

Prayer and Providence

Colleagues,

Every now and then during the academic semester here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center we have no formal classes for a given week, but do a “reading week.” Last month we read and discussed the book listed below. Review addict that I am, I put my input down on paper. Since this was written, one of you asked why I’m so negative so often in Thursday Theology postings. Simplest answer probably is that I’m getting more and more curmudgeonly as I get older. Other folks get more mellow. It’s yin and yang. Could also be that alternate gospels abound as pluralism presses in upon us, and pointing that out is not useless work.

Seems that something similar was already the case back in the New Testament era—right from the word go. Most every one of the 27 NT texts—the epistles for sure and even the gospels when read closely—are not only proclaiming the crucified/risen Messiah as Good News but also polemicizing against “other” gospels. Some of them are explicitly named: the Galatian legalist gospel, the Corinthian gnostic one, the anti-incarnationalists who vex St. John. Imagine! That many heresies in the teensy-weensy body of Christ within just the first few decades (= the life span of most all you readers!) of church history! Pluralism of gospels within the church, not just pluralist ideologies on the outside, was at least as bad then as it may be now. So what else is new?

My review below doesn’t intend to be that adversarial. [Surprise?] The topic is Christian prayer. My thesis is: prayer grounded on providence is dicey business, but prayer grounded on promise is better. If interested, read on. If you do want something more feisty, come back for next week’s look at the “creation spirituality” of Matthew Fox and company.

Terrance Tiessen: PROVIDENCE AND PRAYER: HOW DOES GOD WORK IN THE WORLD?

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 2000. 432 pages. Paper.

Terrence Tiessen is a Canadian Mennonite, professor of theology and ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Otterburne, Manitoba. His study of Providence and Prayer is a monumental study, but

FIRST THE MONUMENTAL STUDY. . .

- 1. He formulates 10 (yes ten!) different models in the history of Christian theology (and then adds his own #11) for relating the two key terms: providence and prayer. Providence (literally pro-videre, looking out for) is the what and how God works in the world, continually "looking out for" the world he's created. Prayer is believers speaking to God about his workings in the world, and in specific instances petitioning God for special attention (special favors?) to some difficult situation they confront. The 10 models he proposes are labelled as follows: Semi-deist, Process, Openness, Church Dominion, Redemptive Intervention, Molinist, Thomist, Barthian, Calvinist, Fatalist.*
- 2. Tiessen's format for presenting each model is eminently readable. He summarizes each model in a paragraph or two at the outset of the chapter on that model. Then comes an*

exhaustively researched middle section: his presentation of the model in detail—often stunning in the breadth of its coverage and the clarity of his interpretation. To conclude each chapter he composes a prayer grounded in this model's point of view. To make that prayer "real life" he conjures a Christian prayer group each of whose members offers a prayer in keeping with one of the models. The real life issue each pray-er addresses is the crunch situation of a missionary group captured by guerrillas in a politically conflicted nation and held for ransom.

3. In the book's final 70 pages Tiessen presents his own proposal, "A Middle Knowledge Calvinist Model of Providence," distinct from the ten classical ones he has chronicled, though "close" to Calvin as his label indicates. Here too he follows the same format: summary of the model, the model itself in detail and its rationale, and the concluding prayer for the endangered missionaries based on such a model.

The presentation is brilliant, I'd say, but . . .

AND NOW THE "BUT . . .

1. The complementary term to Christian prayer is God's PROMISE, not God's PROVIDENCE. God's fulfilled promise in Christ, and the future promise-consequences of faith in that promise constitute the grounds for Christian prayer. That is the meaning of the N.T. term "prayer in Jesus' name." Christian pray-ers come to God with a marking: we are "in Jesus' name," the signal of who owns us, to whom we belong when we address God in prayer.
2. Hence the term "Our Father" in Christian prayer, a title for God signalling endearment and linked to God's promise in his Son to us. Not so Jewish prayer which is regularly addressed to the "ruler of the universe," a title

signalling providence, not God's promise. It is perhaps no accident that there is no listing for "promise" in Tiessen's index. Nor is there a listing for "Gospel," nor for "faith," faith in that promissory Gospel. That signals a major lacuna, I'd say.

