

**GOD'S FOREKNOWLEDGE & MAN'S  
FREE WILL**

by

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## God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will (1)

One correspondent writes, "Do you realize that God has no foreknowledge outside His creation? He can't have foreknowledge of His own actions. Remember, He had no beginning and foreknowledge only exists prior to a beginning."

Although the question proceeds on a misconception and has an air of arrogance about it, when it suggests that those who believe in God's foreknowledge really do not understand what foreknowledge is, the question is worth our consideration.

Another questioner has obviously given the matter considerable thought, but continues to have some problems with the idea of foreknowledge. He writes,

"I understand the passages about 'before the foundation of the world' in the light of foreknowledge.

1. What is that foreknowledge? For those He foreknew. What did God foreknow?
2. If the elect are chosen before the foundation of the world outside of foreknowledge of the individual, then, at what point were they ever condemned? I do not see how one can be simultaneously condemned and saved at the same time.

"As Moses raised up the serpent—

1. Numbers 21:8-9, I am sure we will agree that Christ Himself used this passage as a picture of what He was doing on the cross [John 3:14]. Well, in this picture, all of the people that were bitten had to use their free will and simply looked upon the serpent to live, and all who didn't died. How can this be a picture of Christ in the Calvinist eye, when looking is an act of conscience and of will?
2. This cannot be an accurate picture, if the consequences are not applied in the same manner.

3. The serpent was never kept away from those who were bitten so that [they] would never be able to look upon it. If salvation is not available to those who are bitten, then it is not an accurate picture.”

This last question does not have foreknowledge in mind, but it is so closely related to the subject of foreknowledge that it is well to treat the two together.

First of all, we ought to be sure of what the Bible means by “foreknowledge.”

The word is not frequently used in Scripture. It is found only in Acts 2:23 and I Peter 1:2. Its verb cognate, “foreknow,” is used only in Romans 8:29 and Romans 11:2.

In Acts 2:23, the word is used to teach us that Christ’s death and all the circumstances of it were brought about by God’s sovereign and eternal counsel. The word “foreknowledge” is, in fact, identified with His counsel.

In the other three instances, the word is used in relation to God’s people: “For *whom* he did foreknow, he also did predestinate;” “*Elect* according to the foreknowledge of God the Father;” “God hath not cast away *his people* which he foreknew.”

Although foreknowledge is distinguished from both predestination and election, it is closely associated with both concepts.

In the Middle Ages, many theologians, committed as they were to the Pelagianism of Rome, defined foreknowledge in the sense of prediction. God was able to predict accurately who would, by his own free will, believe, and, on the basis of man’s own decision to believe, he was elected. The Reformers, without exception, condemned this view as being contrary to the Scriptures and a denial of God’s sovereignty.

But the heresy arose again. It arose in the hypothetical universalism of the Amyraldians in France and in the Arminian heresy of Jacobus Arminius and his followers in the Netherlands. Amyraldianism was

condemned in the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) and by the Westminster Assembly (1640s), although the Amyraldian position or views like it were defended by a few delegates. The Arminian position was condemned by the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619).

The confessions that arose out of the Reformation are unanimously opposed to a conditional predestination and man's free will. The *Scottish Confession* (1560) says, "So that the cause of good works we confess to be not our free will, but the Spirit of the Lord Jesus ..." (Art. 13). Regarding free will, Article 10 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1562/63) of the Church of England states, "The condition of man, after the fall of Adam, is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God." The *Lambeth Articles* (1595), intended to be added to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, though never officially adopted by the Anglican Church, is strong on the doctrine of predestination ([www.cprf.co.uk/articles/lambeth.htm](http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/lambeth.htm)). All the other Reformed confessions teach the same truth: the *French Confession* (1559), the *Belgic Confession* (1561), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), etc.

It is faithfulness to the confessions to confess and maintain these truths, and to oppose the heresies that basically arose out of Rome. That most of the church today is unfaithful to her heritage makes no difference; these churches have simply repudiated what lies at the heart of Reformation thought. In doing so, they have rejected Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, Knox and all the later Reformed theologians. Defenders of later heresies must not come up with their denials of foreknowledge, predestination and election, along with their notions of free will and attempt to palm this off on the church as the truth of the Scriptures. Let them do their homework and read Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* or Calvin's [\*God's Eternal Predestination and Secret Providence\*](#). They will soon learn that they stand outside the stream of biblical thought.

