

Why the Glory of God Is at Stake in the "Foreknowledge" Debate

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This article pre-supposes that true doctrine is the foundation of true delight. If we do not get our doctrine of God right, we will destroy the foundations of delight. Joy may flourish for a generation when the root is severed, but in the end, delight in God will die without true doctrine. And the glorification of God--through both understanding and enjoying him--will vanish. So, for the sake of God's glory, I write with a very specific burden about the doctrine of God. Let Martin Luther set the stage:

If I profess, with the loudest voice and clearest exposition, every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle field besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point. (1)

*Personally, this has meant a twenty-year battle with the attack on God's foreknowledge of his creature's moral choices. This engagement has been sporadic until recently, and intense for the last two years. Back in 1977, a book was published called *Did God Know?* The book affirmed that "God's knowledge is perfect and boundless." But it argued that omniscience cannot include what is by nature unknowable, namely, future choices made by free creatures. "[God] cannot know something which is nothing," said the author, and future choices are not yet in existence to know. They are nothing. (2) So it is not limiting God's foreknowledge to say he cannot "know nothing," namely, the future his creatures create.*

I knew someone close to the author, and this person, not agreeing with his view, prevailed on me to meet with him. So this issue became a pressing personal reality for me in the late seventies. The position, of course, is not new. The Socinians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made the same argument. "God does not know," they said, "in such a way that whatsoever he knows will surely come to pass." (3) In other words, in regard to human choices, God knows future possibilities, but not future certainties.

Thankfully, the Socinians did not carry the day. And both Calvinists and Arminians have, as a whole along with virtually all Christendom affirmed God's foreknowledge of human choices. John Calvin wrote, "[God] foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place" (Institutes, 3.23.6). And Jacobus Arminius wrote, "[God] has known from eternity which persons should believe... and which should persevere through subsequent grace." (4) Denying God's foreknowledge of human choices has never been an option within orthodox Christianity.

The Current Version of an Old Error

But the astonishing fact is that, here at the end of the twentieth century, it is not just quirky, self-published books like *Did God Know?* that make this denial, but scholars of evangelical repute, in books by publishers that once would have regarded such views as far from orthodox. Ironically for me, the most popular proponent of this view today is a pastor in my denomination who also teaches at our denominational school and has published this view with Scripture Press (Chariot Victor Publishing) and InterVarsity Press. Greg Boyd's most popular book is *Letters from a Skeptic*. The book contains many helpful insights to strengthen faith. But here he explains his view of God's omniscience and foreknowledge:

In the Christian view God knows all of reality--everything there is to know. But to assume He knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person's free activity is already there to know--even before he freely does it! But it's not. If we have been given freedom, we create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don't exist. Thus, in my view at least, there simply isn't anything to know until we make it there to know. So God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn create their decisions. (5)

I cannot treat this view as though it belongs to historic, orthodox Christianity, much less biblical Evangelicalism. It is a profoundly defective view of God and therefore will lead, if unchecked, to the uprooting of true delight in God and to the depreciation of his glory. Jonathan Edwards shared this negative assessment of the denial of God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge, and therefore devoted a major section of his greatest book, *The Freedom of the Will*, to the defense of God's foreknowledge of moral choices. The title of this section is, "The Evidence of God's Certain Foreknowledge of the Volitions of Moral Agents." (6) Paul Ramsey, the editor of this volume of Edwards' Works explains Edwards' driving motive: "Into the writing of [*The Freedom of the Will*] he poured all his intellectual acumen, coupled with a passionate conviction that *the decay to be observed in the religion and morals followed the decline in doctrine since the founding of New England.*" (7) In other words, doctrine matters for life and worship. Edwards believed passionately that a defective doctrine of God would, in the end, destroy delight in God and devotion to God. And above all, this meant that the glory of God would be lost in the Church and in the world. I think he is right. The issue of God's foreknowledge is ultimately about the glory of God.

God's Deity Connected with His Foreknowledge

Edwards makes this point clear in three primary ways. In the first place, he says that if God can't foreknow our choices, then "in vain has God himself often spoken of the predictions of his Word, as evidences of ... his peculiar glory, greatly distinguishing him from all other beings." (8) The texts he has in mind are the very powerful texts in Isaiah that explicitly connect God's deity with his foreknowledge.

