

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Meaning of “Foreknew” in Romans 8:29

DAVID N. STEELE & CURTIS C. THOMAS

1

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Romans 8:29, 30

Broadly speaking there have been two general views as to the meaning and use of the word “foreknew” in Romans 8:29. One class of commentators (the Arminians) maintain that Paul is saying that God predestined to salvation those whom He *foreknew* would respond to His offer of grace (i.e., those whom He saw would of their own free will repent of their sins and believe the gospel). Godet, in commenting on Romans 8:29, asks the question: “In what respect did God thus *foreknow* them?” and answers that they were “foreknown as sure to fulfill the conditions of salvation, viz. *faith*; so: foreknown as His *by faith*.”¹ The word “foreknew” is thus understood by the Arminians to mean that God knew beforehand which sinners would believe, etc., and on the basis of this knowledge He predestined them unto salvation.

The other class of commentators (the Calvinists) reject the above view on two grounds. First, because the Arminians’ interpretation is not in keeping with the meaning of Paul’s language and second, because it is out of harmony with the system of doctrine taught in the rest of the Scriptures. Calvinists contend that the passage teaches that God set His heart upon (i.e., foreknew) certain individuals; these He predestined or marked out to be saved. Notice that the text does *not* say that God *knew* SOMETHING ABOUT *particular individuals* (that they would do this or that), but it states that God *knew the individuals THEMSELVES*—those whom He *knew* He predestined to be made like Christ. The word “foreknew” as used here is thus understood to be equivalent to “fore-loved” —those who were the objects of God’s love, He marked out for salvation.

The questions raised by the two opposing interpretations are these: Did God look down through time and see that certain individuals would believe and thus predestine them unto salvation on the basis of this foreseen faith? Or did God set His heart on certain individuals and because of His love for them predestine that they should be called and

¹ Frederic Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 325. Italics are his.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

given faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit and thus be saved? In other words, is the individual's faith the *cause* or the *result* of God's predestination?

A. The meaning of "foreknew" in Romans 8:29

God has always possessed perfect knowledge of all creatures and of all events. There has never been a time when anything past, present, or future was not fully known to Him. But it is not His knowledge of future events (of what people would do, etc.) which is referred to in Romans 8:29, 30, for Paul clearly states that those whom He *foreknew* He predestined, He called, He justified, etc. Since all men are *not* predestined, called, and justified, it follows that all men were *not foreknown* by God in the sense spoken of in verse 29.

It is for this reason that Arminians are forced to add some qualifying notion. They read into the passage some idea not contained in the language itself such as those whom He foreknew *would believe etc.*, He predestined, called, and justified. But according to the Biblical usage of the words "know," "knew," and "foreknew" there is not the least need to make such an addition, and since it is unnecessary, it is improper. When the Bible speaks of God knowing particular individuals, it often means that He has special regard for them, that they are the objects of His affection and concern. For example in Amos 3:2, God, speaking to Israel says, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." The Lord knew *about* all the families of the earth, but He knew Israel in a special way. They were His chosen people whom He had set His heart upon. See Deuteronomy 7:7, 8; 10:15. Because Israel was His in a special sense He chastised them, cf. Hebrews 12:5, 6. God, speaking to Jeremiah, said, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you," (Jeremiah 1:5). The meaning here is not that God knew *about*, Jeremiah but that He had special regard for the prophet before He formed him in his mother's womb. Jesus also used the word "knew" in the sense of personal, intimate awareness. "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers'" (Matt. 7:22, 23). Our Lord cannot be understood here as saying, I knew nothing about you, for it is quite evident that He knew all too much about them—their evil character and evil works; hence, His meaning must be, I never knew you intimately nor personally, I never regarded you as the objects of my favor or love. Paul uses the word in the same way in 1 Corinthians 8:3, "But if one loves God, one is *known* by him," and also 2 Timothy 2:19, "the Lord knows those who are His." The Lord knows *about* all men but He only *knows* those "who love Him, who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28)—*those who are His!*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Murray's argument in favor of this meaning of "foreknew" is very good. "It should be observed that the text says 'whom he foreknew'; *whom* is the object of the verb and there is no qualifying addition. This, of itself, shows that, unless there is some other compelling reason, the expression 'whom he foreknew' contains within itself the differentiation which is presupposed. If the apostle had in mind some 'qualifying adjunct' it would have been simple to supply it. Since he adds none we are forced to inquire if the actual terms he uses can express the differentiation implied. The usage of Scripture provides an affirmative answer. Although the term 'foreknew' is used seldom in the New Testament, it is altogether indefensible to ignore the meaning so frequently given to the word 'know' in the usage of Scripture; 'foreknow' merely adds the thought of 'beforehand' to the word 'know'. Many times in Scripture 'know' has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with 'love', to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action (cf. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 2:25; Psalm 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; Matt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 John 3:1). There is no reason why this import of the word 'know' should not be applied to 'foreknow' in this passage, as also in 11:2 where it also occurs in the same kind of construction and where the thought of election is patently present (cf. 11:5, 6). When this import is appreciated, then there is no reason for adding any qualifying notion and 'whom he foreknew' is seen to contain within itself the differentiating element required. It means 'whom he set regard upon' or 'whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight' and is virtually equivalent to 'whom he foreloved'. This interpretation, furthermore, is in agreement with the efficient and determining action which is so conspicuous in every other link of the chain—it is God who predestinates, it is God who calls, it is God who justifies, and it is he who glorifies. Foresight of faith would be out of accord with the determinative action which is predicated of God in these other instances and would constitute a weakening of the total emphasis at the point where we should least expect it... It is not the foresight of difference but the foreknowledge that makes difference to exist, not a foresight that recognizes existence but the foreknowledge that determines existence. It is a sovereign distinguishing love."²

