

Created for Glory (Part Two)

God's Glory made manifest in His rule over the free Acts of Men

By Jay Wegter

In order for God to govern man, “God [must] foreknow the free and voluntary acts of man.”ⁱ Such divine foreknowledge is asserted in Proverbs 19:21. “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand.” Amidst all of the possible choices the will of man may devise, God’s counsel is a constant. God “orders [men] to be subservient to His own stable counsel.”ⁱⁱ

In Isaiah 45:11 God commands His people to ask of Him what is necessary for their protection. How could God guarantee a positive answer if He did not foreknow the contents of the hearts and wills of Israel’s neighbors? The remarkable prophecy that king Cyrus, the Mede would support the repatriation of Israel (Isa. 45:1-7) was made over a century before his birth. “If the liberty of Cyrus’ will was no hindrance to God’s certain and infallible foreknowledge, . . . how can the contingency of any other thing be a hindrance to Him?”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is also evident from Scripture that God possesses foreknowledge concerning the evil activities of men’s wills. In many instances, He has foretold the event. Stephen Charnock gives a partial list:

The Egyptians voluntary oppressing of Israel (Gen. 15:13); Pharaoh’s hardening his heart against the voice of the Lord (Ex 3:18-20); Israel becoming idolaters (Deut 31:16); Judas’s betraying of our Savior, a voluntary action (John 6:70-71).^{iv}

God foreknows the sinful acts of free agents before they are conceived. Before Hazael ever planned his acts murder and oppression, God announced through His prophet the cruel deeds that Hazael would conceive and carry out (2 Kings 8:12).^v

Scripture affirms that God’s foreknowledge encompasses all his works since the world began (Acts 15:18). This foreknowledge includes an intimate knowledge of individuals prior to their birth (Jer 1:5). God’s foreknowledge also entails what men would do under circumstances God chooses to prevent (God tells David that the citizens of Keilah would surrender him into the hands of Saul if he remains in the city) (1 Sam 23:10-12).

Gordon Clark makes the observation from Matthew 10:30 that divine foreknowledge extends to every possible detail.

When the Lord says, “The very hairs of your head are all numbered” He implies knowledge of the past and the future. The statement is not intended to be limited just to those Jews who actually heard His words, . . . [but it is a] general assertion of God’s knowledge of all details at all times and in all places.^{vi}

What is the relationship between God foreknowing and God foreordaining?

In Isaiah chapter 46, verses 10 and 11, there is a joining of God’s foreknowledge to His omnipotent might and purpose. God’s ability to control the future, and bring to pass all His plans is stipulated upon His absolute foreknowledge. They work in conjunction but are not

identical in function. A.A. Hodge provides the following distinction between foreknowledge and foreordination. “Foreknowledge recognizes the certain *futurition* of events, while foreordination makes them [certain].”^{vii} Boetner aptly remarks, “Foreordination renders the events certain; while foreknowledge presupposes that they are certain.”^{viii}

Arminians (those who deny God’s predestination) confuse the order between the two, and weaken foreordination to the point that it is merely the ratification of choices of free agents. Augustus H. Strong offers clarity on the relationship between these two doctrines. “. . . God foresaw the future as certain . . . because He had decreed it. [God’s] decreeing creation implies decreeing the foreseen results of creation.”^{ix}

The most common position held by Arminians is that God foreknows all things but decrees only some things. But Scripture posits an absolute decree in which God foreordains all things and all events both of free agents and physical creation. Herman Bavinck provides a brief, but helpful survey of the Scriptural terms associated with God’s decree.

Humanly speaking, . . . every work of God is preceded by a deliberation of the mind and a decision of the will. In some passages of Scripture, the word used is counsel (Ps. 33:11), in some it is establishment or decree (Gen. 41:32), in some it is purpose (Rom. 8:28), in some ordination (Eph. 1:5,11), and in some it is the favor, or good pleasure of God (Is 61:2).^x

God speaks of the “purposes which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” as an “eternal purpose” (Eph. 3:10,11). God’s wisdom “is displayed in the realization of [His] eternal purpose.” The wisdom of God’s decree is perfect; therefore, the decree is immutable (Job 23:13-14).^{xi} God represents the decree in this manner; as that which magnifies the excellence of His perfections. There is no need for God to change His decree or retract any portion of it because it can be thwarted or because it is deficient or requires alteration (Is 14:24-27).

The Arminian position insists that God’s foreknowledge conditions God’s foreordaining (in other words, in this view, God ‘ratifies’ what He sees will happen). But this cannot be supported from Scripture. The Arminian position is an attempt to remove the antinomy (or paradox) between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (especially the paradox between divine control and human sin). God’s purpose flows solely from Himself as Samuel Waldron observes.

