

God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Human Freedom

Dennis Bratcher

The Nature of Assumptions

One of the greatest difficulties in discussing theological issues is recognizing and understanding the assumptions upon which any particular theology is built, as well as the questions, perspectives and points of emphasis that give shape to how it unfolds. Those are almost always influenced by the needs of a community of faith in particular historical circumstances. The logic of a theological system is rarely the source for contention, nor is the fact that particular communities formulate theology based on the kinds of questions they ask from a particular historical frame of reference.

However, the way those questions are formulated from that historical situation is almost always a function of the assumptions that support the theological system, sometimes even more so than the theology itself. That gives rise to a great many points of contention, especially if the theological system is built on ways of thinking in one group or at one time that are not shared by another group or at another time.

That leads to the observation that theology is not an objective equivalent of Truth. Theology is constructed as the best way, given a certain community in a certain context and within certain parameters of assumption, philosophical framework, and logical coherence, how to communicate what we understand (or has been revealed) about God. Theology is an expression of a certain community. Thus, it is a logical construct. That construct may be more or less reliable, but it is not itself the Truth. Too often theological discussion ends up debating issues of Truth on one side or the other without this recognition that the debate is actually about how best to **talk about** the truth given certain assumptions

This suggests that an examination of those assumptions might provide a basis for understanding some of the issues in the perennial debate about predestination, free will, and God's foreknowledge. I am under no illusion that this discussion is going to solve those problems, or even to raise issues that have not been raised before. Hopefully, however, it will give some perspective for others to discuss the issues on a level that goes beyond simply asserting competing truth claims.

"Philosophical Categories" and Ways of Thinking

"Philosophical categories" in a broad sense are simply those fundamental ways of thinking that we use to make sense out of our existence. Another term might be "world view," although that includes many aspects besides philosophy such as history, culture,

social context, ethos, etc. In a more specific sense, "philosophical categories" involve the ways of thinking, usually established by a dominant philosophical system in a culture, that define the kinds of questions we ask of our world and ourselves, and thus what we seek as "truth" for how we live. That is, these categories define what is important in the thinking of a people or culture.

For example, the Western world since the 4th century BC has been dominated by questions and perspectives raised by the classic Greek and Roman philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle. While coming at the issue of the meaning of human existence from different directions, they were both concerned with the primary question of "what is real?" or "what is absolute?" Plato answered this question with an idealistic dualism that pushed ultimate reality beyond physical existence, and left the physical world as only an imperfect and corrupted shadow of the absolute. "What is real" only existed on a metaphysical plane.

One of the fundamental assumptions arising from Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy is the acceptance of a basically dualistic view of reality in which there are understood to be two (thus "dualism") levels of existence. The "top" level (a logical metaphor, not a spatial term) is "ultimate reality," and consists of ideas, such as truth, beauty, goodness, justice, perfection. In other words, ultimate reality is non-corporeal, or non-physical. It is the level of "spirit" and "deity."

The "lower" level is the physical world in which we live. It is the opposite of ultimate reality, thus it is not "real" in the sense that it is not ultimate. It contains the imperfect physical manifestations of the ideas that exist in the perfect plane, so by definition it is characterized by falsehood, ugliness, evil, injustice, imperfection.

So, for example, I can have an idea of a perfect chair. That **idea** is the ultimate reality of "chair," because it is perfect in every way. However, any given chair that exists in physical time and space is only an imperfect attempt to copy the ultimate reality that only exists on the level of idea, since any given physical chair cannot be "perfect" in every way. A physical chair is therefore false, ugly, evil, etc., since it only crudely approximates the ideal or the ultimate reality of "chairness." The result of this conceptual model of reality is a view that, by definition, sees everything that exists in the physical world, since it inhabits that level of reality that is imperfect and evil, as itself imperfect and evil.