In Isaiah 41:22b-23, God calls the idols to give an account and challenges them to show that they are gods: "Announce to us what is coming; declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods." In other words, in God's mind, the capacity to predict the future belonged to God. It was part of his deity to be able to "declare things that are to come afterwards."

He makes the same connection in Isaiah 42:8-9, and connects his power to foreknow with his glory: "I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you." You see the connection: I am Yahweh, and this is part of my divine glory: before they spring forth, I proclaim them to you. Knowledge of what the future will bring is my glory.

Perhaps the most famous word of all on God's claim on the future is Isaiah 46:9-10, "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure." Those who deny God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge object that the predictions in view here are only of things God intends to bring about himself. And, they say, of course he knows what he intends to do. But they deny that God claims to foreknow certainly what others will do.

But that assumes there are two classes of future events: those God predetermines and therefore foreknows; and those that arise from some other source than his plan, and which he does not know are coming, namely, those that arise from human and demonic choices. (9) But does Isaiah make this distinction? I don't think so. For virtually all the predictions God has in mind in these texts in regard to Israel's future judgment and rescue involve thousands of human choices to bring them about; yet God foreknows them; and *this* knowing is what it means for him to be God. Isaiah does not separate what God is planning to do and what man will choose to do. Virtually all God's judgments and deliverances involved choices that humans would make as instruments of God's plan.

So Edwards is right when he says that God's predictions of human events are "evidences of ...[God's] *peculiar glory*, greatly distinguishing him from all other beings." The issue of God's foreknowledge is the issue of God's glory. And if evangelicals hope to seek and see and savor and show the glory of God, we should defend this doctrine and define ourselves as those who believe in it.

Jesus' Precise Predictions

The second way Edwards defends the glory of God in his exhaustive, definite foreknowledge is to focus our attention on the precise predictions of Jesus, especially concerning the choices of Judas and Peter for which they were morally accountable. Edwards says, "What a contradiction is it, to say that God certainly foreknew that Judas would betray his Master or Peter deny him, and yet certainly knew that it might be otherwise, that is, certainly knew that he might be deceived!" (10) In other words, it would be utterly inglorious of God if he claimed to know that something is a future certainty and at the same time that it is only a future possibility, rather than a certainty. The glory of Christ is to know what is coming upon him with certainty and specificity.

John's gospel makes this explicit by connecting Jesus' foreknowledge with his deity, similarly to the way Isaiah made God's foreknowledge evidence of his deity. For example, in John 13:19, Jesus says at the Last Supper, "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that *I am*." With the words "I am" Jesus lays claim on deity in words that God uses of himself in texts like Isaiah 43:10 ("You are My witnesses," declares the Lord, "And My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that *I am*"). And the warrant for believing

that he is divine, he says, is that he is telling the disciples what is going to befall him before it comes to pass. Then two verses later, in John 13:21, Jesus specifically predicts the betrayal of Judas. "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me." The disciples wonder who he is talking about, and Jesus says in verse 26, "'That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him.' So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas." Jesus had known it from the beginning, as it says in John 6:64, "Jesus knew from the beginning ...who it was that would betray Him." And he not only knew *that* it would happen and who would do it, but also *when* it would happen. Matthew 26:2: "You know that after *two days* the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is handed over for crucifixion." And it says that when he had given the morsel to Judas he said, "What you do, do quickly" (John 13:27). He knows that it is coming, who will do it, and when.

Two things are crucial to note here: one is that Jesus foreknows the evil deed of Judas *with certainty*. The other is that Jesus himself says that this foreknowledge is *part of his glory* as divine: "I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that *I am*" (John 13:19). If evangelicals have a passion for the glory of Christ, we must join him in affirming, not denying, his ability to foreknow with certainty human choices without removing moral accountability. It's his glory to know them.

His knowledge of Peter's threefold denial is even more remarkable. Jesus not only predicts that Peter will deny him three times that very night, but treats the act with such certainty that he is already praying for Peter's future repentance and future ministry.