If they claim that the Reformation came with novelties, let them go back to Augustine (354-430) and Gottschalk (c. 808-c. 867) to learn that these are ancient truths held by the churches' greatest theologians.

The only explanation for this consistent emphasis on God's foreknowledge and the bondage of the will of man is that these doctrines that the Reformers taught are thoroughly scriptural and must be maintained.

We will enter into the subject itself more completely in the next article and answer some of the objections of the gainsayers. I urge our readers to save this issue of the *News* so that you can refer to it when the next issue comes out to refresh your memories of the questions we are dealing with. *Prof. Hanko*

## God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will (2)

In last month's *News*, I began a discussion of two questions that came to me, both dealing with related subjects. (1) The first concentrated on God's foreknowledge, arguing that to believe in foreknowledge is foolishness, for it implies contradictions in God Himself that are beyond resolution. (2) The second, a series of questions, had to do more with man's free will. This latter question appealed to the biblical narrative of the fiery serpents that attacked Israel because of their murmuring (Num. 21:4-9) and the fulfilment of the brass serpent, of which Jesus speaks in John 3:14.

(1) I will deal with divine foreknowledge first. We must remember, in talking about God's counsel (for foreknowledge is a decree in God's counsel), that the divine counsel is eternal. This does not mean that God Himself and His counsel are without a temporal beginning and a temporal end. It means that God's counsel is timeless, without time, above time, not in any way affected by time, since Jehovah Himself is timeless.

We are so totally controlled by time that we cannot even form an idea of divine eternity. Eternity means that we cannot speak of "when" God does something (as the questioner does), for "when" implies time. We cannot speak of one work of God preceding another work of God in eternity, for one thing preceding another is something characteristic of time. All the decrees of God are eternally before His mind and they are so without change.

The terms (a) foreknowledge, (b) election and (c) predestination refer to the same decree of God, but they look at that decree from different points of view.

(a) God's foreknowledge is His eternal knowledge of His purpose to glorify Himself through Jesus Christ and the salvation of the church. This foreknowledge of salvation in Christ includes God's eternal foreknowledge of the cross of Christ as the means of salvation (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

It must never be forgotten, however, that God's knowledge of something is not like our knowledge. I have knowledge of a black walnut tree that once stood in my backyard. But I knew that tree only after the tree was there. God knew that black walnut tree before the tree was there.

In fact, because God's counsel is the living will of the living God, His knowledge of that black walnut tree was the cause of the tree's existence. And so it is with all things.

God is omniscient, not because He is able accurately to predict the future, but because He determines all that takes place in time in His eternal counsel.

(b) Election refers to the same decree of God to save His people in Christ, but with this word the emphasis falls on the fact that He chooses with absolute precision and final determination those whom He wishes to save. "To elect" means "to choose."

(c) Predestination in Scripture also refers to God's eternal will to save His people in Christ, but looks at God's decree from the viewpoint of its purpose or destiny. That purpose is to take His elect into everlasting fellowship with Himself in Jesus Christ. Predestination also refers to all that God determines to do to attain that goal.

(2) I turn now to the issue of man's free will. The question we face is this: Does fallen man have the natural ability to choose to do good or evil? We are not talking about Adam before he fell. Nor are we talking about man today who may choose to send you a letter or to refrain from sending it, to eat a T-bone steak for dinner or a hamburger, to buy a Ford car or a Mercedes. The question asked—and the question that has been asked a thousand times—is this: Does a totally depraved man possess the moral ability to choose to do that which pleases God and meets with His approval. Or, as it is so often said nowadays, does sinful man have the spiritual ability to accept the salvation offered him in the gospel? Is man's salvation determined by his own choice?

The question is an ancient one. Even in Augustine's day (354-430), the question had to be faced. In those days, the Pelagians and Semi-

Pelagians taught that man had a free will and that God saved only those who wanted to be saved by their (alleged) free will. Augustine most emphatically denied it. The Roman Catholic Church most emphatically taught it and killed those who denied it. All the Reformers, without exception, denied free will, as did the Reformed and Presbyterian churches throughout Europe. The Arminians taught it; the Synod of Dort, representing the Reformed churches in the whole of Europe denied it. And so it is today: there are those who teach free will and there are those who deny it, who rightly insist that total depravity is total depravity and not partial depravity (Rom. 3:9-20).

