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"Cross-Examination: Foreordination & Free Will"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

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

Based on texts like Ephesians 1:11, Isaiah 46:9-11, etc., we hold that the Bible teaches that God has decreed in an unchangeable fashion from all eternity what events will take place in nature and history -- and even what decisions men will make. He has predetermined the end from the beginning of all things, 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.

Think of some notorious Biblical examples of this. When Moses did wonders in the presence of Pharaoh, demanding that God's people be liberated, the Bible says that Pharaoh refused to listen and hardened his heart (Ex. 7:13). Pharaoh did as he wished and made his own choices -- which is why he later suffered at God's hands for his obstinacy. Nevertheless, Pharaoh's free choice to harden his heart was previously decreed by God, who told Moses in advance that He as God would harden the heart of Pharaoh (Ex. 4:21). The Persian Emperor, Cyrus, made his own free choice to release the Jews from captivity and rebuild Jerusalem. Yet the Bible tells us that God foreordained that Cyrus would decide to do such things (Isaiah 44:28; 45:13). These things were prophesied by God and brought to pass according to His wise plan or counsel, without taking anything away from the reality of the volition exercised by Cyrus in history.

In the days of Christ the two earthly rulers, Herod and Pontius Pilate, deliberated on options available to them and eventually determined for themselves to have Jesus executed. Along with the Jewish people themselves, Herod and Pilate were guilty before God for such a choice. The Bible says they did so "with wicked hands" (Acts 2:23). However, the very same text of Scripture tells us that what they did was done "according to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God." In Acts 4:27-28 we read: "For of a truth, against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together *to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.*"

Well then does the Bible declare that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1). We see this in the case of the free decisions made by monarchs like Pharaoh, Cyrus, Herod and Pilate. (And surely the Lord likewise directs the hearts and decisions of all those who are less than mighty kings as well.)

Over and over again we see that from the Biblical perspective there is no conceptual difficulty in asserting that God has foreordained the decisions which men freely make. God determines in advance what individuals will choose to do, and yet those individuals genuinely decide for themselves to do it.

Examination

Question: But if God *predetermines* the choices that men make, then they are not truly *free* choices since men cannot help but do what God has ordained -- in which case men are merely puppets without moral responsibility for what they do. How can you reconcile God's sovereign foreordination with man's free will?

Answer: The first thing we have to admit about this pattern of reasoning (viz., God ordained it, so man is not free and responsible) is that it directly contradicts the teaching of God's infallible word. The Biblical logic says that God's foreordination does not deprive man of freedom or responsibility. Who can credibly claim to correct God for such an alleged error? Obviously we need to go back and find out what is wrong in our own way of thinking.

It seems that many people make the mental mistake of thinking that God's sovereign plan and control over the things in this world somehow changes the very character and operation of those things. Thus if God sovereignly predetermines how a man will use his volition (his free will), then man's volition is no longer really his volition (his free will is not actually free). But such reasoning is fallacious.

When we hold that God predetermined that the wind would turn a particular windmill, we do not thereby deny the reality of the wind. When we hold that God predetermined that a glass of water would quench your thirst, you cannot infer from that fact that the water is not truly water. Take for an example the bones of Jesus. We know from Biblical teaching that Jesus had a genuine human body; thus his bones were real human bones -- made of the same material as anybody else's bones and capable of breaking. He did not have steel or super-divine bones. Yet the Bible declared in advance that his bones would not be broken (John 19:36). God predetermined that the bones of Jesus would not be broken, but in so doing God did not alter the nature or those bones as bones. They did not mysteriously become unbreakable material. They still were regular bones.

Similarly, when the Bible teaches us that God foreordained the free decisions made by men, we should not infer that those free decisions were not really free after all. Man's volition remains just that -- his volition. God is able, according to Biblical teaching and reasoning, to determine in advance that a man will exercise his free will in a particular way -- and the man *freely* does so. Without force or compulsion, the man genuinely chooses to do what God had already foreordained.

Question: But doesn't the Bible teach that man does not have a free will, but a will which is enslaved to sin?

Answer: When we talk about man's "free will" in a setting like this one, we must remember that we are simply saying that a person's actions or choices are voluntary -- genuinely under his control, and such that he has the outward ability to do other than what he actually chose to do. We can call this "*metaphysically* free will"; the person's choices are self-determined, rather than forced or compelled.

To affirm this is not to say that man has a "*morally* free will." The Bible teaches that unregenerate men are not free to do good in God's sight; they are morally incapacitated, so that all of their choices -- and they are genuine choices -- will fall short of pleasing God and will fail to live up to His holy standards. Morally speaking, man's will is in bondage to sinful desires -- is not "free."

Nevertheless, the sinful choices made by unbelievers are still "choices." Whether your unregenerate neighbor chooses to play football with his son or to rob a bank, he will in some way be guilty of sin (thus he is not morally free to do what is good in God's sight). Yet his choice to play ball or rob the bank will genuinely be his own; it will determine what he actually does (in which case he is metaphysically free in the decision he makes).

The Westminster Confession of Faith has a chapter entitled "Of Free Will," and it distinguishes between the metaphysical freedom and the moral freedom (or lack thereof) of fallen man's will. "God hath endued the will of man with that *natural liberty*, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined, to good or evil.... Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all *ability of will to any spiritual good*" (IX.1,3).

Further Investigation

For a catalog of Dr. Bahnsen's tapes in theology, Biblical exposition, apologetics, and ethics you can write to Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA 95603. The five-part series on the distinctives of the Reformed faith sells for \$29.

If you would like to receive the free monthly newsletter from Dr. Bahnsen's ministry with Southern California Center for Christian Studies, you can request it from P. O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713.