As this is applied to human beings, it has interesting results. On the one hand, human beings are viewed much like the physical chair. Since they exist in the lower level of reality, they are by definition evil, imperfect, and, to introduce a value term, sinful. However, since human beings also exhibit the capability to think and contemplate the ideal level, to conceptualize ultimate reality, they must be something more than purely physical and totally evil. So, the idea is introduced that human beings also have a "spark of the divine" within their physical body.

This spark of the divine, usually termed "soul" or "spirit," depending on the system used, is what allows human beings to conceptualize the ideal plane, and is also the part of humanity with which God can communicate. But this small flicker of the ideal is trapped in a physical body that is totally a part of the lower level of existence, which is to say, is totally evil. Therefore, while the "real" us can have communion with God on some primitive level as a function of God's grace, the physical body remains evil and sinful. It cannot ever be anything other than that because that is the nature of physical existence.

So, there is constant struggle between the physical side and the "spiritual" side of human beings. But the "soul" can never master the "physical," so the only final solution to the struggle is to shed the physical body and move to the ideal plane of existence, which for human beings is death. Thus is born the concept of the immortality of the soul, a "spirit" trapped in an evil physical body that needs to be shed so that the "real" us can move on to that ideal level of perfection that we can never reach as long as we are trapped in physical existence.

This has implications in many areas, such as thinking about how God works with humans. In this view, humans can never be transformed into anything other than sinful beings as long as they live in a body that is by definition sinful. They cannot really obey God, so God does what is necessary on their behalf in Christ. Since Christ was righteous, God in His grace has decreed that the righteousness of Christ is to be counted as (the technical term is *imputed*) the righteousness of humanity.

Continuing the logical metaphor of "top-bottom," as God looks down at humanity, he would see their evil and sinfulness. But Christ serves as the mediator coming between God and sinful humanity, so that when God looks at humanity, he sees the righteousness of Christ. The righteousness of Christ is **counted as** human righteousness. People are not really righteous and cannot be, since they still live in evil, sinful bodies in an evil, sinful world. But, drawing heavily on legal metaphors, they are pardoned even though they remain guilty and sinful.

This view has many other implications for how we think about Christianity, such as thinking we have to shed the physical body to be with God (immortality of the soul), rather than the biblical view that God actually redeems his **creation** (the physical world), with the model of death and resurrection. Interestingly, it is that same model of death and resurrection that the early church used to talk about salvation, especially in the baptismal liturgy (buried with Christ, raised to new life).

This view also leads to the practice of "mortification" of the body, attempts by various means to subdue the physical aspect of human existence. Throughout church history it has come out in various ways, from living in monasteries isolated from the physical world, to vows of celibacy, to very restrictive ideas about sexuality (it is sinful for any purpose but procreation).

The Nature of God and Humanity

For our purposes here, one of the areas in which this conceptual model applied to Christianity has had the most impact is in formulations about the nature of God and, as a result, how we think about humanity in the world.

Platonic philosophy, especially as later recast by Plotinus (Neoplatonism), helped shape the kinds of questions being asked in the church by the 2nd century AD. This had tremendous implications for how some of the early doctrines of the church were formulated. Some of those doctrines were intended to address the specific (metaphysical) questions being posed via those "philosophical categories." Thus Augustine developed his doctrine of "original sin" under the influence of Neoplatonism and as a reaction to the Pelagian controversy, both of which shaped what he said and how he said it. The same factors were at work in the Christological controversies of the 4th century. Some of these "philosophical perspectives" that have as their primary question "what is absolute?" led to the development of theologies that emphasize the sovereignty of God and took a very low view of humanity as part of the corrupted physical world.

Most of the history of Western thinking until this century has been dominated by these categories and questions. To some degree, the development of modern scientific rationalism that focuses on knowledge can be traced to this via Aristotle. Even the kinds of questions that we sometimes ask of the Bible (what *really* happened?) reflect this mode of thought. And much of our "classic" systematic theology is cast in these terms.

During the twentieth century, there was a radical shift in the "philosophical categories" operating in Western culture. For a variety of historical and social reasons, the old idealistic categories and the "out there" (metaphysical) orientation collapsed. That's not necessarily good or bad, just the way ideas developed. For whatever reasons, the shift has been back toward human beings and humanistic concerns (here we should note that "humanistic" does not necessarily mean anti-religious; there is a considerable "humanistic" strand in Scripture, most of which was written before the domination of largely ontological categories).