Hodge observes that "as *to know* is often *to approve* and *love*, it may express the idea of peculiar affection in this case; or it may mean to *select* or *determine upon*.... The usage of the word is favourable to either modification of this general idea of *preferring*. 'The people which he foreknew,' i.e., loved or selected, Rom. 11:2; 'Who verily was foreordained (Gr. *foreknown*), i.e., *fixed upon*, *chosen* before the foundation of the world,' 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:19; John 10:14, 15; see also Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:2. The idea, therefore, obviously is, that those whom God peculiarly loved, and by thus loving, distinguished or selected from the

² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I, pp. 316–318. Italics are his.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

rest of mankind; or to express both ideas in one word, those whom *he elected* he predestined, etc.”³

Although God knew *about* all men before the world began, He did not *know* all men in the sense that the Bible sometimes uses the word “know,” i.e., with intimate personal awareness and love. It is in this latter sense that God foreKNEW those whom He predestined, called, and justified, as outlined in Romans 8:29, 30!

4

B. Romans 8:29 does not refer to the foresight of faith, good works, etc.

As was pointed out above, it is unnecessary and therefore indefensible to add any qualifying notion such as faith to the verb foreknew in Romans 8:29. The Arminians make this addition, not because the language requires it, but because their theological system requires it—they do it to escape the doctrines of unconditional predestination and election. They *read* the notion of foreseen faith *into* the verse and then appeal to it in an effort to prove that predestination was based on foreseen events. Thus particular individuals are said to be saved, *not* because *God willed* that they should be saved (for He willed the salvation of everyone) *but* because *they themselves willed* to be saved. Hence salvation is made to depend ultimately on the individual’s will, not on the sovereign will of Almighty God—faith is understood to be man’s gift to God, not God’s gift to man.

Haldane, comparing Scripture with Scripture, clearly shows that the foreknowledge mentioned in Romans 8:29 cannot have reference to foreseen faith, good works, or the sinner’s response to God’s call. “Faith cannot be the cause of foreknowledge, because foreknowledge is before predestination, and faith is the effect of predestination. ‘As many as were ordained to eternal life believed,’ Acts 13:48. Neither can it be meant of the foreknowledge of good works, because these are the effects of predestination. ‘We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works; which God hath before ordained (or before prepared) that we should walk in them;’ Eph. 2:10. Neither can it be meant of foreknowledge of our concurrence with the external call, because our effectual calling depends not upon that concurrence, but upon God’s purpose and grace, given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, 2 Tim. 1:9. By this foreknowledge, then, is meant, as has been observed, the love of God towards those whom he predestinates to be saved through Jesus Christ. All the called of God are foreknown by Him,—that is, they are the objects of His eternal love, and their calling comes from this free love. ‘I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness I have drawn thee,’ Jer. 31:3.”⁴

³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 283, 284. Italics are his.

⁴ Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 397.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Murray, in rejecting the view that “foreknew” in Romans 8:29 refers to the foresight of faith, is certainly correct in stating that “It needs to be emphasized that the rejection of this interpretation is not dictated by a predestinarian interest. Even if it were granted that ‘foreknew’ means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. For it is certainly true that God foresees faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates (cf. John 3:3–8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:2). Hence his eternal foresight of faith is preconditioned by his decree to generate this faith in those whom he foresees as believing, and we are thrown back upon the differentiation which proceeds from God’s own eternal and sovereign election to faith and its consequents. The interest, therefore, is simply one of interpretation as it should be applied to this passage. On exegetical grounds we shall have to reject the view that ‘foreknew’ refers to the foresight of faith.”⁵

C. Various ways in which the Greek word “foreknew” (*proegno*) has been rendered in modern English translations of the New Testament

The root Greek word (*proegno*) literally translated foreknew and foreknowledge occurs seven times in the Greek New Testament. Twice it refers to previous knowledge on the part of *man*: In Acts 26:5 to the Jews’ previous knowledge of Paul, and in 2 Peter 3:17 to the Christians’ previous knowledge (being forewarned) of scoffers who would come in the last days. Five times it refers to *God’s* foreknowledge: Three of these times it is used as a verb, Romans 8:29; 11:2; and 1 Peter 1:2, and twice as a noun, Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:20. The following quotations show how various modern translations have attempted to convey in English the Biblical connotations of the word when used in reference to *God’s* foreknowledge. In each quotation the English word or phrase which corresponds to the Greek word “foreknew” is CAPITALIZED so that the reader may see at a glance how the translators have rendered it. These various renderings certainly show, in the opinion of these translators, that when used in reference to God’s foreknowledge in the New Testament, the word connotes more than simple knowledge of future events.⁶

⁵ Murray, *Romans*, Vol. I, p. 316.

