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A table of contents for *Grace Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-journal.php

THE ACTS OF GOD

WILLIAM R. FOSTER
Professor of Theology
London (Ontario) College of Bible and Missions

One of the problems in contemporary theology is the question of theological meaning. The understanding of the meaning of theological terminology does not follow directly from the use of the terminology. In much of the current theological literature the special terms of theology are used in other than their literal and historical sense. In the literal and historical sense the term as used provides a univocal meaning, i.e. a meaning which is certain and unmistakable. The contemporary "Biblical Theology" movement has maintained the theological terms, but uses them in an analogical sense, i.e. the term has a symbolical sense which conveys meaning by resemblance or comparison. Two basic criticisms may be directed against this new tendency. In the first place, the use of historical terms in an analogical sense is deceptive because the theological assertion may have an appearance of orthodoxy without being really orthodox. In the second place, the adoption of analogical usages of language is liable to produce ambiguous, unintelligible, and equivocal assertions. We will illustrate the seriousness of this theological problem in relation to one of the most important theological concepts in Biblical revelation.

The Scriptures portray the truth that God is One who acts in the affairs of men, and specially in the history of His chosen people Israel, and in the Church of Jesus Christ. The specific question to be answered is simply, "What do we mean by the acts of God?" By the use of the word "act" or "activity" we normally mean that some work, deed, or event takes place in some location and at some time. This definition would constitute what might be called a literal sense of the term, and the univocal meaning of the term may be demonstrated by a comparative investigation of its meaning in dictionaries. In applying this literal sense to the Biblical text the evangelical theologian would understand that God acted in time and space so that the results of His activity were observable, or at least, potentially observable. The acting and speaking of God are, therefore, to be conceived as falling into an historical context.

Liberalism regarded this orthodox representation of God's activity as a primitive pre-scientific form of religion which should be modernized. The concept of the world and history adopted by Liberals was that of a locked causal continuum of space-time experience. In such a view there was no place for outside intervention, but only for the operation of natural law and inter-relating natural causes. However, Liberalism did not repudiate the concept of the activity of God, but redefined it to mean "the continual, creative, immanent activity of God, an activity which worked through the natural order."¹ The activity of God was, in this formulation, only the whole total of the world's natural processes, and the immanent God of Liberal-

ism had no transcendent control over natural law or historical process. Nevertheless, the language used to describe the activity of God was univocal, even though it did not agree with the Biblical revelation.

Neo-orthodoxy reacted against the liberal reduction of God's activity to an immanent operation within the space-time continuum. This new trend in contemporary theology places an emphasis upon the transcendence of God, i. e., God is designated as the wholly-Other. God is, therefore, removed from the world, its law, and processes. Along with this concept of God's transcendence the scientific view of the world is maintained in agreement with the liberal position. However, this attempt to harmonize divine transcendence and the modern scientific world view produces some basic problems in relation to the activity of God. In continuing to stress the activity of God the "Biblical Theology" movement is faced with the question as to the nature of God's activity--"What actually happened in the events of Biblical history?" In relation to the Exodus, Wright states that "outwardly the event was indistinguishable from other events."² The event is affirmed to have had a natural explanation on the objective side of the event because the modern scientific theologian must abide within the framework of scientific explanations. However, in such an explanation the question intrudes itself--"How then did God act?" The response to this implied question involves the analogical usage of language, i. e. "God acts" means something other than the literal sense of the term, and the Biblical portrayal of the event would demand. What the concept does mean "is extremely elusive to discover,"³ and no proper interpretation is given other than the fact that the act cannot be a divine intervention or a miraculous event. "In other words, they continue to use the Biblical and orthodox theological language of divine activity and speech, but they have dispensed with the wonders and voices that gave univocal meaning, and thus content, to the theological words 'God acts' and 'God speaks.'"⁴

These options are not the only ones which are available to explain the nature of the acts of God, or to show the relationship of a transcendent God to the natural operations of the world. The evangelical believer does not need to adopt a prescientific world view in order to maintain the Biblical concept of divine activity and miracle. The evangelical answer is often misrepresented as a denial of the reign of causal law in the phenomenal realm of space and time. However, there is no dichotomy between the Biblical and the scientific if the nature of both categories is understood, and if the developing state of theological and scientific knowledge is properly affirmed. An attempt will therefore be made to express a Christian interpretation of the acts of God in five areas in which Biblical revelation affirms the fact of divine activity--creation, preservation, history, miracle, and prayer.

