Implications of Open Theism’s Debate on God’s Foreknowledge and Divine Decree: Part 4

Biblical Theism Definition of Foreknowledge and Decree

Paul Helm states,

"Divine foreknowledge is infallible and extends to all future things including the free actions of all his creatures..."[1]

In other words, God knows about an event (includes all of His creation) before it occurs.

For God’s divine ordination or decree, it can be defined this way: (1) in Scripture, God’s will is irresistible (whatever He desires will come to pass); (2) exhaustive divine foreordination is compatible with moral free agents (can be seen with the example of Daniel’s prayer and the decisions we make); (3) God has complete fixed control because of His unalterable decree (God is also immutable).[2] If we take these three elements into account, I think it will help decrease any misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding this topic we have covered in this series.

Wayne Grudem defines the decrees of God this way,

"The eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to bring about everything that happens."[3]

In other words, God’s decisions came before the world was created.

Biblical Theism Describes Foreknowledge and Divine Decree

When studying God’s divine decree, you will see that the decree of God is wise (Romans 11:33), free (Isaiah 40:10), and unconditional (Is. 46:10; Eph. 1:11).[4] It must also be noted that the teaching of God’s divine decree in Scripture is different than His providential actions in time because God’s providential actions are an outflow of the eternal decrees of God.[5] For example, David says in Psalm 139:16,

"Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them."[6]

On another note, just because God’s decrees or eternal plans were before the creation of the world, does not mean that God’s creatures are not responsible for their actions—our actions have real results and also changes the course of events in light of God’s eternal decree.[7] One form of action would be prayer. God ordained prayer as a means to bring about changes in the...
An example of that would be Daniel’s prayer. Daniel’s prayer in Daniel chapter nine, which submits submission to God’s will—both in heartfelt confession of Israel’s sin and passionate intercession for Israel’s deliverance from exile in the hands of her enemies and the blessing of restoration, is just one of many Old Testament examples of how God uses human prayer like Daniel as a means to accomplish his predetermined sovereign plan.[9]

In Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology book, the topic of foreknowledge and its interactions with other doctrines are discussed. For example, Grudem points out that election is not based on God’s foreknowledge of our faith. But that does not mean that there is no foreknowledge of persons and facts.[10] In light of foreknowledge’s interaction with predestination, predestination based on foreknowledge, does not give people free choice to determine their own destinies outside of God’s decree because God determines people’s destinies.[11] Faith, on the other hand, is the outflow of God’s decree.

Biblical Theism Defense of Foreknowledge and Divine Decree

Calvin puts it like this concerning this topic

How should [God] foresee that which could not be? For we know that all Adam’s offspring is corrupted and that we do not have the skill to think one good thought of doing well, and much less therefore are we able to commence to do good."[12]

This truth as stated by John Calvin resonates how Christians see the relationship between God’s foreknowledge and decree. In the area of soteriology for example, Calvin understood the a nature of man; and there was no way that God would wait for man to respond to His Gospel in order to bring about his decree regarding salvation. His decree is not reliant on no one nor anything, but events and actions of man are outflows of His decree because they are relevant upon His decree.

Now we will move into the exegetical defense of God’s foreknowledge and God’s divine decree. When it comes to the discussion of the election of God’s people based on foreknowledge, Scripture says that God made His decisions on the basis of His foreknowledge. Romans 8:29 says that God predesigned those whom He foreknew. 1 Peter 1:1-2 says that believers are elected according to God’s foreknowledge. Acts 2:23 says,

This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.*

But the money question that we must answer is: “How does one reconcile God’s decree and foreknowledge?” I believe answering this question will help us against the assaults of open theism or any other view (i.e. Arminianism) that is contrary to the Bible’s understanding of divine decree.

