

Predestination, Foreknowledge and Human Freedom

Kwabena Donkor, BRI

The topic of predestination has a long and checkered history in Christian theology. From the days of Augustine and Pelagius in the early fifth century until today, predestination has consistently been understood as God's decree concerning the salvation of individuals. Hence, predestination is defined as "God's choice of individuals for eternal life or eternal death,"¹ while election describes the selection of those who receive eternal life rather than eternal death.² All the different views on the subject of predestination are in reality variations of the two basic positions represented by Augustine and Pelagius;³ and both positions present predestination as the cause of salvation. It is when predestination is understood as God's direct choice of people for salvation that the contentious issue of God's foreknowledge and human freedom is raised. What are some of the critical issues in this debate and how should a Seventh-day Adventist relate to them? Bruce Reichenbach likens the question of predestination to a puzzle and identifies the major pieces of the puzzle to be human freedom, divine sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, God and time, and providence.⁴ All of these issues are relevant and provide perspectives on the two fundamental concepts--predestination and foreknowledge. We will only focus on these two concepts.

I. Predestination as the Cause of Salvation

The key point in predestination as it is generally taught is that predestination is the cause of salvation. The Augustinian tradition comes to the conclusion that predestination is the cause of salvation on the basis of its view of original sin. It is held that the fall of humanity was so devastating in its effect that from an original situation where humans had the ability to refrain from sin (*posse non peccare*), they are now no longer able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). Therefore, if humans will be saved, it must be an action of God. To avoid sin and choose good, human beings have to have God's grace. This grace works irresistibly and in concert with a person's will in such a way that while he or she is free to choose and do good, he or she does so only if and when God grants a person that freedom. Hence salvation becomes a matter of God choosing discriminatorily to give grace to some while denying it to others.⁵

Although it does not readily appear so, the opposing tradition also makes predestination the cause of salvation. The difference is that whereas in the Augustinian tradition predestination is a discriminatory, sovereign act of God, in the Pelagian/Arminian/open tradition God predestines those whom he foreknows will believe. But it is still predestination and it becomes a problem due to its association with foreknowledge.

II. God's Foreknowledge and Human Freedom in Salvation

The question of God's foreknowledge as an aspect of divine omniscience raises problems for classical theology.⁶ Augustus Strong defines omniscience as "God's perfect and eternal knowledge of all things which are objects of knowledge, whether they may be actual or possible, past, present, or future."⁷ The issue is how to relate this knowledge to belief in free will and human responsibility. It is an acute problem because Protestant theology tends to identify foreknowledge with predestination.⁸ Such theism forces God's foreknowledge to take on the nature of an 'eternal present'—the past, present, and future are rolled together in an eternal present. The practical implication of this view is that one is not permitted to make a separation between what God knows at a point in time and what He does with or about that knowledge in the future. In other words, what God knows is as good as done. When this kind of foreknowledge is linked to predestination either in the Augustinian/Calvinistic tradition or in the Arminian sense a serious problem arises for human freedom and responsibility.⁹ If what God knows is as good as done, as they say, then any notion of free will and human responsibility is negated.

III. Predestination and Foreknowledge in the Bible

It is impossible to examine all the data in the Bible on this subject in this brief paper.¹⁰ We will selectively focus on passages that speak directly to these two concepts and address them in the context of the issues mentioned above.

Predestination: A Decision about a Planned Activity. The biblical term from which we derive the noun predestination is *proōrizō* which means to preordain. Used in connection with *proginōskō* (to foreknow) and *prothesis* (plan, decision) in Romans 8:28-30 and 1 Corinthians 2:7, God's predestination is described as "an activity of his with men directed towards their fellowship with him."¹¹ It is God's decision "to bring about a certain event or state of affairs at a future time,"¹² without reference to destiny.¹³ The significance to understanding predestination as an activity is that it envisages a beginning point which runs a course until its goal is achieved.

Predestination: Beginning Point. Ephesians 1:4 shows that the decision about predestination as a planned activity occurred prior to and independent of creation. Does this then mean that predestination being prior in time to creation necessarily required the creation and sin which happened subsequently? The answer is no; and how this all fits together leads to our understanding of the nature of foreknowledge.

Foreknowledge: Prior to Predestination. Romans 8:29 shows clearly that predestination presupposes foreknowledge but the two are different. The latter is an epistemological phenomenon; the former an activity of God. Foreknowledge is a certain attribute or capacity in God; and it is this attribute that provides the ground for, or enables the act of predestination. Foreknowledge inevitably gets linked and confused with predestination when the God of the Bible is interpreted as the Aristotelian immovable, immutable, timeless God.¹⁴

Predestination: Comprises Theoretical and Historical Aspects. In 1 Corinthians 2:7, we find God deciding, theoretically, at a time before human time to do something subsequently and historically in human time. There is from the biblical point of view a sequence in predestination. Predestination moves from theoretical conception to historical implementation.

Predestination: The Goal. As an activity predestination has the goal of restoring humanity. Ephesians 1:4, 5 speaks to this issue. The word *eklegomai* is used but we are told that the *ek* in *eklegomai* "should not be taken as if it emphasized the selection of a small group out of a larger; it does not have this sense in Lk 9:35; 23:35. Election and predestination in our passages are not related primarily to individual salvation but to God's purpose."¹⁵ It is important to observe that Ephesians hints at the formal manner in which the goal of predestination is attained. The election (*eklegomai*) is not attained in an absolute, automatic manner. Election is relational in nature because it is done "in Him."

