The Foreknowledge of God

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Critics of sovereign grace reject that salvation is God's gift to particular people whom He has chosen. They prefer the idea that man's will, works and efforts in some way combine to determine who goes to heaven. For them the Biblical doctrine of election is an offence and they look for any opportunity to rob it of its force and meaning.

Such critics cannot deny that election and predestination are taught in the Bible, the doctrines stand out from the pages of holy scripture like two supporting poles for the banner of God's love. They must therefore explain these two key subjects in such a way as incorporates free-will and man's own decision to trust in Jesus Christ or not. One way they try to do this is by telling us that God's choice of who will be saved is based upon His foreknowledge.

Foreknowledge and election

In scripture, election and predestination are often connected with God's foreknowledge. Paul tells us "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate" while Peter says that believers are "elect according to the foreknowledge of God". These verses provide opportunity for free-will believers to claim that God's election of sinners to salvation and their predestination to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ is contingent upon His foreknowledge in eternity of those who will come to Christ when salvation is offered to them in time.

But, we ask, is this interpretation plausible? Is foreknowledge just a crystal ball? Did God peer through the mists of time see who would believe and then predestine them to salvation? Some try to make the scenario more encompassing, telling us either that God offers everyone salvation at least once in their life, or else that God knows how they would respond had their opportunities to believe been as plentiful as other's. God sees how they will respond to that offer, we are told, and upon that decision predestines their souls to heaven or hell.

Not only is such an interpretation utterly without Biblical foundation it also strikes at the very nature of God and the clear testimony of His word.

Four Facts of Foreknowledge

Here are four things we can say with Biblical authority about God's

foreknowledge:

1. God knows everything, if He did not He would not be God. The old writers call this God's omniscience. Because God is eternal and unchangeable His knowledge is also eternal and unchangeable. No event or its consequence is outside of God's knowledge. He knew from eternity not only everything He Himself intended to do but everything He would permit others to do. We are told 'Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world' (Acts 15:8).

2. God's foreknowledge is not approximate or 'rough'. It is absolute and certain. God does not play percentages. He is not overtaken by events. He does not revise His plans to accommodate unforeseen circumstances. From the beat of a butterfly's wing to the resolutions of the United Nations, 'Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do' (Hebrews 4:13).

3. God does not compel people to act against their wills in order to accomplish what He foreknows will happen. It is important to remember this. The Almighty does not 'force through' His will against the wills of others. He does not make people do things they do not willingly choose to do. On the contrary, men and women act according to their nature, their desires and their own will as free agents. Nevertheless, in so doing they act entirely according to the purposes and decrees of God. 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings' (Jeremiah 17:9, 10).

4. This eternal purpose and the sovereign decrees of God – sometimes simply called 'The Will of God' – are the beginning and end of all things. God's eternal purpose is His own glory and what He has determined to do to accomplish it. His foreknowledge is built upon His purpose and results from it. God's foreknowledge is arrived at not by His looking into the future but by His knowing the cause and consequence of every event, it is His knowledge of every outcome He has sovereignly determined will occur. We can see this with respect to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, Peter declares to the Jews, 'Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain (Acts 2:23).

Foreknowledge is not déjà vu

Now from these points we can see that God's foreknowledge in election and His conforming men to Christ in predestination does not arise from Him looking into the future. It is not based on prescience (a knowledge of the future), or some kind of déjà vu. It is drawn rather from His knowledge of His own eternal purpose. God foreknows the future because He knows His own mind, His own will and His settled purpose for time and eternity.

But there is another strand to God's foreknowledge too, that is sweet and precious to the child of God. Arthur Pink points out that 'foreknowledge' is never used in the Bible in connection with events or actions; instead, it always has reference to persons. God foreknows people. It is persons God is said to 'foreknow', not the actions of those persons. This can easily be shown from the four occurrences of the word in holy scripture:

1. Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain (Acts 2:23).

Notice it is the Christ, the crucified one that is foreknown of God.

2. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called (Romans 8:29,30).

Again, it is not 'what' He did foreknow, but 'whom'. It is not what God foreknew of these persons but the persons themselves which is here in view.

3. God hath not cast away His people which He foreknew (Romans 11:2).

It is God's people who are foreknown not their works or their 'decisions'.

4. Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father (1 Peter 1:2).

The previous verse identifies the elect as 'strangers scattered'. Once again the verse refers to people, and not to their foreseen acts.

With God its personal

Thus we learn that God's foreknowledge is a personal knowledge of specific individuals. The elect, those who are chosen, are particular individuals known to Him in eternal purpose and identified within His sovereign decrees. Far from being a simple looking forward to see how men and women will react to the gospel God's foreknowledge of His chosen people is His everlasting love for them, His delight in them, and His acceptance of them. It is in this sense that God knows them. John Gill says,

He foreknew them from everlasting, affectionately loved them, and took infinite delight and pleasure in them; and this is the foundation of their

predestination and election, of their conformity to Christ, of their calling, justification, and glorification.

The election of sinners to salvation is not conditional upon any action or belief on the part of the sinner. If salvation is based in any way upon what we do it is not of grace but of works. No sinner believes until God gives him faith (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Grace is free, unconditional and enabling! God’s choice of certain individuals in election arises not from anything in us, or anything from us, but from His own sovereign will and purpose.

Good to know

Proper appreciation of the ‘foreknowledge’ of God will serve us well both in our thanksgiving for God’s grace and goodness to us and in personal worship of God. It will also help us to more ably rebut false and dishonouring notions proposed by peddlers of free-willism. Bible commentator Arthur W. Pink says,

God not only knew the end from the beginning, but He planned, fixed, predestinated everything from the beginning. And, as cause stands to effect, so God’s purpose is the ground of His prescience. If then the reader be a real Christian, he is so because God chose him in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and chose not because He foresaw you would believe, but chose simply because it pleased Him to choose; chose you notwithstanding your natural unbelief. This being so, all the glory and praise belongs alone to Him. You have no ground for taking any credit to yourself. You have "believed through grace" (Acts 18:27), and that, because your very election was "of grace" (Romans 11:5).

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