⁶ See the article on “Foreknow” in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. II, pp. 1128–1131 and *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, p. 225. See also W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 441–449. Cf. the article on “Predestination” by J. I. Packer in *The New Bible Dictionary*, pp. 1024–1026.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Moffatt's Translation

- Rom. 8:29 "For he decreed of old that those whom he PREDESTINED should share the likeness of his Son ..."
- Rom. 11:2 "God has not repudiated his People, his PREDESTINED People!"
- 1 Pet. 1:2 "whom God the Father has PREDESTINED and chosen, ..."
- 1 Pet. 1:20 "He was PREDESTINED before the foundation of the world ..."
- Acts 2:23 "this Jesus, betrayed in the PREDESTINED COURSE of God's deliberate purpose, ..."

Goodspeed's Translation

- Rom. 8:29 "For those whom he HAD MARKED OUT FROM THE FIRST he predestined to be made like his Son, ..."
- Rom. 11:2 "God has not repudiated his people, which he HAD MARKED OUT FROM THE FIRST."
- 1 Pet. 1:2 "whom God the Father has chosen and PREDESTINED ..."
- 1 Pet. 1:20 "who was PREDESTINED for this before the foundation of the world, ..."
- Acts 2:23 "But you, by the fixed purpose and INTENTION of God, handed him over to wicked men, ..."

Wuest, An Expanded Translation of the New Testament

- Rom. 8:29 "Because, those whom He FOREORDAINED He also marked out beforehand ..."
- Rom. 11:2 "God did not repudiate His people whom He FOREORDAINED."
- 1 Pet. 1:2 "chosen-out ones, this choice having been determined by the FOREORDINATION of God the Father ..."
- 1 Pet. 1:20 "who indeed was FOREORDAINED before the foundation of the universe was laid, ..."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

- Acts 2:23 “this One, having been delivered up by the counsel of God which [in the council held by the Trinity] had decided upon His destiny, even by the FOREORDINATION of God WHICH IS THAT ACT FIXING HIS DESTINY, ...”

Phillips' New Testament

- Rom. 11:2 “It is unthinkable that God should have repudiated his own people, the people WHOSE DESTINY HE HIMSELF APPOINTED.”
- 1 Pet. 1:2 “whom God the Father KNEW and chose long ago to be made holy by his Spirit, ...”
- 1 Pet. 1:20 “It is true that God CHOSE him to fulfill his part before the world was founded, ...”

The Amplified New Testament

- Rom. 8:29 “For those whom He FOREKNEW—OF WHOM HE WAS AWARE ...”
- Rom. 11:2 “No, God has not rejected *and* disowned His people [whose destiny] He had MARKED OUT *and* APPOINTED *and* FOREKNOWN FROM THE BEGINNING.”

Williams' New Testament

- Rom. 8:29 “For those ON WHOM HE SET HIS HEART BEFOREHAND He marked off as His own to be made like His Son, ...” Williams gives the following footnote: “Lit., *foreknew* but in Septuagint used as translated.”
- Rom. 11:2 “No, God has not disowned His people, ON WHOM HE SET HIS HEART BEFOREHAND.”
- 1 Pet. 1:20 “who was FOREORDAINED ...”

The New English Bible

- Rom. 8:29 “For God KNEW HIS OWN BEFORE EVEN THEY WERE, and also ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness of his Son, ...”
- Rom. 11:2 “No! God has not rejected the people which he ACKNOWLEDGED OF OLD AS HIS OWN.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

- 1 Pet. 1:2 “chosen of old IN THE PURPOSE of God the Father, ...”
- 1 Pet. 1:20 “He was PREDESTINED before the foundation of the world, ...”
- Acts 2:23 “When he had been given to you, by the deliberate will and PLAN of God, you used heathen men to crucify and kill him.”

D. Conclusion

As was stated at the outset, Calvinists reject the Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:29 on, two grounds, (1) because it is not in keeping with the meaning of Paul’s language, and (2) because it is out of harmony with the system of doctrine taught in the rest of the Scriptures. This Appendix has been devoted to demonstrating the validity of the first objection. Part II of this work dealt with the latter objection.¹

¹ Steele, D. N., Thomas, C. C., & Nicole, R. (1963). *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented* (pp. 85–91). The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co.