The philosophy in a general sense that lies behind this shift is existentialism. In a very simplified way, existentialism asks a different set of questions. The primary question is no longer "what is real?" or "what is absolute?" with the answer pointing away from humanity (metaphysical ontology), but rather "what should we do?" or "how should we live" (or in relation to Scripture, "what does this mean for us?"). These are very this-worldly questions, and concern immediate existence (thus, existential). The shift has been rapid in our culture, and I am convinced that nearly 100% of young people growing up in our culture today have this new perspective.

The new philosophical orientation is not in itself bad. Some existential philosophers have been atheists, and have used it to say that "God is dead." But then, Plato wasn't exactly a "Christian" either! On the other hand, there have been some very good Christian existentialist philosophers, such as Søren Kierkegaard (*Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*), or those who have used the categories without swallowing wholesale all the implications or extensions of the philosophical perspective itself.

Our purpose here is not to debate philosophies, simply to observe that one reason we can begin asking different kinds of questions than those asked throughout much of the history of the Western Church is that some of the assumptions have changed enough to allow different questions. When the basic "philosophical categories" are different, not only are the questions posed then different, the answers will likely be different as well. The issue here is not "which one is True?" That is simply another question that arises from the idealist model. The better question is, "which one can best express how we understand God?" always working with Scripture as the basis.

Rather than try to develop a systematic treatment of this topic, I will simply touch on several areas that are points of contention between those who are asking different sets of questions from different bases, and hope this will stimulate further thought and dialog on the issues.

The Problem of the Absolute Foreknowledge of God

I think there are problems with how we tend to formulate the "foreknowledge" of God, especially when we define that foreknowledge in absolute categories and tie it to ultimate reality. Let's use the four principles that Albert Outler distilled from John Wesley's theological method to examine this issue, realizing that the first three were already well established aspects of doing theology in the Western Church.

1) From the perspective of Tradition: Throughout most of the history of the church, the "standard" position has been that God knew the future, that it was simply an unfolding of the divine plan. However, that view was rooted deeply in a certain world view built on certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality.

The kinds of questions asked in the early church, especially following Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries, were metaphysical ontological questions about ultimate reality. And those questions were rooted in the Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophies that saw God and human existence in absolute or idealistic terms. God was defined by asking logical questions, and reaching logical answers. Basically, **a view of God was developed whereby God was defined in terms of what a god ought to be to be God.** While the results may not be totally invalid, they are obviously limited, and a departure from Scripture and God's own revelation about himself in human history.

I think this became a circular argument, because then it was assumed that God was exactly like we had logically described Him to be, and then that "nature" or "essence" of God was used to construct ideas about His work in the world. The "omni-" doctrines that arose from this were all logically consistent, and reinforced one another (*omni* mean *all*, so that God is *all* knowing, *all* powerful, etc.). Since the questions that were being asked were about ultimates (what is the *all*?), the definition of God was given in terms of those ultimates. He was omni-everything, that is, the absolute and ultimate of any category about which one could think or speak.

I simply do not think these formulations are at all adequate, simply because they are *our* definition of what we want in a God or what a god by our definition should be, which does not necessarily define God very adequately. They are far too limiting, at the very point that they claim to be *all* encompassing! In other words, God does not have to be what we say he is, no matter how "big" or "omni-" we try to make what we say.

The same thing can be said for other categories, like "perfect" or "infinite" or "immutable" that we impose on God as if we really knew that they were adequate, or even accurate. It is just that those are the "biggest" terms we can come up with in order to answer the questions about ultimate reality and absolute existence.

