

The Fallacy of Foreknowledge: A Study of Romans 8:29-30

Brent Hobbs

Pew College Society Conference  
Dallas Baptist University  
April 5, 2003

## “The Fallacy of Foreknowledge: A Study of Romans 8:29-30”

### Introduction

The debate has been handed down throughout the centuries. Christians have long studied and pondered the issue of God’s sovereignty and how it relates to the responsibility of man. This is an important issue to those who seek to understand what scripture has to say about the question. One of the traditional arguments against the Reformed view states that God predestined people according to what He “foreknew” that they would choose. This idea stems from several passages of scripture that contain the idea of God’s foreknowledge.<sup>1</sup> This is probably the most popular view among modern lay Christians and is admittedly the natural interpretation considering human experience.<sup>2</sup> This view still allows people a supposed “free choice” in the process, whereas the Reformed idea of unconditional election is neither verified by experience nor is it a particularly pleasant view of salvation.

This study intends to investigate the biblical validity of the idea that God’s sovereign choice is determined by His foreknowledge. Of the four passages that mention the foreknowledge of God, Romans 8:29 deals most directly with the idea of the personal election of people by God. This passage not only mentions foreknowledge, but also predestination, calling,

---

<sup>1</sup> Verses that speak of the foreknowledge of God include Acts 2:23; Rom 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet 1:2.

<sup>2</sup> See John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).

justification, and glorification and shows the relationship that all of these actions relate to one another for the salvation of man.

Romans 8:29-30 can and has been used to support the idea of election by foreknowledge. The purpose of this study will be to examine, by careful exegesis and theological consideration, whether or not this passage really does support the idea of election by foreknowledge or if this is an incorrect use of this passage of scripture.

### Exegesis of Rom 8:29-30

#### Literary Context

The immediate context of Rom 8:29-30 is most easily realized when the famous and oft quoted verse 28 is taken into account. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” The fact that the NIV groups these three verses together in a single paragraph is just one indication that these verses are related closely to one another. Verse 28 is the affirmation by Paul to Christians that all things are used by God ultimately to bring about good for them. Verses 29 and 30 are used in support of the statement made in verse 28, to which Paul apparently expected some objection.<sup>3</sup> This is no surprise, considering the inherent strangeness of the comment that God uses even the worst things believers can imagine for their good. His proof of this fact is the statement in verses 29-30. The argument for an eternal purpose of God in salvation seems to Paul to be the greatest

---

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 8, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 179.

proof that all things work for the good of those called. His proof is that God has “predestined them [those he foreknew] to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” This is the mention of God’s foreknowledge which is important to the study at hand. Verse 30 gives further weight to the argument and brings it to its climax.<sup>4</sup> This verse explains the predestination in verse 29 and further supports Paul’s controversial claim in verse 28. This point can hardly be emphasized enough. It is not uncommon for Christians to quote God’s promise in 8:28 without realizing the ground for that promise is contained in 29-30. Murray says of verse 29, “This verse unfolds in greater detail the elements included in the purpose of verse 28, and verses 29, 30 are a ‘continued confirmation’ of truth that all things work for the good of those who are the called of God.”<sup>5</sup>

In the slightly larger context, the present findings are made even more apparent. Starting in verse 18, Paul begins a reflection on the “present sufferings” of Christians. His argument from verse 18 through verse 27 is simply that in the sufferings and hardships of Christians, there is great hope and purpose. This passage (verses 18-27) is brought to its climax in verse 28, and then, ultimately in verse 30 as has already been seen. Paul’s admonition is for Christians to take heart in their struggles, and hardships, including the struggle against indwelling sin, which has been the context of the beginning of chapter 8 and is ultimately the subject of chapter 7. And so it is now seen what has brought Paul to make the statement in verses 28-30. It is a passage of great hope and consolation to the believer.

Also helpful to the present study is to look at the result of Paul’s statement in verses 28-30. In view of this passage, Paul continues to build and becomes more and more assured of his secured place in the purpose of God. The rhetorical question posed in the beginning of verse 31

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, 315.

further indicates that verses 31-39 are a response to verses 28-30: “What, then, shall we say in response to this?” Paul answers his own question and begins rejoicing that is brought to its climax in his answer to his question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” It is here that Paul writes his “Hymn of Triumph” concluding with the proclamation that nothing can separate the believer from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Thus it has been seen that verses 28-30 carry a tremendous weight in the argument for the hope of the believer. Verse 28 is the absolute reason for that hope and verses 29-30 carry a brief apologetic for Paul’s statement in verse 28.