CREATION

The first of the mighty acts of God, the creation, makes all others possible and understandable. The Scriptures begin with the assertion of the activity of God--"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). In the literal understanding of the text God is to be understood as an eternal Being who brought all things into existence which constitute what we know as the universe and its inhabitants. God is conceived to have an originative relationship to this universe so that its laws and processes are specifically ascribed to the creative

wisdom and will of God. The Christian does not, therefore, fear the study of nature for to him that which is discerned and discovered can be nothing less than the natural processes which God brought into existence. Conflict arises in the mind of man when he allows his systems of knowledge to be absolutized into unchangeable dogma. The perception of harmony in science and Scripture is a developing pursuit which has the promise of ultimate satisfaction.

Our Christian faith has an explanation of reality which is uniquely different from all other systems. Reality embraces God and His creation in the relation of Creator and created. The world contains within itself no explanation or cause for its own existence. Whatever is investigated in this world must be understood to be contingent, i.e., ultimately dependent upon something else. Nothing within the world as we find it is ultimate, but everything has connections with prior causes. Scientific research attempts to discover the pattern of these contingent causes so as to lay down patterns of action for practical ends. Scientific explanations are subject to modification or rejection in the light of each new observation of relevant data. More and more scientists are coming to realize that it is impossible to discover the real truth of nature. "It is difficult to conceive anything more scientifically bigoted than to postulate that all possible experience conforms to the same type as that with which we are already familiar."⁵ "What twentieth-century science has come to is the view that science will never, can never describe how nature works. Science does not aim at truth; it aims at invention."⁶ This is precisely what the Christian means in affirming that the meaning or truth of nature cannot be discovered within the natural process. God alone as the originative cause embraces the meaning of that which He created, and has expressed the basic foundation of this meaning in the sacred Scriptures (Psa. 19:1-6, Heb. 11:3, Rev. 4:11).

The modern evolutionary hypothesis would not allow room for the activity of God as previously defined, and therefore stands opposed to the Biblical concept of creation. Christians are not opposed to a concept of evolution. There are many legitimate senses in which the concept may be used to designate a process of development which is generally recognized in many areas such as horticulture, animal breeding, and even society itself. In this sense evolution is a term which designates the developing process in realizing the full potential of the original kinds of life created by God. However, the use of evolution as a quasi-answer to the problem of the origin of matter and life is certainly unbiblical, and, according to some competent authorities, unscientific. "Of all the laws of nature, perhaps the most fundamental is concerned with nature's time sense. . . . Events occur in such a way that order disappears, or at best remains unchanged. . . . All the laws of nature which are concerned with how things happen are restatements, in a limited field, of the law of morpholysis."⁷ This law really means that the energy of the universe was wound up at the beginning, and has subsequently become less and less available for useful work--a fact that does not make creation appear to be fantastic or unscientific. The Biblical record establishes the proper guide lines for modern science in its affirmation that God is active in the creation of matter and life, and in the establishment of the basic forms and laws related to matter and life.

PRESERVATION

In the definition of the relationship of God to His creation our Christian faith places along-

side the work of creation the work of preservation. Therefore, Christians affirm that God is in a continuing relationship to the world which He created. Over against this item of our faith is the concept of the world as a self-sustaining and self-continuing mechanism. Naturalism states that the universe continues, and is sustained by inherent natural forces. Deists believe that God imparted to matter certain properties, and placed it under certain invariable laws. Nevertheless, from this point of creation God has no direct or continuing relationship to the universe. Both of these theories are antagonistic to our Christian faith in that they impute the attribute of self-subsistence to the creation.