The idea of the "perfection" of God is one of those Platonic philosophical categories that we have tended to accept as absolutely necessary. It is our definition of what God must be. That very idea, when played out logically, has created some very difficult problems of its own, primarily in relating a "perfect" being to the existence of evil in creation (see [The English Term Perfect](#) and [The Problem of Natural "Evil"](#)). Plato's idea of perfection was the *idea* of perfection (thus, idealism), because nothing in *physical* existence could conform to the idea. Thus, all of physical existence was imperfect and corrupt, which, of course, led to the development of a radical metaphysical dualism. While on one level, that may be satisfying intellectually to our sense of order, it does not necessarily tell us anything about God.

God may or may not be "perfect" or "infinite" in whatever way we want to define that. We do not know. How would we, being less than the ideal or the perfection or, as Plato called it, "the beingness" or pure existence, understand the ideal, the perfect? How can we define perfection unless we are ourselves perfect? How can we who are finite define the infinite, except to say that it is beyond us? Do we just define it as what we are not? Interesting, that this is exactly how the Bible talks about God; He is other than humanity! However, the biblical term for this is "Holy" (cf. Hos 11:9), not "perfect" or "infinite."

2) From the perspective of reason: One way that we have tried to maintain the logical coherence of the omni-doctrines is by retreating to paradox. This simply asserts that the apparently contradictory logical conclusions that we have reached about God, that he is perfect yet the creator of an obviously evil world, or that He is all powerful and good yet horrible things happen, or that He knows everything that will happen yet does not cause events to occur, are really somehow consistent on a level beyond what we can understand logically. But, if it is a valid observation that while truths about God may not be totally logical, they will not be illogical, we have problems at this point.

Paradox may well be an option here. But if we do not resort to paradox, the logic of the omni-doctrines will not stand. The biggest problem for the foreknowledge of God is the relation of foreknowledge to human freedom. If God knows that something will happen, then it *will* happen. That is, if God *knows* the event to be a historical reality, then that event *must* occur; it is predestined. If it does not occur than God did not know.

If God *knows* that when I leave the house for Wednesday evening Bible study, that at exactly 5:58 PM CDT (running late, as usual!), at the intersection of NW 42nd and MacArthur, a car will run the red light, strike my car as I turn onto MacArthur, and I will be killed, then it **will** occur. I have no choice in the matter. No matter what I do, it will happen. It may appear that I chose, but that event is determined to occur regardless of what I decide. I will only choose the courses of action that will allow that event to happen. It doesn't matter that I never drive to church through that intersection, or that I usually go an hour later, or that I actually decided to get around on time for a change. My freedom is dissolved into God's foreknowledge. Human freedom is only the illusion of freedom.

Some want to respond at this point that simply because God knows something does not mean either that it must occur or that he caused it to happen. Usually the example is given from human experience in which knowledge is not related to causality. However neither of these perspectives will stand.

There is a great deal of difference between a human being "knowing" and God "knowing." Our knowing is influenced and conditioned by a myriad of factors, not all of which we are even aware or understand if we are aware of them. So our perceptions, even of ourselves, let alone others, or the world, or God are always limited and flawed. That's why Paul can say that we see through a glass darkly. However, God's "knowing" about Himself, and about His creation is not hindered by those things, so that what he knows is an accurate and complete knowledge of whatever is the object of that knowledge (which I'm not sure we can totally define).

Relating this to causality is not the answer. Yet it doesn't really matter whether we introduce the idea of causality into the equation or not. The point is that because of God's complete (but not necessarily absolute) knowledge, if indeed He "knows" something, then that's the way it is, whether or not He directly caused it to be that way. If God "knows" a future event, that event *must* occur, whether or not He directly caused it. It is still predestined, even though we might think from our perspective we were exercising our freedom to choose (a classical argument from determinists and predestinationists). Our freedom is still only an illusion of freedom. And if that event *must* occur, and not just be a possibility, then either God was indeed the cause of the event, which results in theistic predestination, or God is not the cause of the event, which results in a form of naturalism (historical positivism) or at best deism, which is a theistic naturalism.