### Linguistic Study

There are two major grammatical issues pertinent to the present study: (1) the term *προέγνω*, often translated “foreknow,” and (2) aorist tense of the verbs in verses 29-30. *Προέγνω* comes from the root word *προγινώσκω*, which is a compound word made from *γινώσκω*, a verb meaning “to know,” and *πρό*, a preposition meaning “before.” The two words combine to make *προγινώσκω*, which literally means “to know beforehand.”<sup>7</sup>

Concerning *προέγνω*, Cranfield alludes to the important issue in saying, “it denotes that special taking knowledge of a person which is God’s electing grace.”<sup>8</sup> The point here is that the idea of foreknowledge contains more than simply the divine omniscience. As Hodge states, “the

---

<sup>6</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries, ed. Henry Chadwick (London: Hendrickson, 1991), 160.

<sup>7</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “προγινώσκω.”

<sup>8</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: Volume I, 1-8*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 431.

literal meaning of the word *to foreknow* gives no adequate sense, inasmuch as all men are the objects of the divine prescience, whereas the apostle evidently designed to express by the word something that could be asserted only of a particular class.”<sup>9</sup> Dunn agrees here, “Προέγνω obviously means more than simply foreknowledge, knowledge before the event. It has in view the Hebraic understanding of ‘knowing’ as involving a relationship experienced and acknowledged.”<sup>10</sup> The commentaries are virtually all agreed on this issue. Of them, Calvin probably states it best: “The foreknowledge of God here mentioned by Paul is not mere prescience, as some inexperienced people foolishly imagine, but adoption, by which He has always distinguished His children from the reprobate.”<sup>11</sup> As the harmony of scholars demonstrates on this issue, the clear sense of the passage makes any other interpretation questionable at best. “On exegetical grounds we shall have to reject the view that ‘foreknew’ refers to the foresight of faith.”<sup>12</sup>

The other pertinent linguistic aspect of these two verses is the use of the aorist tense through the “chain” of events listed, despite the fact that some of the steps are yet to take place in the scope of human history. The aorist tense is a sense of punctiliar action.<sup>13</sup> Wallace gives the

---

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 284.

<sup>10</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 38 (Dallas: Word, 1988), 482.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Murray, 316.

<sup>13</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, (Broadman Press, Nashville, 1934), 831.

following example: “It may be helpful to think of the aorist as taking a snapshot of the action while the imperfect (like the present) takes a motion picture, portraying the action as it unfolds.”<sup>14</sup> One must, however, be careful not to place too much emphasis on the use of the aorist tense. Wallace states, “There are two errors in treating the aorist: saying too little and saying too much.”<sup>15</sup> So at this point, the exegete must be careful not to read too much into Paul’s selection of the aorist, but there is likely at least some insight that can be gained. “In the *indicative*, the aorist usually indicates *past* time with reference to the time of speaking.”<sup>16</sup> All five verbs in the chain described in verses 29-30 are in the aorist tense, despite some of them being future events in relation to man’s temporal experience. The sense here of the aorist seems to be that the actions are to be viewed, at least in some sense, as events that occurred at some point in the past. The glorification of Paul and other living believers is something that had not taken place yet in the course of human history, yet it is spoken of in a past tense. F. F. Bruce deals plainly with the issue.

Why then does Paul use the same past tense for this as he does for the other acts of God? Perhaps he is imitating the Hebrew use of the ‘prophetic past’, by which a predicted event is marked out as so certain of fulfillment that it is described as though it had already taken place. As a matter of history, the people of God have not yet been glorified; so far as the divine decree is concerned, however, their glory has been determined from all eternity, hence – ‘them he also glorified’.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 239.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, 240.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>17</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 178.

The repeated use of the aorist tense throughout this chain sheds light on Paul's doctrine. The future glorification of a person is not open for question in the mind of God. Those that were foreknown were also glorified. Some have described the chain of events as a tunnel. The point of the tunnel analogy is the same as the constant use of the aorist tense, and it also brings out the fact that each step is said to be all-inclusive of the previous step. The phrases "those he predestined, he also called" and "those he called, he also justified" and "those he justified, he also glorified" reject any notion that any person could take part in one of the steps without the others. The grammatical construction through verse 30 is called sorites, where the predicate of one statement is then used as the subject of the next.<sup>18</sup> This excludes the notion that any person may participate in one of the events without also participating in all of them. It is, in effect, a causal view of the process. It is that predestination causes calling, and calling causes justification, etc., and they do so without fail.