The acts of God in preservation mean that all created things are utterly dependent upon God for their continuance and sustenance. "For of Him, and through Him, and unto Him, are all things" (Rom. 11:36). Creation as such does not possess the attributes of self-existence or self-perpetuation. No nature, substance, or being can exist apart from God through any inherent power of being. God preserves in existence the entire creation with all its laws, properties, powers, and processes (Col. 1:17, Heb. 1:3, Acts 17:28). "This concept opposes every claimant to absoluteness in this world--gods and idols, and any who would autonomously and sovereignly pretend to a self-existence. The doctrine dethrones all creaturely self-sufficiency, all assumptive independence."⁸ God is the continuous and preserving cause of the continued existence of all things.

The acts of God in preservation mean that God operates upon, in and with the creation in accordance with the original design of creation. Preserving acts of God are never to be considered as contrary to creating acts, and so God does not violate in preservation what He has accomplished in creation. Divine preservation is more than a mere conservation of properties, for preservation is to be regarded as a process which unfolds the full potentials of the original created forms. God acts in preservation in order to enable it to achieve the true purpose of its being, and to satisfy the varied needs of all His created life-forms. The Scriptures illustrate abundantly this dynamic activity of God whereby His creation unfolds its potentiality, and fulfills its place in the divine purpose (Psa. 145:16-17, Job 38, Psa. 104). Men of God saw in this activity of God a convincing demonstration of His invincible majesty (Job 37:5, 15; 36:29; Psa. 65:9, 11).

The acts of God in preservation mean that God has a continuing purpose in relation to the present world. The question concerning the purpose of God's preservation gains point in view of the seriousness of the fall--"Why does God desire to sustain the world in light of the fall of man?" In the Scriptures there is no sustenance in itself for the work of preservation is always bound to the purpose of God in redemption. The curse upon Adam and his environment appeared to involve the destruction of creation, but the gracious protoevangelium promised the perpetuation of life until the coming of the seed (Gen. 3:14-19, 3:15). The threatened judgment in the days of Noah appeared to put the continuation of human life in jeopardy. However, through grace the family of Noah was preserved, and after the deluge, God instituted His everlasting covenant with Noah, his seed, and every living creature upon the earth (Gen. 8:21-22, 9:10-16). Grace continued the created life-forms after the infliction of divine judgment. The acts of God in redemption stand therefore in an inseparable relationship to the grace and mercy of God, and to His purpose of redemption.

The acts of God in preservation mean that the activity of God and His characteristics may be seen in the natural order. Since God acts to preserve His universe, man is confronted by the evidence of His acts and the character of His acting (Psa. 19:1-6, Rom. 1:20-21, Psa. 104:24). This general revelation of God in His actions confronts all men with the evidence of God's existence and activity. The truth of this confrontation man refuses to admit, but in rejecting the revealed truth he demonstrates his own blame and guilt (Rom. 1:20-24, Acts 14:15-17). In the extension of history and natural life can be heard the call of the God who preserves. In addition to these external revelations of God's existence and activity man also is confronted by an internal witness of God's existence and continuing activity (Rom. 1:19 - "manifest in them"; Rom. 2:14-15, 1:32). Men are, therefore, not only confronted with the evidence of an omnipotent God, but also with the presence of a moral God. God rules and directs not only the external development of things, but works in the deepest thoughts and motives of every man.

The acts of God in preservation mean that the universe and natural life are not overcome by the total destructive potential of evil. The preserving activity of God explains the presence of some law and order in the natural universe (Gen. 8:21-22, Psa. 74:17, Jer. 33:20, 25); the presence of some small remnant of natural light through which man retains some knowledge of God (Rom. 1:21-25, Acts 17:28); the presence of some traces of an ability to distinguish between good and evil (Rom. 1:32, 2:14-15). This preserving activity of God does not lessen the guilt and responsibility of man. Nevertheless, in His creating and preserving acts God does manifest His grace in the restraining of the emergence of total evil so that natural life and history do still show some of the excellencies and orders of His original work. The Christian may, therefore, find value in the natural order and natural life. All that possesses value in the universe and natural life arises out of this dynamic activity of God. Our Christian faith does not turn away from the creation and its life-forms. Platonic philosophy advocated an escape from the realm of matter in order to inhabit the realm of pure spirit. The Christian recognizes that the universe bears the marks of corruption, but delights in the universe and natural life as bearing the evidence of God's glorious activity, and looks forward to its total redemption (Rom. 8:20-23).