Let those who teach free will admit that they are in doctrinal agreement with the Roman Catholic Church on this point. So important was the question that Martin Luther, whom we esteem as a great Reformer, wrote a book against Erasmus, a humanistic representative of Roman Catholicism, called *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). Luther understood the importance of the question. In answering Erasmus, Luther complimented him on dealing with the one, most important and most crucial, issue that divided the Reformers from Rome. If Erasmus was right, Luther insisted, there was no reason to reform the church and split from Rome.

It is well, as the questioner suggests, that we understand that other crucial doctrines are involved. Some of the most important are: whether Christ died for all men absolutely or for His elect alone (John 10:11); whether God loves all men or His elect alone (Rom. 9:13); whether God gives grace to all men or to His elect alone (II Tim. 1:9); whether God wants all men to be saved or whether He wills the salvation of His elect people alone (Matt. 11:25-27); whether all men have the ability to be saved or whether wicked man will always reject the gospel—unless God Himself saves him (John 6:65).

The question is of utmost importance. It divides between orthodox, believing Christians and heretical theologians who stand outside the stream of the church of Christ here on earth. Let no man belittle the issue.

The only answer that anyone can give is that the church of Christ since Pentecost to today, including Paul's epistles to the Galatians and the Romans, all the great creeds of the church and all the greatest theologians, have held to this one position: Man's fall resulted in his total depravity, that is, his total inability to do any good and his ability to do only what is evil. This includes his will: the will of fallen man is totally unable to do anything pleasing to God; it is totally unable to contribute even 0.001% to a man's salvation; it can do nothing but hate God (Rom. 1:30).

I have recently completed an extensive study of the teachings of the church on this very question. I cannot duplicate the results of that research here. The evidence is conclusive: there have been heretics without number who have denied the doctrine of the slavery of the will, but the true church has consistently and without reservation condemned such errors and held to the absolute sovereignty of Almighty God in the salvation of sinners. The church has always taught (and one need only read its confessions to see this) that man is totally depraved; that Christ died only for His elect people who were given Him of the Father; that God loves His people, but hates the wicked; that God saves a people chosen from all eternity and bestows on them, and on them only, His grace; that His grace cannot be resisted; that those chosen by God will be saved so that all of them will live forever in covenant communion with the Triune God (Ps. 11:5-7; John 6:39-40; 10:27-29; Rom. 8:30-39; Eph. 1:3-14).

I shall deal with the passage in Numbers 21 to which the questioner calls our attention in the next issue. But I want to make a few more remarks in this connection.

The question is not to be answered in terms of what we would like or what we think ought to happen. The question is ultimately—and it is a question every one of us has to answer, for there is no escaping it—Do you choose to go along with the Roman Catholic Church on this crucial question? Do you want to join in the raucous cacophony of far and away the majority of the church world that thinks it knows better than God what He ought to do? Do you want a God who waits upon the will of man to decide whether or not to be saved? Do you want a Christ

whose death is so ineffectual that it cannot save those for whom He died? Must Christ everlastingly wring His hands in despair that so many whom He loved and wanted to save actually go to hell?

I do not want that kind of God or that kind of Christ. He cannot do me any good. If even an iota of this glorious work is left to me, I shall perish. I know it. I know with it with such absolute certainty that Paul's glorious doxology is the one that I rejoice to sing: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal. 2:20-21).

Any other God but the sovereign God, in whose hand is the king's heart so that "he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Prov. 21:1), is an idol, a humanistic invention that makes God small and helpless, and raises man to a level with the divine. *Prof. Hanko*

### **God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will (3)**

In the last two issues of the *News*, I have been discussing questions that were submitted that involve God's foreknowledge and man's (alleged) free will.

One point remains to be answered. A questioner appealed to Numbers 21:8-9 to argue that man is able of his own free will to choose to believe a gospel in which a Christ is preached who is a Saviour who loves all men, died for them and wants everyone to be saved. The questioner claimed that because Israel had the choice of looking at the brazen serpent to be healed or refusing to look at the brazen serpent and die, and because Jesus finds in this brazen serpent a picture of Himself raised up on the cross (John 3:14-15), so all men have the choice of accepting Christ as their Saviour or refusing to accept Him and perishing as a result.