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." But he said to Him, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" And He said, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me." (Luke 22:31-34)

This absolute knowledge *that* Peter would sin, *how often* he would sin, *when* he would sin, and *that he would repent* does not remove Peter's moral responsibility in the least, which is made plain by the fact that Peter weeps bitterly precisely when he remembers the words of Jesus' prediction. Peter does not say, "Well, you predicted this sin, and so it had to take place, and so it can't have been part of my free willing, and so I am not responsible for it." He wept bitterly. He was guilty and he knew it.

Jesus was glorious in the prediction, and Peter was guilty. Why do all four gospels tell this remarkable prediction in detail? Surely the most profound answer is the one given by John 13:19, "I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am." His foreknowledge of "all the things that were coming upon him" was an essential aspect of his glory as the incarnate Word, the Son of God. The denial of this foreknowledge is, I believe John would say, (whether intended or not) an assault on the deity of Christ.

Foreknowledge and the Fall

A third way that Edwards upholds God's glory in the foreknowledge of human choices is in his treatment of the fall and all of redemptive history that God brought about in response to it. Edwards argues like

this:

If God [doesn't] foreknow the volition of moral agents, then he did not foreknow the fall of man, or of angels, and so could not foreknow the great things which were consequent on these events; such as his sending his Son into the world to die for sinners, and all things pertaining to the great work of redemption; all the things which were done four thousand years before Christ came, to prepare the way for it; and the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ § etc. (11)

But in fact, Edwards observes, God must have foreknown the fall of Adam with all its disastrous moral effects, because, for example, Paul says that *from all eternity* God has planned to give us saving grace in Christ Jesus as our Savior. "[God] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim. 1:9). In other words, God not only foreknew in eternity the sinful choice that Adam would make (and Lucifer before him), but he also planned to give us grace through Jesus Christ in response to the misery and destruction and condemnation resulting from the fall that he foreknew.

Now add to this the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 1:4-6, and you see clearly how the glory of God is at stake in the denial of God's foreknowledge of Adam's fall and its consequent miseries. Paul says, "[God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace." In other words, before the foundation of the world (before the sinful choice of Adam (which Boyd says was not foreknowable by God)) God chose us in Christ and predestined us for sonship through Christ so that the free and sovereign grace of God would be seen as glorious: "unto the praise of the glory of his grace." But if God did not foreknow the fall, and (as some argue) was surprised by it, then Paul's argument for the glory of God's grace manifest in his eternal plan to rescue us from the fall is not valid. So again: if evangelicals love the glory of God manifest in Christ's redeeming work planned before the foundation of the world, then we should affirm and cherish (and not deny) God's exhaustive, definite foreknowledge of human choices. Scriptures that seem to deny God's foreknowledge A fair and earnest person will ask at this point: How do Greg Boyd and others defend their view biblically? The answer is that Boyd directs our attention to passages of Scripture that seem to demand a denial of God's foreknowledge of human choices. For example, he refers to Isaiah's prophecy to Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:1, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live." Then Hezekiah weeps and prays. To which the Lord responds, in verse 5, "I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life." Boyd argues that this change in God's expressed intention shows that God did not know what Hezekiah would do when he threatened to end his life. But when God saw Hezekiah's (unforeknown) sorrow and heard his (unforeknown) prayer, God changed his plan and added fifteen years to his life.

But the fact is that both Boyd and I would say that God's first prediction contained an implicit condition. Both of us solve the problem of the apparent untruthfulness of the first prediction ("You will die") in the same way: God was saying in his own heart: "This I will do unless you repent." The difference between Boyd and me is that he thinks God was thinking implicitly, "I will do this unless you repent, and I don't know if you are going to repent." And I think God was thinking implicitly, "I will do this unless you repent, and I know you are going to repent."

Boyd would ask, "What's the point of saying Hezekiah is going to die (if he doesn't repent), when God knows that he will, in fact, repent?" I would respond by saying, God has his reasons for the way he acts that we cannot see ("Who has ever been his counselor?" Romans 11:34). But another answer would be: God warns him that he will die because he wants to move him to repentance and save him. In other words, the threat of death is the means of life.

Scriptures that Refer to God's Repenting

Another group of texts to which Boyd refers are the texts concerning God's being sorrowful that he did something. For example, in 1 Samuel 15:11, God says, "I repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me." And Genesis 6:5-6, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth. The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." Boyd asks, "How could the Lord possibly have regretted something he created if he was perfectly certain what would happen an eternity before he created it?" (12)

The implication for Boyd is that God could not regret or repent of what he foreknew. Therefore, God could not foreknow the fall and its disastrous consequences. And he could not foreknow that Saul was going to be a disobedient king.