#### Fallacious Interpretation

The exegesis of the passage shows that Paul's doctrine in Rom 8:29-30 admittedly does not match up with perceived human experience. For this reason, people, even Christians, who have not studied the issue of divine election and predestination often assume that God's sovereign choice is based on his foreknowledge of human decision. That is, God knew beforehand who would choose salvation and elected them because of this knowledge. James Arminius describes the doctrine this way: "God, from eternity, knew that it was possible that

---

<sup>18</sup> Bruce, 167.



man, assisted by divine grace, should either receive or reject Christ; also, that God has decreed, either to permit a man to reject Christ, or to cooperate with him that he may accept Christ by faith, then, that God foreknows that one will apprehend Christ by faith, and that another will reject him by unbelief.”<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to note that Arminius’ debate was never over whether God predestined people or not, but by which criterion they were predestined. In other words, it is obvious that some men are chosen, but what is the basis for God’s choosing? This view states that God’s basis for choosing is his foreknowledge of human decision.

This view is popular and is admittedly probably the first option that comes to mind when reading passages like Rom 8:29-30, or even other passages concerning predestination like Eph 1:5. Experience indicates that salvation comes by a choice humans make, so it would logically follow, according to some, that this decision is the basis for God’s election of certain individuals.

When applied to the passage at hand, in view of the 5-step process, this view states that God, in his foreknowledge (step 1), looked ahead to the result of the acceptance of the call, the justification (step 4), and predestined (step 2) according to this foreknowledge. If the gear analogy can be applied here, God turned the first gear because of his foreknowledge that the fourth gear would turn.

The major advantage is that this view keeps God from being sole determiner of those who will receive salvation. In other words, the concept in view is not an unconditional election, as the Calvinist holds, but is rather a conditional election. It should once again be noted that the

---

<sup>19</sup> James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 483.

concept of election is not under question, even in the Arminian system. The question hinges on the basis of this election.

This system leaves the ultimate outcome of the process still under the determination of man. Man is the ultimate determiner of his eternal state and God's election follows and is based on what he knew man would choose. Simply put, this doctrine preserves the self-determining will of man.

### Refutation

Despite the advantages of this system, as desirable as they may appear, the ultimate test of the system must be whether or not it stands up exegetically. If the system upholds a predetermined set of beliefs, but does not deal adequately with the text, then the view must be disregarded as either extra- or anti-biblical teaching. Another important test, though secondary to the exegetical test, is whether or not this view is logically possible. Both will now be examined.

Exegetically, the view in question has two major problems. The first problem is one of the points brought out in the original exegesis of the passage: Foreknowledge refers to persons, not actions. Dunn's point that there is a Hebraic sense of knowing implied in the foreknowledge is essential.<sup>20</sup> Other passages are given to demonstrate the use of the Hebrew "know." Gen 18:19, Jer 1:5, Hos 13:5, and Amos 3:2 are Old Testament references to the Hebrew idea of knowing. Instances of Paul's use of the Hebrew "know" are 1 Cor 8:3, 13:12, Gal 4:9, 2 Tim

---

<sup>20</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 482.

2:19.<sup>21</sup> Bruce, Hodge, Cranfield, and of course Calvin agree here, as has been seen in the earlier section on the exegesis of the passage. The importance of this idea is difficult to overstate. The Calvinist position fits perfectly with the idea of foreknowledge referring to persons. The whole basis of the Arminian view is God's foreknowledge of the *choices* of people.

The second major problem with this interpretation is closely related to the first. Charles Hodge, the great Princeton theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, laid out the problems with the view in his commentary on Romans. He states that there are three possible interpretations of the idea of foreknowledge: first, there was the literal meaning, which would be to say that the word expresses "divine prescience merely."<sup>22</sup> The second option is that to foreknow means to approve and love, expressing the idea of peculiar affection. The final option is that it means to select or determine upon. Hodge states, "The second and third interpretations do not essentially differ. The one is but a modification of the other; for whom God peculiarly loves, he does thereby distinguish from others."<sup>23</sup> So he leaves, in essence, two different options: the first interpretation being one possibility, and the second and third interpretations, or some combination of these two, being the second possibility.

He goes on to argue that the first option is really no option at all. Those who would say that foreknowledge is merely divine prescience render the scriptural idea, and therefore the passage at hand, meaningless. It is best to let him speak for himself:

As the literal meaning of the word *to foreknow* gives no adequate sense, inasmuch as all men are objects of the divine prescience, whereas the apostle evidently

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

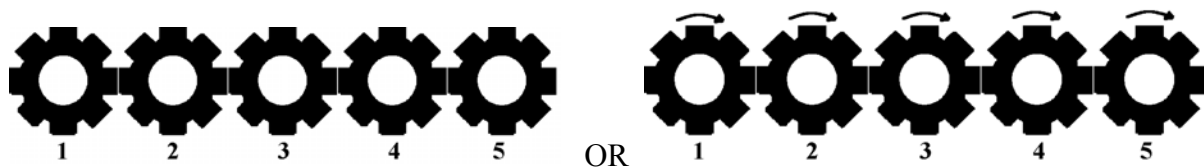
<sup>22</sup> Hodge, *Romans*, 283.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 284.