3. Even though all the sample prayers (with one exception, the "fatalist" model, which sounds to me like Islam) at the end of each chapter conclude with the words "in Jesus' name," Jesus plays no role in the text of the prayer. More specifically, the saving work of that crucified and risen Messiah does not surface to shape the prayer at all. Which is finally not surprising since the author does not reckon with the person and work of Christ as he describes each model to us. [Here too one possible exception, the "Barthian" model.] So prayers fashioned on Christ-less notions of providence come out Christ-less too.
4. Tiessen wants to be doing Christian theology, I'm sure. So why doesn't Christ get some attention? It's a conundrum. Possibly he thinks that since he's regularly using Biblical material, that is sufficient warrant to render his study Christian. But that's not warrant enough to make anything Christian. Especially Christian prayer which is substantively Gospel-grounded, not just warranted by Bible passages.
5. All of the models—some more and some less—make use of the Bible, but we get no help from Tiessen for evaluating which uses of the Bible are better than others. He proposes no criterion, no yardstick, for adjudicating how the Bible is being used. Also in his own model #11.
6. Not that there isn't a principle of adjudication at work. It is the principle of rationality. If you articulate your doctrine of providence in this particular way, then that has such-and-so consequences, rational consequences,

for the character of prayer. I thought of the old “slide-rule” that mathematicians used to use. If you move the function of providence to this point on the slide rule, then the prayer function comes to this corollary point to have a balanced equation. When you nuance one of them by some “x” factor, you get a corollary “y” factor shift in your prayer component. It all makes rational sense.

7. But that is hardly good theology, is it? Sounds rather skimpy as Good News, good news on which believers might stake their lives. As masterful as Tiessen’s work is, I don’t think it’s good enough. Not close enough to the Good News itself. Reason still rules, and Gospel-promise doesn’t even get into the index. The 16th century Reformation went to the ramparts to unseat reason as queen in theology and to put the Biblical gospel in its place. Wouldn’t a Mennonite do that too?
8. Even though Luther was less than kind to the Mennonites of his day, Tiessen casts a wide net, so why not a chapter on Luther? And I don’t say this merely by virtue of my churchly heritage. The big argument of the Reformation era about providence and human will was Luther’s wrestling match with Erasmus and their respective major works—Bondage of the Will and Freedom of the Will. Tiessen ignores it. Had he looked at it, he might have seen that Luther is attacking Erasmus’ slide-rule theology with all its reasonableness, and countering it with a Biblical theology grounded in God’s promise. Even if Luther is not “nice guy” for Mennonites, why move toward Erasmus?
9. Of course, there is more in Luther’s model of “how does God work in the world?” than just God’s promise. ‘Fact is, God’s promise is the alternative to “how God (normally) works in the world.” The antipode to God’s promise in the Bible is God’s law with its fair-and-

square critique of sinners. God regularly “works in the world” counting trespasses, as St. Paul says. How does that connect with providence? Tiessen comes off “soft” on God the critic as he articulates God’s work in the world. Basically his God is always benign, working out his good purposes for all of us and for the whole creation. Everything God does is finally gracious. And that may be a clue to his bypassing explicit Christology/soteriology in this book. For if God is by definition gracious, Jesus needs only to show us that, but not actually DO anything to make it true for sinners.

10. When talking about God in the Bible, said Luther, we must distinguish between “God hidden” (*deus absconditus*) and “God revealed” (*deus revelatus*) in Christ . Talking about providence involves us with *deus absconditus* [“Truly, you are a God who hides himself.” Is. 45:15 and many other places in Isaiah], God-apart-from-Christ. God apart from Christ is impenetrable for humans, “unsearchable his judgments, inscrutable his ways.” (Romans 11:33). Working with the hidden God is a lost cause. Even worse, if we were to break through to this “God working in the world” apart from Christ, it would be deadly. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 13:31) Can any discussion of providence cope with those caveats? And how do you pray to such a deity at all?
11. There is in Tiessen’s book no wrath, curse, death (all of them coming from God) which must be engaged and endured and then trumped by a crucified Messiah before you can get to a God who is Good News for sinners. In 2 Cor 5 (*et passim*) Paul claims that Jesus changed God’s way of dealing with sinners. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting trespasses—as God otherwise regularly does—but making Christ to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.”

That transaction is the cornerstone of Christian prayer. Tiessen never uses it to make his own case.

- 12. In the introduction the author chides his classroom students for separating their soteriology from their notion of prayer and providence. Seems to me that Tiessen comes close to doing the same, giving us 360 pages on p & p without any serious use of Biblical soteriology. Concluding a prayer with the words “in Jesus’ name”—as he does with all but one of the prayers he composes for the models he presents – doesn’t make it a Christian prayer. Faith in the Gospel, God’s promise in Christ, makes a prayer Christian.*
- 13. Jesus thought so too. As pious Jews his disciples had a long tradition of (providence-based?) prayer, but they had never, he said, “asked the Father in my name” for anything. Jesus said that their connection to him made all the difference—both for God’s fatherly providence and for their confidence in praying. My question to Tiessen: Does it?*