HISTORY

The twentieth century has witnessed mounting interest in the meaning of history, but with the development of scientific historiography has come the pessimistic conclusion that we cannot know if there is a plan for history, nor even if there is, whether it can be realized. The study of history involves more than a recording of past events for the historian looks for significant human happenings, and the pattern of events that has an enduring meaning. Many different philosophies of history have emerged in the attempt to achieve meaning in the mass of historical data. Voltaire and Condorcet thought that history was the record of man's progress from ignorance and superstition to the clear day of rationality through which he would eventually reach perfection. Karl Marx expounded an economic, materialistic interpretation of history which was to issue in the classless society and communistic utopia. Arnold Toynbee has attempted to discover the patterns of history in the study of civilizations and cultures instead

of national groups. Over against these options the doctrine of providence means that the Christian has an interpretation which makes history coherent and complete.

The sovereign God confers meaning and purpose on history. The course of history is not to be considered as a meaningless and purposeless jumble of unrelated events. The meaning and purpose of history are intimately related to the divine plan and purpose of God. "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."⁹ The Scriptures also declare the fact of divine purpose as the ultimate meaning of history (Acts 17:24-31, Heb. 1:1-3, Eph. 1:3-12).

The sovereign God originates and directs the course of history. God is the author of history because He is the Creator of man, and of the world in which man was to live and to fulfil His divinely assigned purposes. The God of Christianity does not deal with a world that evolved by chance, nor does He assume sovereignty over creatures who came into being by some mysterious process. God is the author of the life of man, of the world, and its creatures. In His execution of the decrees of providence the divine author expresses and accomplishes the purposes inherent in the act of creation. The decrees of God "move the stream of events irresistibly toward that goal which is neither visible to human reason, nor susceptible to human manipulations and devices, for it lies beyond the scope of human, political, social, and economic planners."¹⁰

The sovereign God centers all history in the decisive event of the incarnation. The incarnation is the focal point of history, and the great watershed of prophetic revelation. Paul makes one of the most comprehensive statements of all Scripture concerning God's control and evaluation of the historical process when he states clearly that the fulness of time is the birth of Jesus Christ (Gal. 4:6). Ancient history was directed toward this great event, and all subsequent events have their bearing from this great division point. The birth of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work may be considered to be the proper goals of the historical sequence of the ancient times whereas the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the establishment of His kingdom are the divinely appointed goals for this age.

The sovereign God will most certainly accomplish His divine purpose in history. Man was placed under a mandate from God to discover the meaning of his own existence on earth, and to realize the true purpose of life in the will of God (Gen. 1:26-31). Even though man sinned against the will of God introducing into the world a new element which produced tragic consequences, history did not, thereby, lose its meaning or its divinely intended purposes. Sin could in no way thwart the realization of the purposes of God. "Where sin abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly" (Rom. 5:20). History as a result became the scene of the revelation of God's righteous judgments against sin, and of His gracious offer of salvation in Christ. Although the providential activity of God is unknown to sinful man, and comprehended dimly by the believer, God is active in the historical processes. The establishment of a kingdom in which the will of God will be done will be the outcome of the historical activity of a sovereign God.

MIRACLES

The concept of miracle is another topic which is deeply involved in the acts of God for the Scriptures present abundant information as to this divine activity throughout the history of redemption (Acts 2:22, Heb. 2:4). "The concept of miracle has been attacked historically (e.g. Renan), scientifically (e.g. Huxley), and theologically (Sabatier)."¹¹ These attacks have usually arisen out of Hume's famous assertion that a miracle "is a violation of the laws of nature."¹² However, in opposition to these apparently plausible attacks the Biblical world-view does not consider the concept of miracle as an embarrassing anomaly, but as an inevitable description of the way in which God works. "Granted the postulates of creation, providence, sin, and salvation, miracle becomes a veritable necessity, a necessity of grace."¹³