Predestination: The Efficient Means. As an activity, predestination requires an efficient means to achieve its goal. In 1 Peter 1:18-20, Christ's blood is identified as the means needed. Significantly, Christ's role in this matter was foreknown before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:18-20). Therefore, both the goal (Eph 1:4) and the means (1 Pet 1:18-20) of predestination were put in place before the beginning of creaturely time. But Christ's blood is not the only instrumental means for predestination. In 2 Thess 2:13 Paul informs the Thessalonians that God has chosen them from the beginning to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. Here is a picture of the Spirit's involvement in person to person relationships leading to belief in the truth as it is in Christ towards salvation.

Predestination: Effected in History. Ephesians 1:9-10 demonstrates the outworking of predestination in history. The plan (mystery) which God purposed in Himself from the foundation of the world is revealed to men. The plan envisaged an appropriate time (*kairos*, the fullness of time) when it will be dispensed or put into effect (*eis oikonomian*). History is the stage where it all plays out.

Predestination and the Individual. In Romans 8:29 Paul gives a clear sequence of salvific activities based on God's foreknowledge: predestination, call, justification, and glorification. Although at first sight it appears the individual has no part to play in the sequence of activities, it is significant to note that the text presupposes a loving response of the individual to God's offer of salvation (see v. 28).

Summing Up the Biblical Data. The scriptural data on predestination as presented above may be summed up as follows: The biblical God, being the kind of God who knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:9-10), decided to create the world, knowing that there will be the fall. The Bible does not tell us why God still decided to create in spite of this knowledge. Because of His foreknowledge He decided upon (predestined) a plan, an activity through which the fall will be remedied. This plan, although hatched before creation, to be carried out in human history, was not implemented until a certain time was fulfilled (Gal 4:4). The plan envisaged redemption and restoration only 'in Christ;' His life, death, and resurrection, through the enabling and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Since God's foreknowledge of future events does not mean He predetermines every future event, all are genuinely free to respond to His plan positively or negatively. No destiny of individuals is fixed from eternity on the basis of God's decision (predestination). Hence, predestination is not in the technical sense a cause of salvation; predestination is the context within which God has made salvation graciously possible based on individual choices. This summary of the biblical data could be helpful to Seventh-day Adventists when approaching the issue of predestination.

IV. Distinguishing the Biblical View from the Arminian View

The Augustinian/Calvinistic approach that individual salvation is not conditioned by free choices is distinctly different from the biblical data given above. But how is the view given in the summary above different from the Arminian view? There is a continuum in the Arminian view where on the one end it is maintained that God knows ahead what will occur in the world and is never surprised. On the other end there are Arminians such as Clark Pinnock who hold that human freedom is incompatible with divine foreknowledge. Pinnock limits divine foreknowledge to only that which is knowable. He writes, "Free actions are not actions which can be known ahead of time. They literally do not yet exist to be known. God can surmise what you will do next Friday, but cannot know it for certain because you have not done it yet."¹⁶

To the extent that "conditionality"¹⁷ is the key distinguishing feature about the Arminian view, the summary of the biblical position given above could be seen as Arminian. But the biblical view ought to be distinguished in some key respects. First, however predestination is defined in the Arminian sense, it should be maintained that biblically the concept does not entail the causal fixation of individual destiny. Second, although God knows those who will be saved based on His knowledge of individual choices, this foreknowledge should not be defined along the classical understanding of omniscience, i.e. what God knows He has forordained. Third, the view that God does not know future actions runs contrary to biblical data—the idea compromises the entire biblical genre of predictive prophecy.

Conclusion

The Bible teaches a doctrine of predestination which is based on God's foreknowledge of individual future choices. Basically, predestination is God's decision to put in place a plan to save His yet to be created world. The nature of God's knowledge of the future does not have to be understood in strict analogical terms to human knowing (open view) or along classical Greek philosophical lines. God's ability to know events that have not yet occurred in a way that does not condition outcomes is perhaps the key unresolved problem in predestination. But isn't this capacity that which distinguishes Him as God?

¹Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 908.

²Ibid.

³See David Basinger and Randall Basinger (eds.), *Predestination and Freewill* (Downers Grove IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 10-14. Basinger organizes the alternative views around the notions of specific sovereignty (akin to the views of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin) and general sovereignty (akin to the open view of God and process theology).

⁴Bruce Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power," in *Predestination and Freewill*, edited by D. Basinger and R. Basinger (Downers Grove IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 101.

⁵Robert A Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not An Arminian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 29.

⁶Classical theology in this paper refers to the theology that attempted to combine Greek philosophy with Christianity, such as we find in the theology of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

⁷Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (n. p.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), 282.

⁸Disputing the Arminian view of foreknowledge as the basis of predestination Erickson takes the position that foreknowledge means more than advance knowledge and includes the idea of favorable disposition or selection, *ibid.*, 356. See also, on Rom 8:29-30, Matthew Black, *Romans: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 119, where foreknowledge is interpreted as choice or election; and F. F. Bruce, *Romans: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 166, where foreknowledge is said to connote electing grace.

⁹Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Freewill*, edited by D. Basinger and R. Basinger (Downers Grove IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 138, is correct in his critique of the classical Arminian position when he observes: "I agree with strict Calvinists that Arminians, if they wish to be consistent, must rethink the traditional doctrine of omniscience as well as omnipotence."

¹⁰For a discussion of relevant biblical texts see Peterson and Williams, 67-91.

¹¹P. Jacobs and H. Krienke, "proorizo," in Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 696.

¹²Chad O. Brand, *Perspectives on Election* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 74.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴The timeless God in the Aristotelian sense is incapable of participating or intervening in the flow of history.

¹⁵Ernest Best, *Ephesians: International Critical Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 1998), 119.

¹⁶Basinger and Basinger, 157.

¹⁷Conditionality is the notion that God's predestination is conditional upon human decisions.