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The Doctrine of Foreknowledge and its Implications on Human Freedom

For centuries, the Church has wrestled with the implications of God’s foreknowledge. The concept of foreknowledge flows out of the doctrine of God’s Omniscience. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology 2nd ed.*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (2001) defines omniscience as saying, “God’s intellectual capabilities are unlimited, and God uses them fully and perfectly…. God knows all things (1 John 3:20)” (p. 494). In the same work, it notes, “Foreknowledge is thus an aspect of God’s omniscience. All things – past, present, and future; external and internal; material, intellectual, and spiritual – are open to God” (p. 458). Thus, in this work, we will attempt to examine how the concept of divine foreknowledge may or may not be compatible with human freedom (freewill). Norman L. Geisler (2010), in one of his definitive works, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of God’s Sovereignty and Free Will* notes, “*Free choice* [will] in this life means ‘the ability to do otherwise’… True freedom here on earth is the freedom to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation” (p. 21). Moreover, for our discussion, free will, in addition to what has already been defined, will also encompass the understanding that a person operates as their own agent who is in some sense the original cause of their own actions, and in this sense is in control of their own actions.

Our examination will probe the subject from several perspectives: Calvinism and Arminianism. The polemical debate of this subject has been waged over the centuries between Calvinism and Arminianism, and they stand for the traditional Protestant Church’s view; however, in the 20th century, a new player has entered the fray – Open theism, which has a unique perspective that we will engage as well.

The Calvinistic concept of foreknowledge and free will are weighted against the sovereignty of God. For the *Five-Point* Calvinist, one who holds to T.U.L.I.P (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints), sovereignty is defined as God’s supreme control and determination over His creation and all cause and effect events that transpire within His creation. In addition, sovereignty means that God is in control of all past, present and future choices of His created beings. Elwell, summarizing the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards’ Calvinistic view says, “If God is truly in control of all things, then no one could act contrary to his will…. Hence, for God to be sovereign, he must cause every event, be it human or otherwise” (p. 468).

The view espoused here theologically is termed – *determinism*. According to the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, edited by W.C. Campbell-Jack and Gavin McGrath (2006), defines determinism accordingly, “Determinists believe that every event (or every event in a certain category) has a cause that makes it happen exactly as it happens” (p. 218). This understanding, held by Church fathers such as Augustine, Calvin, Luther and the aforementioned Edwards, would be antithetical to free will and would mean that, at least after the Fall, humanity is no longer free.

The idea that humanity is not free, determined and that God is sovereign has far sweeping implications. First, it creates the dilemma that humanity is locked into a fatalistic existence; our lives are determined, what will happen will happen and we can do nothing about it. Second, and more insidious, God becomes the author of evil. Since in His sovereignty He has decreed all things prior to creation, and nothing happens that he has not decreed. The result is that He is ultimately responsible for the origination of evil. Many Calvinists deny this conclusion; however, it is a contradiction to proclaim that He has sovereignly caused *all* things, except evil.

Arminianism is a theological view based upon the thoughts of Jacobus Arminius (1560 – 1609) and the ideology that coalesced around his teachings. Arminius, who began as a Calvinist, changed his views after he lost a debate to an opponent who more ably defended his views against Calvinism. Arminius could not bear the idea of God being the creator of evil, and adjusted his view to what is now known as *Arminianism*. Earle E. Cairns (1954) notes, Arminius’ concerns in *Christianity through the Centuries*, when he records that “God might not be considered the author of sin, nor man an automaton in the hands of God” (p. 351).

Therefore, Arminianists believe that God’s foreknowledge works in conjunction with humanity’s free will. Although, Arminianists do believe in the sovereignty of God – in which He is supreme over all things…they do not believe that His sovereignty is incompatible with human free will. The rational is that if man is created with free will, and maintains a semblance of that free will even after the Fall, then humankind can be held legitimately responsible for their choices. Determinism would alleviate humanity of its responsibility for everything, especially evil. This idea is untenable for adherents to Arminianism, and therein lies the age-old debate between the two schools of thought.

The Arminianists view of salvation differs tremendously from the Calvinist view. Arminianists believe that God looked down through the corridors of time and saw all who would choose salvation in Christ, by the enlightening aid of the Holy Spirit, and He chose (elected, predestined) them to be a part of the family of God. As opposed to supralapsarianism, an extreme Calvinistic idea, which believes that God decreed one group to salvation and one group to damnation; which again, denies creaturely free choice and seems to make God arbitrary in His governance of the universe, and therefore, untrustworthy. In sum, Arminianists believe that God’s sovereignty and foreknowledge are compatible with human free choice. Although, not a contradiction, it is paradoxical.

Openness theology, more commonly referred to as “open theism,” and associated with religious leaders and theologians such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Gregory Boyd, William Hasker, David Basinger, *et al*.

The foundation of open theism is God’s love for humanity. They believe that God is sovereign; however, as to their belief about foreknowledge, Norman L. Geisler (2011), in *Systematic Theology: In One Volume* writes, “…God does not have infallible foreknowledge of future free acts” (p. 684). According to their view, God is only omniscient about the past and the present, since the future is not real, only a grouping of possibilities, the future is open and cannot be known exhaustively; hence, the concept of “open” theism. Moreover, they believe that free creatures much have libertarian free will. In *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, authors, J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig identify libertarian free will as,

Given choices A and B, one can literally choose to do either one, no circumstances exist [internally or externally] that are sufficient to determine one’s choice; a person’s choice is up to him, and if he does one of them, he could have done otherwise, or at least he could have refrained from acting at all. (p. 240)

Therefore, open theists object to God’s complete control or sovereignty over His creation because people have libertarian free will, which allows them to choose otherwise; thus determinism cannot exist, because it is impossible to have certain foreknowledge of free will choices. This opens the door to the open theist belief that the God of the Bible can be fallible; God can repent; God can learn; God can misjudge and God can make mistakes! Yet, this creates its own dilemma – if God is fallible, how can He be trusted to keep all that He has promised?

In sum, the extreme Calvinist says that all things are decreed and determined by God because He is Sovereign; thus, foreknowledge and free will are not compatible. Arminianists conclude that foreknowledge and free will are compatible because God is able to create free creatures and Open theists believe that God is so full of love that He could not infringe upon the rights of free creatures, and therefore, has limited His foreknowledge. Therefore, what do we make of all this information? Is God’s foreknowledge incompatible with free will?

What we must do is step back and take a grand view of the perspectives in order to understand it on a more particular level. If we can picture all of God’s attributes on a bar graph scale, all of God’s attributes would max out at 100% each. These attributes are always operating at 100%; at no time does any attribute diminish or decrease below 100%. However, there are times when one of His attributes shows forth more than another does, but they are all operating at a maximum level. With this concept in mind, let us turn to our perspectives.

Calvinists, in their view believe that God’s sovereignty is the major factor in God decision making; while the open theists believe that God’s love is the overriding force in His decision-making; I believe that the Arminianists have found the most balanced view. What the Calvinists and open theists have done unwittingly is that they have increased God’s sovereignty and His love above all the other attributes. It is as if God’s sovereignty and His love is operating at 110% while the other attributes are operating at 100%. However, in His divine nature, God can no more increase His sovereignty or love to 110%, than He can make a square circle. All of His attributes work in conjunction with one another, so to the open theists I say God is so loving that He could not limit His divine foreknowledge, for that would make Him less than God Almighty. To the Calvinist I say, God is so sovereign that He can make free creatures in which His foreknowledge is compatible; His knowing that something will happen, does not *make* it happen.

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