Miracle does not refer to an event which is contrary to nature. The most discussed problem in the matter of miracles has centered about this idea of miracles as being contra naturam. This concept arises out of an understanding of nature as a self-enclosed, self-explanatory continuum going of its own accord with all events causally interlocked backwards and forwards. The formulation of Augustine on this point of contention has been regarded as a proper guide to be followed by the Christian. "For we say that all portents are contrary to nature, but they are not so. For how is that contrary to nature which happens by the will of God, since the will of so mighty a Creator is certainly the nature of each created things? A portent, therefore, happens not contrary to nature, but contrary to what we know as nature. . . . There is, however, no impropriety in saying that God does a thing contrary to what we know of nature. For we give the name nature to the usual common course of nature; and whatever God does contrary to this, we call a prodigy, or a miracle. But against the supreme law of nature, which is beyond the knowledge both of the ungodly and of weak believers, God never acts, any more than He acts against Himself."¹⁴

Miracle must be understood as an activity of God which is against sin. Nature now exists in a state of abnormality because of the fact of sin (Gen. 3:17-18). The order of nature is now affected by gross disorder, and the entire creation including man no longer is in perfect harmony with the divine purpose. However, God does not allow disorder and disharmony to rule in His creation, but rather in a work of regeneration seeks to remove the abnormality of sin to bring His creation to its appointed end. "That abnormal mode of the divine working called miracle is therefore not a meaningless, haphazard marvel. It is rather that soteriologically motivated deviation from his normal mode of working which the undoing of sin's abnormality requires."¹⁵ Miracle is "the overcoming, interpenetrating working of the Divine energy by which God breaks all opposition, and in the face of disorder brings His cosmos to realize that end which was determined upon in His counsel."¹⁶

The nature and number of miracles are determined by the divine purpose in its historical outworking. Miracles are found to congregate particularly in the critical periods of the history of God's people--the Exodus, the days of Elijah and Elisha, the life of Daniel, the life of Jesus, and the times of the apostles. Miracles call attention to the reality and power of God as He acts redemptively to separate His people from sin and idolatry, and to achieve His purpose in a holy and redeemed people. In these times of crisis the eyes of the people are fixed upon the

absoluteness of His redeeming power. "It is not that in miracles a greater power is revealed than is present in the ordinary course of things. Everything that God brings into being is a work of His singular omnipotence. But in miracles God takes another way than that which had come to be expected of Him in the usual course of events."¹⁷ Miracles are not the intersection of the supernatural with a self-contained natural life, but with the life of sin under the influence of demons, and powers, and unbelief. Scriptures do not indicate any line that can be drawn to mark off a boundary between the time of miracles and the time of the absence of miracles. The presence and absence of miracles depend ultimately upon the purpose of God in its historical outworking. During this age until the return of Christ God has sent His Spirit to work in and by the church through the instrumentality of the written word and the ordinances, but "he who thinks that he can say with certainty that miracles can no longer occur may seriously ask himself whether he thinks in terms of God's power over the world or from a secret capitulation to determinism."¹⁸

Miracle as the overcoming of the abnormality and disorder of sin is not to be considered as an isolated intermittent divine activity. The miracle points forward to the entire metamorphosis which awaits the creation (Matt. 19:28, Rom. 8:18-23). This divine activity will show itself in the radical renewal of the life of man, and in the complete transformation of nature, removing the marks of corruption which man and nature bear because of the consequences of sin. Miracles as they occur in the past are a token or foreshadow of the redemptive activity of God in the consummation of His purpose. The individual tokens of miracle which evidenced the presence of the Messiah in His first advent demonstrate in a partial way that which will be universal in the age to come (Matt. 11:3-6). In miracle God acts to demonstrate His power over the abnormality of sin and disorder, and to foreshadow the time when His redemptive power will have inaugurated "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17).