The question that immediately pops into one's head is this: How does the questioner know that the Israelites who looked at the brazen serpent did so of their own free will? The text does not say that. If this act of the Israelites was of their own free will, then everything that happened to them was also of their own free will: their choice to leave Egypt when the nation went; their choice to camp at Sinai; their choice to murmur because of lack of water; their choice not to believe the report of the ten spies or their choice to believe this report; etc. All their salvation depends upon their own choice.

If man has a choice to accept Christ or to reject Him, he has a choice also to accept part of Christ and reject other parts. He has a choice whether to continue to believe in Christ or to change his mind; he has the choice to go to heaven or to go to hell.

In other words, the whole of his salvation depends on him. Christ is left with nothing else to do but worry whether there will finally be anybody at all who believes in Him. Christ can do nothing about it. Christ is helpless. The choice is man's to make. Who, I ask, wants such a weak Christ? Or is the case that man makes the decisive choice and then Christ takes over? Where in the Bible does one read that?

Let us see the matter as Scripture presents it. Mankind is fallen. All people have sinned in Adam (Rom. 5:12ff.). Their fall has so spiritually devastated them that they are incapable of doing any good (3:12). Their depravity does not only make any moral goodness impossible but also makes man a hater of God, a rebel against Him, an enemy out to destroy Him. This was and is man's choice, man's sin, man's responsibility.

God reveals the riches of His grace and mercy in bringing salvation to this world through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. This salvation is proclaimed in the gospel. The purpose of God in bringing salvation is twofold. On the one hand, the gospel puts all men before God's command to forsake his sin, repent of his evil and believe in Christ. God does this to maintain His righteous demands. On the other hand, the gospel is also the power of God unto salvation to all who believe (1:16).

The *Canons of Dordt* put it precisely: "That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree" (1:6). God's eternal decree includes both election and reprobation (1:6; Rom. 9:10-23).

However, God does not deal with a man as a robot. As the pastor of my youth would say in his sermons, "Man does not go to heaven in a Pullman sleeper." The wicked can do nothing else but reject the gospel. That rejection is due to a depravity which they brought on themselves. The elect believe because God gives them the gift of faith (Eph. 2:8). The wicked go to hell because of their terrible sin of unbelief; the righteous go to heaven because of the mercy, grace, love and longsuffering God shows to them.

Behind all rejection of the gospel stands the eternal decree of God's reprobation; behind all belief in the gospel stands God's decree of election. Christ died only for His elect people and the cross is the means by which we are saved. But God saves us in such a way that we become conscious of our salvation. He brings us to repentance and faith. He calls us to fight the old man, struggle with temptation, confess sin and always flee to Christ to receive strength in the battle. We are commanded to work out our own salvation and we are called to do this

because it is God who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13). Scripture teaches the absolute sovereignty of God in all His works and so maintains God's glory. The opposite doctrines make God small (really, an idolatrous caricature of God) and the cross powerless.

I have often asked myself the question why almost the whole church world pants after and lusts for a theology that promotes the honour, the goodness and the basic moral soundness of man. The answer can only be pride. Pride burns so hot in the heart of man that man's goodness in free will must be maintained at all costs. This theology revolves around man, not God. It is humanistic. God loves all men for He would never hate anyone, it claims. But what does that do to God's holiness, a holiness so bright in its light that it burns against sin (Isa. 6:3f.)?

Christ died for everyone, they say. But what does that do to the cross as the power of God unto salvation (I Cor. 1:24)? It renders the cross powerless and makes of God in Christ One who is unable to save. What does it do to the truth? It drags God down to the level of man and tries, desperately, to raise man up to God's throne.

Calvin's enemies charged him with being drunk with God. It is the greatest of compliments. To be drunk with God! That exceeds in blessedness any pleasure to be found anywhere. The modern church world is drunk with man.

Would that today's "evangelical" church would repent of its emphasis on man, man, man. And would that it would turn to the truth and confess that God is all! Those who looked at the brazen serpent in the wilderness, and saw their desperate need of a Saviour, had the living faith that saves. That faith was a gift of God. Nicodemus needed to hear these words of Jesus in John 3, for he was thinking of a Messiah who would establish an earthly kingdom. He had to learn that the kingdom of heaven would not be established by human might but by the Messiah's crucifixion. And those who by faith look on that cross are those who are saved: saved, not because they chose to do this of their own (alleged) free will, but because God gave them faith to believe in the crucified and risen Christ alone. *Prof. Hanko*

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