come from. It could be a student, or an immigrant.
- ★ A new church member joins who has a special experience and interest.

If God is sovereign in His providence none of these things (and many others) are totally insignificant. They may all present opportunities for the spread of the gospel and in prayerful expectation you must 'put your foot in the door' to keep the opportunity open. However, if you are not willing to have your schedule disrupted, or experience some discomfort by seeking to draw near to the sort of people you are not used to, then the opportunity might well be squandered.

4. The local church will encourage involvement according to the various gifts the Lord has given to its members. Ultimately messengers of the gospel must go to the ends of the earth. They will need prayerful and financial support. Carey famously said to those back home in England, 'I will go down the dark well if you will hold the rope'. There is something everyone can do in this great enterprise as part of the church.

A final challenge. I have heard that I should not expect Christians to go to Kenya to serve the Lord, because they are too comfortable here in the West. Can it really be that a few earthly comforts are more important than fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord who left the glory of heaven to suffer on the cross for our sins? Specifically I have heard that it has been said no Westerner should live in a place like Rendille because of the inclement conditions. Then why did waves of missionaries go to West Africa in the 19th. century to perish in the 'white man's grave'?