

Observations about God's Foreknowledge

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In order to refute unconditional election, many people appeal to the use of the word "foreknow" in Rom. 8:29 and 1 Pet. 1:1-2. "Foreknowledge" is defined simply "to know beforehand." It is seen to be synonymous with omniscience, prescience or precognition. Election is then viewed as God choosing those whom He knows will believe. This conditional view of election asserts that God elects on the basis of foreseen faith.

The following arguments seek to establish the biblical meaning of foreknowledge and demonstrate that "those whom He foreknew" or "elect according to the foreknowledge of God" does not and cannot mean "foreseen faith."

1. In Rom. 8:29, Paul does not say, "What God foreknew," it says, "whom He foreknew." The stated object of God's foreknowledge is personal knowledge of individuals, not events or actions that individuals will do. "Foreknowledge here is not some specific propositional knowledge about people, but it refers to God's relational knowledge of certain people themselves."¹
It is important to note that the Bible never actually speaks of God foreseeing faith.
2. The term "to foreknow" cannot mean mere precognition or bare foresight.² Who does God have precognition of? Who does He foresee? What does He foresee? Why does He foresee all people? Because He willed to create them personally (Psa. 139:13-16). Why does He foresee all events? Because He willed to bring them to pass (Eph. 1:11). "God's foreknowledge, taken abstractly, is not the sole cause of beings and events, but His will and foreknowledge together (Acts 2:23)."³ God is self-existing and self-sufficient. People, circumstances and events do not exist independently outside of God. All that is originated with God; He is the source of all things (Rom. 11:36). What God foresees, He foresees because He foreordained. "God foreknows those things He wills to come to pass."⁴ (Note: Free-will or open theists have seen the inescapable conclusion of certain and infallible foreknowledge and have consequently denied God's omniscience of future events).
3. The word, "to know" in the Bible often means a personal, intimate knowledge of someone. In light of this use of "to know" consider the following biblical passages: Gen. 4:1; 18:19; Ex. 33:17; Deut. 9:24; 1 Sam. 2:12; Jer. 1:5; Hos. 13:4-5; Amos 3:2; Matt. 7:23; Jn. 10:14, 27; Gal. 4:8-9. As many biblical

¹ Bruce Ware, *Perspectives on Election, 5 Views*, edited by Chad Owen Brand (Broadman and Holman, 2006), 27.

² For the logical and philosophical fallacies of this notion of precognition or foresight, see S.M. Baugh's "The Meaning of Foreknowledge," in *Still Sovereign*, eds. Schreiner and Ware (Baker, 2000), 183-200.

³ Jerome Zanchius, *Absolute Predestination* (Silver Trumpet Publications, 1989), 12.

⁴ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification*, trans. Frank James (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 2003), 17.

scholars have pointed out, for God to foreknow is for God to set His love and affection on beforehand. “Thus, to *foreknow* is to *forelove*.”⁵

4. “Foreloved” is the clear and necessary meaning of Rom. 8:29 and Rom. 11:1-2 (cf. Deut. 7:7-8). “Foreseen faith” or mere knowledge of future events cannot be read into these passages.
5. “Foreknown” is 1 Pet. 1:1-2 also clearly means “foreloved.” The elect are elected “according to the foreknowledge of God. Once again, “foreseen faith” will not fit the context, see 1 Pet. 1:20 where “foreknown” is used of Christ (cf. Isa. 42:1 and 1 Pet. 2:4).
6. If God elects those whose faith He foresees, then His choice ceases to be election at all, and is merely ratification of the human decision. Man is in the driver seat and God is the responder. However, Jn. 1:12-13; Rom. 9:16; Eph. 1:11 and a host of other texts declare the opposite. God deciding to accept man’s decision not only minimizes what means for God to choose, but changes the very meaning of God choosing.
7. In Acts 2:23 the events of the sufferings and crucifixion are said to be “foreknown.” This “foreknowledge” cannot be mere foresight that the events would occur. The “Foreknowledge of God” is grammatically connected as a unit with “predetermined plan.”⁶ God knows the events of Christ’s death will occur because He planned them. See also Acts 4:27-28.
8. Conclusion:
Foreknowledge is used in two distinct, but related ways in the N.T.

First, foreknowledge of certain events is an aspect of God’s omniscience; however, we must keep in mind that God’s knowledge does not operate outside of His will and power. So God knows what He knows because He has willed what He wills; His foreknowledge is infallible because His will is unthwartable and His power irresistible. Therefore, to say God foreknows is the same thing as to say God foreordains.

The second way “foreknowledge” is used refers to God’s knowledge of persons (Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:2, 20). This reflects personal knowledge, intimate relationship and love. It is the conceptual equivalent of God setting His love on beforehand and choosing.

The supporting evidence for this understanding of foreknowledge is very strong. Here are a few examples:

⁵ Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life* (Crossway, 2007), 103.

⁶ Both substantives are governed by one article (Granville Sharp Rule).

"In the NT προγινωσκω is referred to God. His foreknowledge, however, is an election or foreordination of His people (Rom. 11:8:29; 11:2) or Christ (1 Pet. 1:20)."⁷

"The idea of the foresight of one's faith is not present in the texts. . . While foreknowledge denotes the exercise of God's will to establish a special relationship with those whom God graciously elects before all time, predestination expresses God's appointing of them to a specific goal before all time."⁸

"On exegetical grounds we shall have to reject the view that "foreknew" refers to the foresight of faith. . . It [foreknowledge] is used in a sense practically synonymous with "love", to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action."⁹

"The -εγνω is to be understood in the light of the use of *yada* in such passages as Gen. 18:19; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2, where it denotes that special taking of knowledge of a person which is God's electing grace."¹⁰

Far from refuting unconditional election, God's foreknowledge in Rom. 8:29 supports it.

⁷ Bultmann, "Ginwskw" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Eerdmans, 1964), 715.

⁸ Gundry-Volf, "Foreknowledge," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Hawthorne, Martin and Reed (IVP, 1993), 310-311.

⁹ John Murray, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament, The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), 316-317

¹⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans* (T and T Clark, 1975), I, 431.