My answer to this is threefold. First, these texts do not say or teach that God does not foreknow the future in question. Rather, Boyd infers this. In fact, no text in the Bible says that God does not foreknow human choices. This is always an inference based on what someone thinks is possible for God to do or say.

Second, we have seen from 2 Timothy 1:9 that God "has saved us according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus *from all eternity*." So the gracious work of Christ, redeeming us from the curse of the fall, was planned in eternity, and grace was given to us "from all eternity." The implication of this verse is just as strong that God foreknew the fall in Genesis 6:6 as that he did not foreknow the fall.

Third, in the very context of God's repentance over Saul (1 Sam. 15:28-29), Samuel says to Saul, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent." So in verse 11 God says, "I repent that I have made Saul king." And in verse 29 Samuel says, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent."

So my alternative way of thinking about these texts is: God foreknows the grievous and sorrowful effects of some of his own choices--for example, to create Adam and Eve, and to make Saul king. These effects are genuinely grievous to God as he sees them in themselves. Yet he does not regard his choices as mistakes that he would do differently if only he foreknew what was coming. Rather, he wills to do some things which he then genuinely grieves over in part when the grievous effect comes to pass.

Now if someone should say, This does not sound like what we ordinarily mean by "regret" or "repentance," I would respond that this is exactly why Samuel said: God "will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent" (1 Sam. 15:29). In other words, Samuel means something like this:

when I say "[God] repented that he made Saul king" (or when Moses said that God repented that he created Adam and Eve), I do not mean that God experiences repentance precisely the way ordinary humans do. He is not a man to experience "repentance" this way. He experiences it *his* way--the way one experiences "repentance" when one is all-wise and foreknows the entire future perfectly. The experience is real, but it is not like finite man experiences it.

God's Glory Is at Stake

Which brings us to the main and final point. When Samuel protests in 1 Samuel 15:29, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent," what is he protesting against? And what is he protesting *for*? The wording of the verse gives the answer. He is protesting *against* making God like a man. "God is not man." And he is protesting *for* the glory (13) of God. "The Glory of Israel will not...repent."

Therefore I say again, as earnestly and hopefully as I know how: the issue of God's foreknowledge of human choices is about the *glory of God*. And if you love the glory of God, if his glory is your treasure and your portion in this life and the next, then I urge you to say with Samuel, "The glory of Israel is not like a human being, he does not repent"--as though he did not know the future! Rather, as Jonathan Edwards said, God's foreknowledge is "his peculiar glory, greatly distinguishing him from all other beings. (14)

[Editor note: For current information on this debate within the Baptist General Conference see WORLD, July 17, 1999, p. 23.]

Notes:

- (1) Quoted in Parker T. Williamson, *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy* (Springfield, PA: PLC Publications, 1996), 5.
- (2) Roy Elseth, *Did God Know? A Study of the Nature of God* (St. Paul, MN: Calvary United Church, 1977), 55, 103.
- (3) *A Religious Encyclopedia*, ed. by Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1888), 2209.
- (4) Carl Bangs, *Arminius*, 352.
- (5) Gregory Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1994), 30 (emphasis added). See also Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 50, 304-305; and from the same publisher, the forthcoming *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.
- (6) Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale, 1957), 239-269.
- (7) *Ibid.*, Ramsey, introduction, 1-2 (emphasis added).
- (8) *Ibid.*, 252.
- (9) Greg Boyd develops the significance of demonic free will as ultimate self-determination. "A self-determining, supremely evil being rules the world." *God at War*, 54.

(10) Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* 208.

(11) Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will,* 252.

(12) Gregory Boyd, "The Bible and the Open View of the Future," unpublished paper dated May 4, 1998, 13, quoted with permission.

(13) The Hebrew word here is *netzach* which is rendered here as "eminence" by the standard lexicon, Brown, Driver and Briggs. But the connotation most often is temporal, in the sense of "enduringness" and "everlastingness." It may be very significant that this particular word is chosen to highlight the difference between man and God since the issue is one of God's capacity to know the future and not regret his decisions in view of what he knows is coming.

(14) Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will,* 252.

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