That is part of the difficulty with the whole idea of foreknowledge; God is locked into a system over which He does not have the freedom to act. My understanding of the sovereignty of God says that He does have that freedom. And perhaps an exercise of that sovereignty is that he has chosen to give up **absolute** sovereignty for the sake of human freedom and soteriological sovereignty (relating to salvation and relationship with humanity)

While the doctrine of predestination is not a *necessary* outgrowth of the absolute foreknowledge of God, it must have it in place to work. That is, there cannot be eternal

and absolute decrees of God unless he has absolute foreknowledge. So, the classical articulation of "foreknowledge," especially as it is related to the concepts of the decrees and predestination, interferes with and indeed precludes the concept of authentic human freedom. Unless, of course, we resort to paradox and try to maintain logically incompatible ideas by this method.

One irony here that is interesting. While these doctrines have their origin in logical formulation, today when there is a difficulty in getting the omni-doctrines to fit with modern ways of thinking or with Scripture, we usually resort to paradox to explain how they can work. That is, we say that we cannot really understand how God can know the future and human beings still have any genuine freedom. The doctrines that came into existence as logical descriptions of God are thereby touted as non-logical assertions, which is inherently illogical.

One assertion at this point is often that, since God is infinite, he exists outside of our time and space. Because of that, he can see the past and the future all at once; in other words, there is no time for God since he exists in the eternal "now" apart from any restrictions of time and space. This begins moving into areas that range far beyond what we can really discuss here. But this objection continues to illustrate how thoroughly the metaphysical categories have permeated our thinking about God. All of this assertion is built on logical inferences about the nature of ultimate reality based on the assumption that the Greek philosophical models represent ontological reality (the way things really are). Just some reflections here for further thought.

The past and the future are not the same thing, unless we invoke a theory of time in which space and time are the same thing (this gets complex very quickly). There are such theories, which are the basis for many of the older science fiction stories about time travel. But they are also rooted in older philosophical ideas about the fixed and immutable nature of reality, ideas which are currently being challenged not only by new philosophical paradigms (existential and process philosophy), but also from new perspectives in science (quantum mechanics, genetic indeterminism, and the idea of random event).

It is interesting that most science fiction now focuses on travel to parallel or alternate realities (e.g. the television programs *Sliders* or *Seven Days*) more than it does on time travel (e.g. H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*). That's because the older theories about the unity of space and time are no longer acceptable in light of newer scientific theories and thinking. The newer perspectives all emphasize the contingency of the future based on various variables. Theologically, one of those variables is human decision, as well as God's interaction with that decision.

As far as we know from our viewpoint, the past no longer exists, but it is "real" because it has existed in a way that the future is not real simply because it does not yet exist. We cannot affect the past, but we can affect the future; the past is a closed book, while the future is still contingent upon the present.

Stephen's King's story *The Langoliers* is a modern expression of this perspective. It is based on a theory of time in which neither the past nor the future actually exist. The past exists only in memory and the future exists only in possibility. This has interesting implications for how we talk about what God knows. Why do we need to affirm that God knows that which does not yet exist? From this perspective, we could say that God knows the possibilities of the future, but that human beings create the future by their decisions. That is part of human freedom that God has granted to us.

That suggests a much more incarnational model for God than earlier models built on metaphysical ontology have allowed. In all of this, we must recall that the only way that we know anything about God is what He has revealed to us within the constraints of finite time and space (unless, of course, one is a proponent of natural theology, which I am not). All of God's relation to humanity has been incarnational.

One of our major difficulties that lies behind all of our "omni-" doctrines is that we have mistakenly assumed that the Incarnation was a single act of God in history, rather than understanding the Incarnation to be revelatory of God Himself. That is, Incarnation is not just something God did in Christ, but is how he has chosen to relate to His creation, of which **the** Incarnation is the best example. In fact, creation itself is an incarnational act, in that God by creating chose to enter into finite time and space. The fundamental faith affirmation of the OT is that God reveals Himself in human history, in finite time and space. That is why we cannot know God beyond that incarnational dimension, except by speculation.