PRAYER

Prayer is one of the most commonly employed activities of the Christian. However, from the standpoint of the question of providence, does God actually hear and answer prayer? Because God is infinite in all His attributes, how can insignificant man hope to force his will upon the will of God? Another objection to prayer is that God has set the world to moving and all things therein according to certain and fixed natural laws. Again, if God is to be considered as changeless and immutable, how can prayer affect His predetermined purpose? Is it, therefore, valid to speak of God acting to answer the prayers of His people, or is prayer merely a psychological mechanism which affects us but leaves the world as it is? From a practical point of view the exercise of prayer is the heart of the question which involves the providential acts of God.

Prayer is personal communion in the context of the Father-child relationship. Prayer can exist only upon the grounds of redemptive grace as the formerly rebellious man comes into the Father-child relationship. The infinity of God in all His attributes does not rule out the possibility of prayer for it is the nature of God to be infinitely merciful and gracious to those who are His own spiritual sons (Psa. 103:8-14, 8:3-4). God is to be understood as interested in the legitimate needs of man, and wills in His redemptive plan to fulfil the needs which man

possesses because of the activity and consequences of sin (Phil. 4:19, Matt. 6:31-33). God's promises to the believer indicate the nature of His gracious will, and provide an opportunity for the believer to request from God that which will be to his spiritual advantage and according to God's will (Jas. 4:2). Since the purpose of God is redemptively orientated, the believer may not expect to receive when the request is for that which will not further the redemptive activity of God (Jas. 4:3). Insignificant man does not force His will upon God for God desires that man should seek Him and His spiritual benefits.

Prayer is an exercise of the soul made possible by the new order which is breaking in upon the world of nature. The objection that prayer to God forces Him to go contrary to the laws of nature arises out of a false assumption concerning the nature of the universe. Nature is not a self-contained mechanism which exists apart from God so that God would have to tamper with the mechanism in order to answer prayer. God actively works in the natural order, and so natural law is simply a description of the manner in which God acts. However, God also is working redemptively in order to overcome the abnormality and disorder of sin which exists in our natural universe, and which apart from the preserving activity of God would lead to complete chaos and disorder. However, a new redemptive order is breaking in upon this world overcoming the effects of sin, and bringing to man and the universe the redemptive blessings of this new order. The believer who prays for inner strength and renewal is praying that he may receive deliverance from that order which sin has introduced, and an experience of the power and energy of the new life (Isa. 40:29). The believer who prays for physical health and healing seeks deliverance from the disabling effects of sin, and an experience of physical health and strength which are to be associated with the new order (Matt. 20:29-34, 11:2-6). The believer must always be mindful that physical redemption is never complete in this life (Rom. 8:23, Phil. 3:20-21). The believer who prays for deliverance from natural calamities desires to know the experience of safety which is the redemptive blessing set over against the violent disorder of our present economy (Matt. 8:23-27). The prayer must always be delivered with the consciousness that the restoration of nature is not total in this age (Matt. 19:28).

Prayer is an orientation to the will of God which can alone produce meaning and satisfaction in life. God is immutable because His will embraces the only true meaning of life. Everything other than the will of God belongs to the realm of the demonic and the Satanic. To suggest that prayer causes God to change His mind is to misunderstand the nature and function of prayer. Prayer is an expression of insufficiency and dissatisfaction arising from the heart of a creature who has no means at his disposal. In prayer we orientate our life to the will of God in order that we may receive the sufficiency and satisfaction which His will can provide. Requests arising out of self-will cannot be answered because they are destructive to life and well-being.

The acts of God must, therefore, be affirmed in a univocal sense since the Scriptures abundantly testify to the fact of God's activity in the universe which He created, and in the community of faith which He calls unto Himself. The Christian faith does not understand these acts in any analogical sense, but confesses that God did and does act in keeping with the literal and historical sense of that term. God is not merely the name for the natural processes of the

world and of life for He is the originative and the transcendent cause of all created reality, and maintains His existence above that creation which He now sustains. On the other hand, the maintenance of God's transcendence does not in any way necessitate that His activity in the world should be denied because of the structures of scientific theory. The acts of God are discovered in the scientific quest even as they are revealed in His special redemptive purposes in the world of which He is the Creator. "All thy works shall give thanks unto thee, O Jehovah; and thy saints shall bless thee. They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; to make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glory of the majesty of his kingdom" (Psa. 145:10-12).

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