designed to express by the word something that could be asserted only of a particular class; those who adopt this meaning here supply something to make the sense complete. *Who he foreknew would repent and believe, or who would not resist his divine influence*, or some such idea. There are two objections to this manner of explaining the passage. 1. The addition of this clause is entirely gratuitous; and, if unnecessary, it is, of course, improper. There is no such thing said, and therefore it should not be assumed, without necessity, to be implied. 2. It is in direct contradiction to the apostle's doctrine.<sup>24</sup>

Hodge's second assertion here will surely be challenged by some, but his first assertion contains the exegetical emphasis. He simply argues that the interpretation in question renders the word *meaningless* in Paul's argument. The importance of this fact can hardly be ignored and should be sufficient grounds for dismissing the view altogether.

If these exegetical problems did not pose enough problem for the view of predestination by foreknowledge, there is also a logical reason why this view is an unacceptable interpretation of Paul's doctrine. This is where the gear illustration will be most helpful. As has been said earlier, the five-fold chain of events that takes place is an exclusive, causal chain that allows for no variance of persons from one step to the next. The common analogy is that of a tunnel, but for clarity and specificity, a gear analogy will be used here. If Paul's five-fold chain of events could be visualized, there are two possible options at this point:



In these diagrams, the numbered gears represent the five steps listed in the scriptural argument: (1) foreknowledge, (2) predestination, (3) calling, (4) justification, and (5) glorification. The first gear turns all the other gears in turn. No one gear can turn without all the others turning.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Notice that one set of gears turns while the other set is stationary. The purpose of the predestination by foreknowledge view is to explain the reason behind God's decision to turn one set of gears and not the other. The view says that God predestines because he knows that the person will respond positively to the call, thereby being justified. If this is to be translated into the language of the gear analogy, it would say that the reason the gear turner turns the first gear is because he foresaw that the fourth gear would turn. So in this view, the gear turner looks ahead to the fourth gear, and depending on what he foresees that gear doing, he may or may not decide to turn the first gear.

The problem with this view should be evident. If the gear turner foresees the turning of gear number four, then he would certainly know that the only way for gear number four to turn is for gear number one to be turned by himself. Another way of saying this is that the cause of gear number four's turning is gear number three's turning. Gear number three only turns because of gear number two. Gear number two turns because of gear number one. And the basis of the system is that gear number one turns because gear number four does. The process begins again, and then again with a never-ending circle. The problem here is that there is no real causal starting point. The view ends up saying that the gear turner turned the first gear because he knew that he himself would turn the first gear.

Applied to the five-fold chain of events listed in Rom 8:29-30, this logic shows again the absurdity of the predestination by foreknowledge view. The view says that God foreknows that someone will be justified, so he is predestined. But God also knows that justification is only caused by calling. And calling is only caused by predestination. And that predestination is only caused by his foreknowing. This view makes justification both the cause and the effect of God's foreknowledge, thereby reducing it to circular reasoning.

## Conclusion

Both exegetical and logical arguments have shown that the predestination by foreknowledge view is not supported by the text of Rom 8:29-30. In fact, the view is rendered impossible by Paul's language and argument through the passage. First, the word "foreknowledge" does not refer to events, but people. Second, the idea that God's eternal prescience is all that the idea of foreknowledge conveys renders the Apostle's idea meaningless in verse 29. Third, the view holds no water when held up to even a mild amount of logical criticism.

The predestination by foreknowledge view is a necessary view in the Arminian system, which seeks to argue against an unconditional election. The system tries to make God's election conditional by basing it on man's choice. Scripture will have none of that, as the text in view has shown. The foreknowledge in the passage must be "the act of cognition or recognition, the fixing, so to speak, the mind upon, which involves the idea of selection."<sup>25</sup> This is an act within the eternal mind of God, not merely a passive knowledge of all things future, but an active knowledge by his setting his mind on certain members of his creation.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hodge, *Romans*, 284.

## Bibliography

- Abbott-Smith, G. *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937.
- Arminius, James. *The Writings of James Arminius*. Translated by James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977.
- Barrett, C. K. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Black's New Testament Commentaries. Edited by Henry Chadwick. Vol. 6. London: Hendrickson, 1991.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Edited by R. V. G. Tasker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963.
- Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries*. Vol. 8. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*. Translated by Ross Mackenzie. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961.
- Cranfield, C. E. B. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Vol. 1. The International Critical Commentary, Edited by J. A. Emerton. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975.
- Dunn, James D.G. *Romans 1-8*. Word Biblical Commentary, Edited by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker. Vol. 25. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987.
- Hodge, Charles. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955.
- Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959.
- Robertson, A.T. *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934.
- Vine, W.E. *The Epistle to the Romans: Doctrine, Precept, Practice*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.