If we could ever come to conceptualize God as incarnational, and history as the arena in which an incarnational God reveals Himself to us, it would help us address a lot of the logical problems we have created for ourselves. We have tried to distance God from His own creation by placing Him in some abstracted way outside and apart from that creation. Yet, if we conceptualize an incarnational God, then we can go one step further and conceptualize an incarnational model for history. We would find, I think, that the Bible makes a lot more sense, and far more readily, than it does when we try to impose other philosophical models upon it, as we have tended to do through most of Christian history.

3) From the perspective of Scripture: Invariably, of course, this is going to lead to a discussion of the nature of prophecy. And here is where people tend to get passionate when we start "messing with the Bible." The fact is, this whole scenario is also tied up with circular reasoning related to Scripture. *The omni-doctrines were not developed from Scripture, but from logic.* Yet, they have become near absolute statements of fact in approaching the interpretation of Scripture. The logical positions are assumed to be true, then assumed to be in Scripture, and then Scripture is interpreted through the lens of these doctrines. This is especially true in talking about Old Testament prophecy, which we commonly assume to be prediction of the future governed by the omni-doctrines, especially God's foreknowledge usually reduced to a subcategory of omniscience (all-knowing).

If, and this is a big if, we leave out the omni-doctrines, and look at biblical prophecy through a different lens, say the lens of history itself, OT prophecy takes on a whole different dimension. Old Testament prophecy is a very diverse type of activity and writing, of which prediction of the future is only a tiny fraction. The prophets were doing very different things than simply predicting the future, especially if we take seriously the perspectives about the foreknowledge of God discussed above. Sometimes they were wrong about their "predictions" (see the article: [Ezekiel and the Oracles Against Tyre](#)). Sometimes they had to change them. Sometimes the community reapplied them to events that the prophet himself would never have envisioned (as in the last chapters of Amos). All this simply says that our understanding of Old Testament prophecy has been unduly influenced by our acceptance of a basically deterministic model. There *are* other ways to understand Old Testament prophecy as Scripture.

A prophet's primary role was to communicate the truth about God, to warn His people of their accountability to God and of the impending consequences of their actions whether positive or negative. Prophets did speak of future events even in the category of "prediction." But that "prediction" was not done solely for its own sake, nor is it the primary category in which to understand the prophetic message. The primary purpose of prophetic prediction was as a vehicle to call the people to faithful response to God. Even when the prophets warned of judgment, that judgment was not absolutely decreed as a predetermined and therefore necessary event, as evidenced by the numerous calls to repentance scattered throughout prophetic judgment speeches (there are even hints of them in Amos, which contain the most unmitigated judgment speeches in the Old Testament). So the primary category for prophetic literature should not be "prediction of the future."

A prophet was given insight (inspiration) into how God works in the world and what God's people needed to do to respond faithfully. It is itself part of the "response" to God's self-revelation. However, the prophet then translated that understanding about God into the historical arena in which he lived, using the circumstances, language, metaphors, cultural allusions, poetry, nearly anything available to communicate that message (including some rather unusual actions, such as walking around naked and barefoot for three years!).

All those things became the vehicle for the message. The heart of the prophetic message, then, is not those details. The message is about God and the people's faithfulness, or lack of faithfulness, to Him. The historical and cultural details are the *medium* of the message. The historical aspects are not totally incidental to the message, because they are the arena in which the message is understood, proclaimed, and heard, even the *cause* for the message in many cases. But finally, the historical circumstances, even the predictions, are not the heart of the message. The prophets speak about **God**; that is, they speak *theology*, cast in the circumstances of historical event.

That leaves the possibility that sometimes the prophets got the details wrong. I am not at all suggesting that the *message* of the prophets, what they understood about God, His work in the world, and how His people should respond to Him is *ever* "wrong" in

Scripture. That is a function of inspiration and, I think, is the only way that "inerrant" can legitimately be applied to Scripture.

