

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Election is Not Based on God's Foreknowledge of Our Faith

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1

Quite commonly people will agree that God predestines some to be saved, but they will say that he does this by looking into the future and seeing who will believe in Christ and who will not. If he sees that a person is going to come to saving faith, then he will predestine that person to be saved, *based on foreknowledge of that person's faith*. If he sees that a person will not come to saving faith, then he does not predestine that person to be saved. In this way, it is thought, the ultimate reason why some are saved and some are not lies *within the people themselves* not within God. All that God does in his predestining work is to give confirmation to the decision he knows people will make on their own. The verse commonly used to support this view is Romans 8:29: "For those *whom he foreknew* he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."¹



Foreknowledge of Persons, Not Facts

But this verse can hardly be used to demonstrate that God based his predestination on foreknowledge of *the fact that a person would believe*. The passage speaks rather of the fact that God knew *persons* ("those whom he foreknew"), not that he knew some *fact about them* such as the fact that they would believe. It is a personal, relational knowledge that is spoken of here: God, looking into the future, thought of certain people in saving relationship to him, and in that sense he "knew them" long ago. This is the sense in which Paul can talk about God's "knowing" someone, for example, in 1 Corinthians 8:3: "But if one loves God, one is *known by him*." Similarly, he says, "but now that you have come to know God, or rather *to be known by God* ..." (Gal. 4:9). When people *know* God in Scripture, or when God *knows* them, it is personal knowledge that involves a saving relationship.

¹ The idea that predestination is based on God's foreknowledge of those who would believe is argued in Jack W. Cottrell, "Conditional Election," in *Grace Unlimited* pp. 51–73. Cottrell says, "Through his foreknowledge God sees who will believe upon Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and become united with him in Christian baptism; then even before the creation of the world he predestines these believers to share the glory of the risen Christ" (p. 62).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Therefore in Romans 8:29, “those whom he *foreknew*” is best understood to mean, “those whom he long ago *thought of in a saving relationship to himself.*” The text actually says nothing about God foreknowing or foreseeing that certain people would believe, nor is that idea mentioned in any other text of Scripture.²

Sometimes people say that God elected *groups* of people, but not individuals to salvation. In some Arminian views, God just elected the church as a group, while the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) said that God elected Christ, and all people in Christ. But Romans 8:29 talks about certain people whom God foreknew (“*those whom he foreknew*”), not just undefined or unfilled groups. And in Ephesians Paul talks about certain people whom God chose, including himself: “He *chose us* in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). To talk about God choosing a group with no people in it is not biblical election at all. But to talk about God choosing a group of people means that he chose specific individuals who constituted that group.³

Scripture Never Speaks of Our Faith As the Reason God Chose Us

In addition, when we look beyond these specific passages that speak of foreknowledge and look at verses that talk about the *reason* God chose us, we find that Scripture never speaks of our faith or the fact that we would come to believe in Christ as the reason God chose us. In fact, Paul seems explicitly to exclude the consideration of what people would do in life from his understanding of God’s choice of Jacob rather than Esau: he says, “Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, *in order that God’s purpose of election might continue* not because of works but because of his call, she was told, “The elder will serve the younger.’ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” ’ (Rom. 9:11–13). Nothing that Jacob or Esau would do in life influenced God’s decision; it was simply in order that his purpose of election might continue.

When discussing the Jewish people who have come to faith in Christ, Paul says, “So too at the present time there is a remnant, *chosen by grace*. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works” (Rom. 11:5–6). Here again Paul emphasizes God’s grace and the complete absence of human merit in the process of election. Someone might object that faith is not viewed as a “work” in Scripture and therefore faith should be excluded from the quotation above (“It is no longer on the basis of *works*”). Based on this objection, Paul could actually mean, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, but rather

² Rom. 11:2 similarly speaks of God’s foreknowing *persons* not facts about people or the fact that they would believe: “God has not rejected his people *whom he foreknew.*”

³ In answer to Barth’s view that all are chosen in Christ, see the discussion below on reprobation (the fact that some are not chosen), and chapter 7, pp. 116–18, and chapter 56, pp. 1148–53, on the fact that those who do not believe in Christ will not be saved.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

on the basis of whether someone would believe.” However, this is unlikely in this context: Paul is not contrasting human faith and human works; he is contrasting God’s sovereign choosing of people with *any* human activity, and he points to God’s sovereign will as the ultimate basis for God’s choice of the Jews who have come to Christ.

Similarly, when Paul talks about election in Ephesians, there is no mention of any foreknowledge of the fact that we would believe, or any idea that there was anything worthy or meritorious in us (such as a tendency to believe) that was the basis for God’s choosing us. Rather, Paul says, “He destined us *in love* to be his sons through Jesus Christ, *according to the purpose of his will* to the praise of his glorious grace *which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved*” (Eph. 1:5–6). Now if God’s grace is to be praised for election, and not human ability to believe or decision to believe, then once again it is consistent for Paul to mention nothing of human faith but only to mention God’s predestining activity, his purpose and will, and his freely given grace.

Again in 2 Timothy, Paul says that God “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but *in virtue of his own purpose* and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago” (2 Tim. 1:9). Once again God’s sovereign purpose is seen as the ultimate reason for our salvation, and Paul connects this with the fact that God gave us grace in Christ Jesus ages ago—another way of speaking of the truth that God freely gave favor to us when he chose us without reference to any foreseen merit or worthiness on our part.

