

Difficulties with God's foreknowledge

Intro: The doctrine of God's omniscience is a powerful truth; but it is also a truth from which men have derived gross misconceptions and misunderstandings. Let's consider three viewpoints together.

Is God's foreknowledge absolute and predetermining?

John Calvin, following Augustine, affirmed that to whatever extent God knows man's action, he does then also make them necessary. Hence, man's actions are foreordained of God; some are foreordained to life while others are foreordained to salvation.

"All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or to death. This God has testified, not only in the case of single individuals; he has also given a specimen of it in the whole posterity of Abraham, to make it plain that the future condition of each nation was entirely at his disposal." (Institutes, Book 3, Chapter 21, Sec. 5 as quoted in McGuiggan's commentary on Romans)

"Reformation theology has contended that the divine foreknowledge contains the ingredient of divine determination. The Reformers claimed that God indeed foreknows who will believe, because believing in Christ is not a human achievement, but a divine gift imparted to men by God's grace and Spirit. Thus God's foreknowledge is not merely prescience, but knowledge that itself determines the event. That is, in Reformation thought what God foreknows He foreordains." (ISBE)

It is true that God has foreseen what in His counsels He will do.

God foreknew that His Son would die for the sins of mankind.

this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. (Acts 2:23)

God foreknew and thus selected those who believed in Him would be His people.

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ..to those who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure. (1 Peter 1:1-2)

Peter does not affirm that God's choice was dependent upon the merit of those who believed or that God foresaw something in people that prompted His choice. He only affirms that God set the boundaries of salvation and those to whom He writes had fulfilled God's purpose by believing in Jesus.

God foreknew that those He chose would have an inheritance with

Him.

also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, (Ephesians 1:11)

When God exercised His sovereign right to choose who His people would be and to set the terms of their inclusion, there is in that sense a predestination or foreordination that occurs. This no one can deny and the Bible plainly affirms.

But the Calvinistic doctrine of foreordination and election contradicts Biblical affirmations about both man and God.

It contradicts God's own stated will for all mankind

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

It contradicts God's statements about man's accountability and responsibility to respond to God.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. (Matthew 23:37)

As McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia appropriately says concerning the actions of creatures endowed with free will: “If such actions do not take place...then we reach a necessitating eternal decree, which in fact, the predestinarian contends of; but it unfortunately brings after it consequences which no subtleties have ever been able to shake off—that the only actor in the universe is God himself, and that the only distinction among events is that one class is brought to pass by God directly and the other indirectly, not by the agency, but by the mere instrumentality, of His creatures.” (Watson)

Must we conclude that God's foreknowledge is limited because of the nature of free will?

One response is to contend that God's omniscience must be qualified to mean “God knows what He chooses to know”, affirming that God chooses not to know contingent events such as acts of man's free moral agency. Brents, in a vigorous anti-Calvinistic work, argues that God simply does not know what men may choose to do. He ends his chapter on God's foreknowledge by quoting Adam Clarke:

“We must grant that God foresees nothing as absolutely and inevitably certain which he has made contingent; and because he has designed it to be contingent, therefore, he can not know it as absolutely and inevitably certain. I conclude that God, although omniscient, is not obliged, in consequence of this, to know all that he can know, no more than he is obliged, because he is omnipotent, to do all that he can do.” (Commentary on Ac. 2:47).

This is unsatisfactory because the Scripture clearly reveal that God foreknew certain things that require knowledge of individual decisions.

That Pharaoh would harden his heart (Ex. 7:4).

That Cyrus would decree the return of the Israelites (Is. 44:28).

That the Jewish people would reject His Son and die for man's sin (Ac. 2:23).

That God knows who the saved will be (Rev. 17:8).

What about verses that suggest that God has learned something He didn't know?

Anthropomorphic expressions of God's response to man's actions

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. (Genesis 11:5;)

"I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." (Gen. 18:21)

Did God have to come to earth to know what men were doing? Surely not in view of texts that show that He sees all. Hence, these expressions are anthropomorphic, suggesting to Abraham that God's judgment of the city was founded on actual knowledge obtained by first-hand experience.

And he said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (Genesis 22:12)

Did God not know whether Abraham would sacrifice His son? Is it possible that the expression anthropomorphically suggests a confirmation and a promise, like the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah, based on actual first-hand experience?

In both texts, God communicates to His creatures in this way that He is fully aware of their attitudes and actions.

Anthropomorphic expressions of God's will in revelation

"And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind. (Jeremiah 7:31)

and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind; (Jeremiah 19:5)

"And they built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin. (Jeremiah 32:35)

The point of all these texts is that the activity of human sacrifice was not a part of God's deliberative purpose for man in commanding man's worship and service.

God's foreknowledge is complete but not determinative.

Perhaps a better solution is to affirm that God's foreknowledge is prescient,

knowing reality before it is real, people before they exist, and days and events before they occur.

He knows what His purpose is

The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation. (Psalm 33:11)

He knows through whom those purposes would be accomplished
And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." (Romans 9:10-12)

He knows the outcome of the redemptive plan not merely in theoretical terms but with specificity to individuals

I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from Thee, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth. Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them. (Psalm 139:14-16)

And those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come. (Revelation 17:8)

It is not necessary to make God's knowledge of man's actions causative. Simply because God knows what men may do does not cause the action to take place. Man still has freedom of will. He is the cause of his actions; but God knows the action. His knowledge of man's choices does not make the outcome necessary but it does make it certain because God's knowledge is perfect. In this view God's knowledge is complete; man's free will is preserved. There is an adequate basis for prophetic statements in Scripture.

How God knows these things is not explained to us; but perhaps it is a quality of God's eternal nature. He lives in the eternal now; therefore both past, present, and future (dimensions of time) are not relevant in describing Him.

Conclusion: Man's understanding or misunderstanding of the omniscience of God has played a key role in the forging of the doctrine of salvation found in many churches. Even if God knows the outcome of His redemptive plan, each person must exercise his free will. You are not destined to perish in hell by God's choice; but we may very well be destined for such a place by our choice! We don't need to wait for God to do something. He has done all that His nature allows to save our souls. Now we must decide whether we will be one of those who He elected to salvation or whether we are a vessel of wrath endured by God for final destruction. I would hate to think that I lived my whole life only, for it to be said about me, that God endured my existence only so He could save others around me, but not me!

How about you?