No one was there, nothing existed, when God decreed. Hence, God took nothing into consideration except his own will when He decreed all things. Scripture asserts that no one counseled God when He decreed (Is 40:13-14; Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16). The decree determines all things, but if it determines all things, then it is determined by none of those things which it determines.^{xii}

The theories set forth by Arminian theologians are intended to avoid the problems “associated with the divine decree by having recourse to divine foreknowledge. . . .”^{xiii} But it is only those things which are certain to take place that “may be foreseen or foreknown. . . It is God’s decree that makes certain all that shall occur; nothing can be foreseen as certain to happen until God decrees that it shall.”^{xiv}

Scripture has abundant examples of this very relationship between divine foreknowledge and foreordination. In Psalm 139:16, David contemplates this majestic truth that God sees what

He ordains concerning a person before that person comes into existence. The contents of each day in a person's life are all written in God's book, this is a matter of worship for the Psalmist. In his article on foreknowledge and foreordination Edgar James comments on Acts 2:23.

[W]as it possible for Christ to be delivered over to His enemies "by the foreknowledge of God?" Certainly, foreknowledge knows, but it does not perform an act like the delivering of Jesus to His enemies. Are not those who read otherwise reading something more than the English meaning of foreknowledge into this passage? However, if we translate that Christ was delivered over by the determinate counsel and forethought of God, that is, by His decision reached in eternity, then we have a thought which is both intelligible and satisfying. Thus, it is that "determinate counsel and forethought that are synonymous expressions, both describing one and the same act, one stressing the element of will, and the offer of knowledge."^{xv}

The Arminian theories hold that foreknowledge amounts to nothing more than bare prescience (merely a knowledge of the future). But the biblical authors by joining in the same passage God's foreknowledge with His foreordination are pointing out that God's foreknowledge has elements of "prearrangement, or predetermination."^{xvi}

In his article on the relationship between foreknowledge and foreordination, Edgar James concludes from Greek grammar, scriptural word use, and lexical study that "foreknowledge is equivalent to foreordination."^{xvii} It is this author's opinion that Edgar James' conclusion is correct and that it represents "the biblical meaning of foreknowledge . . . in its New Testament contexts."^{xviii}

In the Reformed or Calvinistic view of God's decree, divine foreordination is perfectly compatible with human free agency. A.A. Hodge affirms why it is that the human will is both free and responsible.

The liberty of the agent [acts in each case as] he pleases, i.e., according to the dispositions and desires of his heart. . . These dispositions and desires are determined. . . by the character of the agent in relation to his circumstances, which character and circumstances are surely not beyond the control of the infinite God.^{xix}

It is a glorious mystery that foreordination establishes human freedom

Those who theorize that God's determination of all events makes men puppets or robots are neglecting a fundamental principle of human liberty. Namely that men make their choices in life out of their character and out of their natures. John Gerstner elucidates this overlooked fact.

God predestinates the actions of free agents . . . in such a way that they chose what seems good to them. . . And in some profoundly mysterious way what God decrees is what seems good to a man . . . [T]he closer we look, the more clearly we see that predestination is the great Magna Charta of human liberty. God's predestination of every act of men is the same thing as predetermination of the freedom of men.^{xx}

How inscrutable are God's ways that the nature of the decree reveals both God's wise and merciful ends and man's freedom. Though God's decree makes the acts of free agents certain, the decree does not perform those acts. It is man who makes himself wicked.^{xxi} And, it is man by the enabling grace of God who believes the gospel and who repents of his sin.

Whatever evil deeds are committed are “the sinful acts of . . . [God’s] rational creatures. God assumes no responsibility for these sinful acts whatsoever. . . . A distinction must be made between the decree and its execution.”^{xxii} As Shedd points out, “sin is not part of [the original] creation, but a quality introduced into the creation by the creature himself.”^{xxiii} When men sin, it is their own desires that they pursue (Ps. 78:29, Acts 14:16). It ought to be evident that God’s decree to make the acts of His creatures certain is not the same as the act itself.^{xxiv} God’s determination of events in eternity past “does not rob them of their own character [and nature].”^{xxv}

Arguments lodged against God’s decree tend to misstate the nature of freedom

God governs so as to overrule sin for His own Holy purposes, but sin is reckoned to man’s account. The sinner by the exercise of his free agency in sinning does not emancipate himself from dependence upon God, but becomes an instrument in God’s hand.^{xxvi}

The sinner’s freedom is not as some Arminian theologians would define it—as the freedom, will, and power to choose contrary to one’s nature. An African lion is ‘free’ to eat vegetable matter, but he chooses not to do so because ‘by nature’ he is a carnivore. Ephesians 2:1-3 refutes the notion that man has the power to do good or evil at any moment in time. “[It] is very different from saying that a man is at liberty to do what he desires. . . . Man has liberty but not ability to do what is right, . . . while free from coercion from the ‘outside,’ [he] is not free from the control of his own nature.”^{xxvii}