But I *am* suggesting that sometimes, when they translated that message into specific historical predictions, they were wrong about the way they read history, and they were wrong about their specific predictions about future historical event. **They could be wrong, because history is not predetermined.** If history is not predetermined, then there is no future already in place to predict, only the possibilities that arise from human decision. History is contingent upon human decisions and moves in dynamic ways that cannot always be predicted. And there is more than adequate biblical evidence to support this perspective.

Some have suggested that the predictions of prophecy actually had a double meaning, one meaning for the short term, and another prediction for the long term. However, it does not solve the problem inherent in assuming absolute prediction of the future. The whole idea of "double meaning" or "short term-long range" distinctions has been, I think, an attempt to deal with the obvious problems of a pure prediction understanding of prophecy. That became a logical necessity when faced with the conflict between a prediction model that cannot hold up under close scrutiny, while at the same time trying to retain the idea, even if modified, that the Bible is indeed predicting a predetermined future. It is an easy matter to look at a prediction made, for example, by Micah concerning the destruction of Jerusalem by the Assyrians and, because in fact Jerusalem was *not* destroyed by the Assyrians in Micah's time but by the Babylonians some 130 years later, say that Micah's "prediction" was of a dual nature (it was *really* about the Babylonians).

That approach can be applied to most any prediction. I suppose that it will work for many prophecies, *if* we assume: 1) that the *intent* was to predict a future historical event, 2) that God absolutely predestines some if not all historical events to occur, 3) that the Bible is an inerrant record of *historical* events, 4) the real message of the prophets was not for their own time but for times in the future about things that they could not possibly understand, and 5) the only real sense that can be made of prophecy is from that future perspective looking back from the "fulfillment" (else how would we know to what the "second" meaning referred?).

In this view, the **historical** connection between the past and future (or the Old Testament and New Testament) runs *forward* in the model of "prediction-fulfillment." As a result, the **theological** connection must go *backward* because it is only from the future perspective, after the "second" level event has occurred that the prophecy reaches its "true" meaning (as is often asserted about the New Testament). I would suggest just the opposite. That is, it is the *theology* that runs *forward* in a **trajectory**. In this case, the OT prophets understood something about God (revelation, inspiration) that they then projected into history, their own present history since that was the only historical perspective they had. Sometimes it worked out like they thought, sometimes it did not.

But the important thing was not the historical events into which they projected their (revealed, inspired) understanding about God. The important thing was just that

understanding about God, no matter how history tracked, because history could take different tracks depending on the decisions human beings made in history. **History was neither directly related to nor dependent upon the truth about God; it was only the arena in which that truth worked out.**

So, Micah was writing about the consequences that would unfold in the life of the nation because of their social oppression, injustice, and faithlessness to their relationship with God. That is the message, I believe, God inspired him to understand. But he translated that into the historical events of his day, the rise of Assyria as a world power. So he envisioned the consequences of the nation's sin working out in catastrophe at the hands of Assyria. *And I think he was right!*

But it didn't happen. Not because it fit into some grand historical blueprint that God had drawn up. It didn't happen because the righteous king Hezekiah came to power and led the nation in a renewed commitment to God. They tore down many of the Baal altars. They prayed to God for forgiveness. Hezekiah listened to the prophet Isaiah. Because this man, and the people, obeyed God, the foretold destruction at the hands of Assyria did not come about. History changed because of human decision!

There was no predestined event. There was no "second" level of historical prediction. But **there was a truth about God in Micah's prophecy**. And that truth would later be applied, even quoted, by Jeremiah in his message. Same truth. Same translation of that truth into the historical arena. But in Jeremiah's case, there was no repentance. There was no king like Hezekiah to tear down the Baal altars and call the people to repentance. And so the historical scenario that Jeremiah envisioned played out.

Was Micah wrong? In his historical prediction, yes! In his truth about God, absolutely not! He wasn't predicting the future, as we on this side of the idea of predestination and the debates about the sovereignty of God understand. There was no secondary level of the *historical* scenario that he painted, knowingly or not. That was simply his way of translating into real-time historical reality the truth he had come to understand about God. He was telling the people about God! Yet that *theological* truth worked out in the time of Jeremiah in a totally different historical scenario. That is the **theological trajectory** that works **forward** through history.