Regarding God’s decree and foreknowledge, one must ask, “Are God’s decrees, seen in light of the election of His people and His predetermined plan for Christ to suffer, on the basis of God’s foreknowledge of what Christ and people would do or was it a predetermined plan?” Can we say that His creatures affected God’s decree? These are some questions that must be answered when dealing with foreknowledge.[13] However, foreknowledge does not mean what the objecting questions suggest. This is so because our English word “foreknowledge does a poor job in explaining foreknowledge.” As a result, this negatively impacts the understanding of foreknowledge.[14]

When one does a biblical survey of the biblical uses of “know” and “foreknow,” one will see that Greek has three separate words for know.[15] In Hebrew, there is no word for foreknowledge, but there is a word for what is known, which refers to a knowledge that is reasoned out,[16] which typically refers to intuitive knowledge, and it implies what is known without the process of reasoning.[18] The first term is ginōsko. Feinberg points out that that ginōsko refers to experiential and/or relational knowledge.[20] On another note, in the Hebrew Bible, there are no words for foreknowing or foreknowledge, but the New Testament Greek provides the words for foreknowing (proginōsko) and foreknowledge (proginōsin)[21]

There are many instances where the Hebrew word yadda refer to nothing other than intellectual awareness; and the same is true for the biblical usage of the Greek words.[22] As a result, context must be taken into consideration for the OT and NT, not just the lexical meanings, if one is to figure out the meaning of “know.” For example, in Amos 3:2, the prophet says,

You only have known all the families of the earth.[23]

This verse would make no sense if it was just mere intellectual knowledge. From context, we see that God knew them in a relational way. The same applies to Hosea 13:4, where God warns His people to not know any god, except Yahweh. If this was just mere intellectual knowledge, it would not make sense for God to warn them because Israel was living close, relationally to their pagan enemies.[24] Another example of knowing can be found in Psalm 101:4 where David says,
A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will know no evil."

Context conveys the idea of relational knowledge in Ps. 101, Hosea 13:4, and Amos 3:2, because God wants a relationship with His people—for He is a jealous God.[25]

The NT also provides examples of how the word “know” also points to relational knowledge (Matt. 7:22-23; John 10:27). If this is mere intellectual knowledge then there are no reasons for God to say this, because God also knows intellectually those who are not His sheep.[26] 1 John 2:3 says,

"By this we know that we have to come to know Him, if we keep His commandments."

Feinberg says,

"If the two instances of 'know' in this verse are identical and refer merely to intellectual awareness, the first use of know is redundant."

In other words John could have written, "By this we know Him if we keep His commandments."[27] The word “knowing” in the OT can also be taken as relational knowledge.

In regards to “foreknow” and “foreknowledge,” there are only seven passages in the NT that uses either a verb or a noun (Acts 2:23; 26:5; Romans 8:29; 11:2; 1 Peter 1:2; 20; 2 Peter 3:17); and only two of the seven passages clearly means knowing something intellectually in advance.[28] Two of those seven passages can be found in Acts 26:5, where Paul says,

"Since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion."

This verse gives evidence about intellectual knowledge and personal acquaintance since it is speaking about Paul’s manner of life.[29] Likewise 2 Peter 3:17 must also mean an awareness of information since he has forewarn them about the Lord’s coming beforehand, in order that they should not be fooled by those who think that the Lord will not return.[30] Both these verses illustrate the notion of knowing something in advance or prior to its happening.[31] Here is what Feinberg notes in regards to proginōsko,

"Any who think proginōsko can never mean prescience in Scripture are mistaken."

It is crucial to note that those passages mentioned earlier such as Acts 26:5 that speak of humans knowing something in advance; neither refers to divine foreknowledge or knowledge that is a priori to the events or communication of what these events will be. Man in his fallen state does not have that type of attribute that God has. Only God can have prescience. Some will ask, “What about prophets?” Prophets are not inspired. Their messages are from God. They are used as instruments to speak God’s predetermined messages.