It is this author’s opinion that the enmity toward God’s absolute decree is frequently traceable to man’s sinful hostility toward God’s sovereignty. The fact that God has the right to deal with men for His own purposes and interests is repugnant to human pride.^{xxviii}

It is tragic that men seek to replace God’s determinate counsel with their own wills, or even with fate as the controlling purpose in history. The world was created in order to fulfill God’s purpose (Is 46:10-11). God’s decree and man’s will form an antinomy (paradox, apparent contradiction), but not a conflict; for God would not create what He could not control.^{xxix}

The sticking point is always about the question of control—who is in control, and how much control does God have? Humanistic thought has so permeated modern man’s reasoning abilities, that even Christian men do not begin the study of the divine decree by starting with the character of God.^{xxx}

Removing foreknowledge from foreordination solves none of the difficulties associated with God’s decree. Ultimately, attempts to diminish either foreknowledge or foreordination constitute an attack upon biblical theism. Such an attack cannot be concealed under the guise that one is attempting to solve a conundrum.

Antipathy toward the divine decree is an expression of hostility against who God is.^{xxxi} God’s infinite wisdom and power are displayed in foreknowledge and foreordination. Creation is a stage for the display of His glory.^{xxxii}

There is great ‘ballast’ for the soul to be gained from the study of God’s decree

The study of the divine decree may at first blush appear only as high doctrine with little practical use. It is this author’s opinion that this doctrine offers much to nourish the soul. Today

more than ever, the need is great for a renewed emphasis upon the supremacy of God. God's intent is that men live in synchrony with His unifying purpose to glorify His name. As subjects of His moral government, the believer's last end and highest good both terminate upon the goal of God's glory.^{xxxiii}

Contemplation of God's wisdom in ordering every detail ought to have a powerful effect upon the believer's confidence in God. B. B. Warfield suggests that thoughts of God's plan in all aspects of personal life constitute an invaluable aspect of true religion.^{xxxiv}

So much of the Christian's peace and comfort issue from his trust in God's providence. If in fact God's decree is manifested in the works of providence, then the elect of all men have call for great consolation. It is the redeemed alone who can pray and sing "This is My Father's World."^{xxxv}

It is the saved man who looks at Bible promises believing that God has ordered all things for His glory and for the perfection of the saints.^{xxxvi} Not only does an understanding of this doctrine inspire confidence, it also stimulates responsible living. It is sobering indeed that God should grant His creatures such a measure of freedom. The choices men make are fraught with significance for the very reason that God is sovereign over His creatures.

God by grace has planted within the believer a holy inclination foreign to man's natural condition. The pious man will pray, "incline my heart to thy testimonies. . ." (119:36). The godly man shudders at the plight of those left to their own desires. The righteous man pleads with God to continue forming holy desires within him. Therefore, he does "work out his salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12-13).

The doctrine of the divine decree does not promote laxity. It does promote a heightened sense of responsibility and a greater commitment to holiness. If God gives us choices, affirms them, connects them to character and destiny, then men who truly fear God will make use of the means that God commands in His holy Word. They will do so because they know that God shall bring to pass His perfect purpose for His people by use of the means appointed in His word.^{xxxvii}

Endnotes:

ⁱ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 rp.), 1:441.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 442.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 443.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid., 445.

^{vi} Gordon H. Clark, *Predestination* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), 43.

^{vii} A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 202.

^{viii} Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 42.

^{ix} Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1907), 356.

^x Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 163.

^{xi} L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 104-5.

^{xii} Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Confession*, 64.

^{xiii} Ibid., 68.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Edgar James, "Is Foreknowledge Equivalent to Foreordination?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 122 (July 1965): 215-9.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Ibid.

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- ^{xix} A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 210.
- ^{xx} John H. Gerstner, *A Predestination Primer*, Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1980), 30.
- ^{xxi} John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 4 vols. (Paris: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 1992 rp.), 3:225
- ^{xxii} L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 103.
- ^{xxiii} W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3vols. (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Publishers, 1979 rp.), 1:386.
- ^{xxiv} W.E. Best, *God's Eternal Decree* (Houston: South Belt Assembly of Christ, 1992), 21-2.
- ^{xxv} Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 163.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 180.
- ^{xxvii} G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 31.
- ^{xxviii} Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), 103.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 105-6.
- ^{xxx} Jay Adams, *The Grand Demonstration* (Santa Barbara: East Gate Publishers, 1991), 117-8.
- ^{xxxi} John H. Gerstner, *A Predestination Primer*, 32.
- ^{xxxii} Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 rp.), 1:100-102.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, 111-2.
- ^{xxxiv} Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 1:108.
- ^{xxxv} Maltbie D. Babcock, "This is My Father's World," in *The Trinity Hymnal*, eds. Robert S. Marsden et al (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1961), 109.
- ^{xxxvi} Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 182.
- ^{xxxvii} Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Confession*, 72.