

Problems of Providence: The African American Doctrine of Providence

Our greatest assets can be our greatest liabilities. Beauty can devolve into narcissism. Intelligence and charm easily morph into snobbery. The impregnable city walls fall by lassitude. Consider gratitude. Jesus esteems thankfulness-- "Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten [lepers] cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'"¹ We are to give thanks in *all* circumstances². Yet even thankfulness has its perils.

As I visit Black churches, and as I've studied the distinctive "core" values of general Black theology, at the foundation is the theology of Providence. You will visit White churches in vain to find the morning intercessor thanking God for waking him up (in his right mind) that morning (assuming he is fully awake), for example. It is nearly ubiquitous—including common variations such as, "We just stopped by this morning to say Thank ya!!"—in the Black church. During slavery every little blessing was appreciated, including the ones most Whites now overlook. Being thankful is a virtue.

The problem is that unless our theology moves from self to others, we will be guilty of a selfish Christianity, and a parody of the plans God has for us to serve HIM in the Kingdom. We can use praise to keep God at arms length, while treating Him as, in reality, our servant, as we load on the new requests, even expecting Him, as EV Hill once noted, to visit the jails and the nursing homes and, I'd add, the mission fields of the housing projects and the foreign field, instead going ourself. A theology of Providence can sidestep the call to godliness and service. This may be upwardly mobile Christianity, but not biblical Christianity. I sometimes hear zero of the horizontal responsibilities of the Christian--only talk of blessing, wholeness, deliverance, prosperity and freedom. Nothing wrong with being whole, just in being wholly absorbed in personal "wholeness," which in fact is incomplete.

Prosperity theology plays well to Black churches already permeated with a profound sense of receiving God's goodness. Prosperity theology teaches (1 that God wants all His children to be prosperous (2 exactly what to say and believe which, it appears, *must* move God to answer our prayers. Some even try to make us believe that Jesus was wealthy, so that in our emulation of the Master, we're justified to run for Mammon. This heresy certainly dupes Whites and others.

I heard a Black preacher recently who said that when we say "Jehovah Jireh," this puts "pressure on God" to be our Provider. By invoking this name of God, can we exercise a power over this God, putting a "move" on Him, which induces His blessing upon us? This ignores Rom 11:36, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" Is God so paranoid of His reputation and character that He jumps to justify Himself? What amazes me is that God doesn't jump to

preserve His glory. He chose to use Cyrus, for example, despite Cyrus not acknowledging Him³. Our God is too small when we think we can put pressure on the One who builds galaxies. God does *whatever* He pleases⁴. The shaman by spell or mantra tries to manipulate the spirit world. In no way can we manipulate God. My wife noted that prosperity theology contains the truth that God ultimately wishes to prosper all His followers, if nowhere else—in heaven. Half-truths are harder to fight than outright lies, as Jesus' temptation illustrates.

Can we be too thankful? Probably not. We are to be “overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:7). Can we focus upon being blessed to the neglect of biblical Christian responsibilities and to the detriment of His Kingdom? Yes. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quoted from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, “Whoever insists upon security and comfort as primary conditions of life cannot have faith.” Following Christ is first about Him and His work.

¹Luke 17:17-18, NIV ²1 Thess. 5:18 ³Is. 45:5 ⁴Ps. 115:3; Ps. 135:6; Dan. 4:35

Jim Sutherland, Ph.D.