The other five passages do refer to God’s foreknowledge, and a good case can be made that none of them means prior knowledge, but foreordination instead.[32]

In 1 Peter 1:20, the root word of foreknow (προγινώσκω proginōsko) is used, but in this verse Peter is not speaking (not that He does not know—of course He knows) about God being mentally aware about His Son before the foundation of the world.[33] If the emphasis is primarily prescience, one must ask what is the basis for prescience.[34] Also one must ask, “Did God send Christ because He foresaw that He would be persecuted and die?”[35] One must not take this verse nor with the other verses in this section (Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Peter 1:2; 20) as God first consulting what He foresees Himself doing before He decrees, but rather, God foreordains.[36] This applies to 1 Peter 1:20 and Acts 2:23 too. In regards to 1 Peter 1:2 and Romans 8:29, it must be pointed out that salvation for God’s people is either based God’s foreordination to save them or based on what He foresaw.[37] John Frame clarifies 1 Peter 1:2 and Romans 8:29 with this statement,

"Often in the biblical languages, as in English, when the verb know has a noun rather than a fact-clause as its object, it refers to a personal relationship, not a foreknowledge of information."[38]

Moreover, in Word Biblical Commentary, says that ὅτι οὖς προήγηκα, καὶ προώρισεν ("For those whom He foreknew, He also predesigned") that προγινώσκω means more than simply that knowledge before the event, but as more of the Hebraic understanding of relational/experiential.[39] In other words, when reading verses like Romans 8:29, it would be unbiblical to say that the Lord simply looked ahead to see who would believe; and then He chose some for salvation.[40] God did not first consult what He foresees Himself doing before He decrees, but rather, God foreordains. Pastor John MacArthur argues this concerning Romans 8:29,
CONCLUSION

Much has been discussed regarding the words that have to do with knowledge, foreknowledge, and preordination. I went over these terms exegetically in order to help Christians be familiar with them and how to use them in context when dealing with open theism, Arminianism, or any view that assaults the eternal, divine decree of God.

Biblical theism is rooted in the orthodoxy of Scripture, which is absolute, objective, eternal, transcendent, immutable, and unified. The Open theist, portrays a shade of orthodoxy of community, which is, relative, subjective, temporal, cultural, and mutable. To deny the biblical understanding of God’s foreknowledge and divine decree would have huge negative implications on the Gospel of Christ. In other words, the Gospel is at stake when it comes to the openness debate. Open theism’s denial of God’s exhaustive foreknowledge renders unsure God’s own covenant promises, jeopardizes the legitimacy of God’s justification of saints, renders uncertain His execution of Yahweh’s plan of salvation, jeopardizes the substitutionary nature of Christ’s death for sin, undermines God’s wise plan of suffering and evil in a believer’s life (Rom. 8:28), and undermines the church’s ultimate eschatological hope (unalterable plans).

The Gospel of Christ according to Bruce Ware can be best summarized this way when contrasted against open theism,

What we—and the whole Protestant Christian tradition—hold in common is that in eternity past, God knew the future sin of humankind, he made a deliberate and decisive choice to save sinners, and he formulated then a definitive and fixed plan by which he would succeed in bringing about their future, certain salvation. According to this saving purpose and plan, devised and fixed in eternity past, God would send his Son to die in the place of sinners to pay the penalties of their sin, and he offers freely the gift of justification and eternal life through faith alone in Christ alone.

Here is what Pastor John MacArthur conveys about the negative implications of open theism,

True evangelicals will never relinquish those truths. And those who cannot stomach God the way He has revealed Himself have no right to the label ‘evangelical.’ These are issues worth fighting for, as both church history and Scripture plainly prove. The rise of open theism is a grave threat to the cause of the true gospel. May God raise up a new generation of evangelical warriors with the courage and conviction to contend for the truth of substitutionary atonement.

Please see the prior installments to this series:

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Two more new papers add to the voluminous paleoclimate evidence that most of the last 10,000 years were much warmer than modern. The globe was about 4 to 6°C warmer than it is today between 9000 and 6000 years ago, when CO2 concentrations centered around 265 ppm. Image Source: ScienceDaily.com

Some regions exceeded the…

IPv4 system officially ran out of addresses last year, but fortunately the moment was prepared for: June 8th 2011 was “World IPv6 Day,” where a host of sites including Google, Bing and Facebook quietly tried out the new system for 24 hours to make sure it wouldn’t cause the internet to explode.


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