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## **"Cross-Examination: Foreordination"**

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*Each month the "Cross-Examination" column presents a summary statement of a Reformed and Reconstructionist conviction in theology or ethics, and then offers brief answers to common questions, objections or confusions which people have about that belief. Send issues or questions you would like addressed by Dr. Bahnsen to the editor.*

## We Believe

God is the sovereign governor of every event in nature and human history. All things take place according to His plan and purpose. God's sovereign rule over everything that happens includes the affairs of men -- indeed, even the free choices made by individuals. He has decreed in an unchangeable fashion from all eternity what events will take place and what decisions men will make. He has determined the end from the beginning as well as the means by which all His ends shall be accomplished. According to His own wisdom and in deference to nothing whatsoever outside of Himself and His purposes, God has predetermined or foreordained everything that will happen in the created order and what men will do.

The grandeur of the Westminster Confession of Faith's statement of this theological truth can hardly be improved upon: "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established" (III.1). Let us look at this truth from a Biblical perspective. Scripture teaches us that God has predetermined whatever comes to pass. Ephesians 1:11 refers to "the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of His own will."

Special note should be taken of the expression "all things." Nothing is excluded from this generalization. Blessed and providential events are covered -- rainfall, clothing provisions, deliverance from sickness, winning the big game. Difficult and unhappy events are covered -- floods, starvation, cancer, divorce and heartache. "All things" have been worked or caused by God in His sovereign plan for human life and history.

The "all things" includes the decisions made by individuals. This means "all" such decisions. God has predetermined the sensible, loving and righteous choices made by individuals -- to work in a particular field, to give a specific gift for a birthday, to submit in faith to Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord. God has likewise predetermined the foolish, abusive and sinful choices made by individuals -- to try drugs, to slander a neighbor, to reject the call of the gospel.

So then, God "works all things" after the counsel of His own will. This predetermination, according to Biblical teaching, applies to the most minute details of life. Jesus said: "not one sparrow shall fall on the ground without your Father; even the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:29-30). God has planned in advance the number of hairs we will have on our heads from day to day -- how much more the more obviously important aspects of what we do and what happens to us! God's sovereign plan leaves nothing to "chance," not even those details of events which appear insignificant or purposeless to us. "The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is from Jehovah" (Proverbs 16:33). God's sovereignty is seen everywhere, from the laws of physics to the toss of the dice in Las Vegas.

Finally, we should note that whatever God foreordains will certainly take place or happen; it cannot fail to come about. "I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.... I have spoken, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed, I will also do it'" (Isaiah

46:9-11). God makes no mistakes, and thus He need not change His mind about whatever He has planned. Moreover, there is no power outside of God which can thwart Him from accomplishing whatever He wishes to do.

Examination

Question: The doctrine of foreordination (that God predetermines whatever takes place in history and in individual lives) seems to make God "too big." Doesn't this teaching diminish the importance of the world, the reality of the created order, and the significance of causal relationships? Are the things which we see taking place just an illusion?

Answer: God's sovereignty does not undermine the reality of the created order and what takes place there. The world and the things in it are not simply a figment in God's mind. They actually exist separate from God. The things which we observe taking place around us are genuine events -- and the causal relations we discover in our experience (like between bumping our shins and bruises) are precisely the created realm's expression of the means-to-end choices made for this world by God the Creator.

Ironically, if we deny the sovereign foreordination of God, it is then that we would have difficulty accounting for the true reality and purposefulness of the world. In a "chance" or random world which is not governed by a sovereign, personal God, the events around us would have no relationship to each other -- much less a causal relationship. Any "order" which we think that the world has would be an order imposed by our own minds upon the chaos of things and events. Thus it would be imaginary. Indeed, the workings of our own minds could not count as orderly, but just another random series of events, thus making it arbitrary for us to distinguish between reality and illusion. What we take to be the "world" and our personal experiences in it would truly be without importance or meaning, if everything happens arbitrarily and "by chance." So then, it turns out that the concerns of those who question God's sovereignty can be intellectually guarded and guaranteed only by affirming that very sovereignty.

Question: If God foreordains even the choices made by individuals, then it seems that they had no real choice in the matter. How can we reconcile God's sovereign foreordination with man's moral responsibility?

Answer: Well, look at what has just been said. We say that "God foreordains the choices made by individuals." If this is the case, then it follows that what individuals do is *make choices*. God has foreordained that they do so (and what they choose). This is not to negate or undermine man's choice in whatever he does, but rather to affirm it. We do not say that "God foreordains that individuals behave like puppets." We say that God has planned in advance that individuals will make a choice to do something or the other -- "make a choice" to do so. Thus the affirmation of God's sovereign predetermination of man's choices is not at all a denial of the reality of man's choosing. Men genuinely choose what they wish to do, and yet God planned and determined that choice in advance.

The problem here, of course, is that people have a tendency to say that this is "impossible." They think that if God predetermines what somebody will do, that person "cannot" really have chosen to do it. But how do human beings know so much about what can and cannot happen -- know so much about the depths of reality, human nature and God's abilities -- that they can decree what is possible or impossible? We should recall here Job's arrogance in thinking that he could question God. God responded by showing how little Job really knew, even about mundane affairs of the created order -- not to mention the mysteries of God's power and purposes. If God tells us in His word -- as surely He does -- that He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, even the choices made by men, then we are in no position to declare that such a thing is impossible. God can do far more than we can even imagine. The Bible tells us He can foreordain what a man will do, and yet that the man genuinely *chooses* for himself to do it. To judge that this is impossible is to exalt your intellect and reason above God and His word.

### Further Investigation

For further consideration of the issues of rationalism and mystery in Christian theology, you can order Dr. Bahnsen's seven-part tape series entitled "Mystery, Wonder and Awe -- a Theological Exposition of Isaiah 55:8-9." Send \$38.95 to Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA 95603.

And if you would like to receive *Penpoint*, the free monthly newsletter from Dr. Bahnsen's ministry with Southern California Center for Christian Studies, please write to P. O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713.