Election Based on Something Good in Us (Our Faith) Would Be the Beginning of Salvation by Merit

Yet another kind of objection can be brought against the idea that God chose us because he foreknew that we would come to faith. If the *ultimate* determining factor in whether we will be saved or not is our own decision to accept Christ, then we shall be more inclined to think that we deserve some credit for the fact that we were saved: in distinction from other people who continue to reject Christ, we were wise enough in our judgment or good enough in our moral tendencies or perceptive enough in our spiritual capacities to decide to believe in Christ. But once we begin to think this way then we seriously diminish the glory that is to be given to God for our salvation. We become uncomfortable speaking like Paul who says that God “destined us ... *according to the purpose of his will* to the praise of his glorious *grace*” (Eph. 1:5–6), and we begin to think that God “destined us ... according to the fact that he knew that we would have enough tendencies toward goodness and faith within us that we would believe.” When we think like this we begin to sound very much unlike the New Testament when it talks about election or predestination. By contrast, if election is solely based on God’s own good

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

pleasure and his sovereign decision to love us in spite of our lack of goodness or merit, then certainly we have a profound sense of appreciation to him for a salvation that is totally undeserved, and we will forever be willing to praise his “glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6).

In the final analysis, the difference between two views of election can be seen in the way they answer a very simple question. Given the fact that in the final analysis some people will choose to accept Christ and some people will not, the question is, “What makes people differ?” That is, what *ultimately* makes the difference between those who believe and those who do not? If our answer is that it is ultimately based on something God does (namely, his sovereign election of those who would be saved), then we see that salvation at its most foundational level is based on *grace alone*. On the other hand, if we answer that the ultimate difference between those who are saved and those who are not is because of *something in man* (that is, a tendency or disposition to believe or not believe), then salvation ultimately depends on a combination of grace plus human ability.⁴

Predestination Based on Foreknowledge Still Does Not Give People Free Choice

The idea that God’s predestination of some to believe is based on foreknowledge of their faith encounters still another problem: upon reflection, this system turns out to give no real freedom to man either. For if God can look into the future and see that person A *will* come to faith in Christ, and that person B *will not* come to faith in Christ, then those facts are already *fixed* they are already *determined*. If we assume that God’s knowledge of the future is *true* (which it must be), then it is absolutely certain that person A will believe and person B will not. There is no way that their lives could turn out any differently than this. Therefore it is fair to say that their destinies are still *determined* for they could not be otherwise. But *by what* are these destinies determined? If they are determined by God himself, then we no longer have election based ultimately on foreknowledge of faith, but rather on God’s sovereign will. But if these destinies are not determined by God, then who or what determines them? Certainly no Christian would say that there is some powerful being other than God controlling people’s destinies. Therefore it seems that the

⁴ The fact that the Arminian position ultimately makes something in man the determining factor in whether people are saved or not is seen clearly in the statement of I. Howard Marshall: “The effect of the call of God is to place man in a position where he can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (which he could not do before God called him; till then he was in a continuous attitude of ‘no’)” (“Predestination in the New Testament,” in *Grace Unlimited* p. 140). In this statement of Marshall’s we see that the final determinant of whether people are saved or not is whether they say yes or no to God’s call, and therefore salvation still ultimately depends on something in man, an ability or tendency within him that persuades him to say yes rather than no.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

only other possible solution is to say they are determined by some impersonal force, some kind of fate, operative in the universe, making things turn out as they do. But what kind of benefit is this? We have then sacrificed election in love by a personal God for a kind of determinism by an impersonal force and God is no longer to be given the ultimate credit for our salvation.

Conclusion: Election Is Unconditional

5

It seems best, for the previous four reasons, to reject the idea that election is based on God's foreknowledge of our faith. We conclude instead that the reason for election is simply God's sovereign choice—he "destined us in love to be his sons" (Eph. 1:5). God chose us simply because he decided to bestow his love upon us. It was not because of any foreseen faith or foreseen merit in us. This understanding of election has traditionally been called "unconditional election."⁵ It is "unconditional" because it is not *conditioned upon* anything that God sees in us that makes us worthy of his choosing us.^{6 7}

⁵ Unconditional election is the "U" in the acronym TULIP, which stands for "the five points of Calvinism." The other letters stand for *Total depravity* (see chapter 24, pp. 497–98), *Limited atonement* (see chapter 27, pp. 594–603), *Irresistible grace* (see chapter 34, p. 700), and *Perseverance of the saints* (see chapter 40, pp. 788–803). See also p. 596, n. 35.

⁶ Regarding the doctrine of election, there has been a dispute in Reformed circles (those who hold to election as presented here) between two positions known as *supralapsarianism* and *infralapsarianism*. The difference concerns what happened in God's mind before the foundation of the world. It does not concern something that happened in time, but rather it concerns the *logical* order of God's thoughts. The question is whether, in logical order, (a) God decided first that he would *save some people* and second that he would *allow sin* into the world so that he could save them from it (the supralapsarian position), or whether it was the other way around, so that (b) God first decided that he would *allow sin* into the world and second decided that he would *save some people* from it (the infralapsarian position). The word *supralapsarian* means "before the fall," and the word *infralapsarian* means "after the fall." The discussion is complex and highly speculative because there is very little direct biblical data to help us with it. Good arguments have been advanced in support of each view, and there is probably some element of truth in each one. But in the last analysis it seems wiser to say that Scripture does not give us enough data to probe into this mystery, and, moreover, it does not seem very edifying to do so.

In fact, I have decided to mention the discussion in this textbook at this point only because the words "supralapsarian" and "infralapsarian" are sometimes used in theological circles as symbols for the most abstract and obscure of theological discussions, and it seemed to me appropriate simply to inform the reader of the nature of this dispute and the meaning of these terms. For those interested, a further discussion is found in Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* pp. 118–25.

⁷ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (pp. 676–679). Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.