Now, after the exile, it is easy to look back through Jeremiah straight to Micah and collapse the two into one. Both predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and that happened. But it did not *have* to happen, even with Jeremiah's prediction, else why would he spend a significant portion of his book pleading "Return to me, and I will return to you?" Was the destruction of Jerusalem inevitable just because Jeremiah "predicted" it. No! No more so than it was 130 years earlier when Micah predicted it. Or 50 years before that when Hosea predicted it.

Looking back, the straight line of the **historical vector** that we draw artificially because we know how history has actually tracked easily ties the history together in a seemingly neat, unbroken sequence that all makes sense. That's easy to do looking back. But that

straight **vector** that tracks the historical sequence through history can only run **backwards**. That's why it always looks so neat; it simply levels out the vagaries of history into a straight, neat line, when in fact the actual track of history was anything but straight and neat going forward. And the prophecies can only have any "secondary" meaning as the new events in history confirm the *theological* truth of the prophecies, not the historical "prediction." It is the *theological trajectory of truth about God* that ties them together **forward**, and the *vector of historical sequence* that ties them together **backward**. But remember that the level of **historical vector** is constructed backward after knowing the result.

That moves the issue of "prediction" out of the categories of the decrees of God or any category of predestination, and places it firmly within the concept of human freedom and a God who chooses to respond to that freedom out of his sovereignty.

4) From the perspective of Experience: I think the idea of the absolute foreknowledge of God and the accompanying predestination model leads to the formulation of the idea of the "perfect plan of God." While this is a popular way of talking about humanity in relation to God, the idea raises all kinds of practical and real problems for people in how they live out their Christian life. It affects people in what I call the "second best" scenario, in which people think they have missed the perfect plan of God and live their lives in God's second best (rather devastating when the "second best" is a marriage because you missed getting God's first choice!). It also works out in asking why God has done certain things in the world, like kill a child to get a parent's attention, or bomb a building killing 168 people. If we are not careful with how we express this, we set people up for all sorts of difficulties in relating ideas about God to how life actually works.

The concept of the *perfect plan of God* is soundly rooted in predestination thinking, which is likewise rooted in absolutist, idealist Greek philosophy. Apart from those categories, the biblical perspective as well as other theologies that are not rooted so heavily in the absolutist categories, are much more compatible with the concept of making responsible choices, and understanding that God is with us even when we make bad choices.

On a purely practical or functional side, if there is only one "correct" choice, one "perfect" path in life to walk, then there is absolutely no one who walks it. We simply do not always make the right choices, and even one wrong choice would disrupt the "perfect" plan and invoke the "second best." So, for all practical purposes, in that view no one lives out the "perfect will of God" in their lives, which fits very well with theologies that view humanity as irredeemably flawed as long as they exist in this less-than-perfect physical existence.

In some traditions a slightly modified version of this view is described as "the center of God's will," implying the same single course of action or choice as the "center" and any other course of action as moving away from the center. It is the same "perfect plan (or will) of God," which in predestination thinking is conceptualized as a single line through history, visualized in more static or "state of being" terms.

I don't think we have ever, at least on a popular level, taken seriously enough with all of its implications the idea of human freedom (or more correctly, God's free grace enabling human will). We have been heavily influenced by predestination thinking, especially as mediated through certain views of Scripture and prophecy.

I think a better perspective would allow a large place for human freedom to make choices, and for God's ability and willingness to work with us as we make those choices. It would also compel us to take responsibility for our choices without viewing human existence in absolute either/or terms, and without invoking some external power that caused us to mess up the bad decisions we make. It would also affirm that God works in our lives, both in helping us make the best choices, when there really is a better and best, and in helping us deal with where we are in life no matter what choices we have made. I don't especially use the "permissive will of God," simply because it still implies (at least to me) overtones of control that does not allow human freedom a large enough role. But it is probably a better term than either "perfect" will of God or the idea of the "center" of God's will

If metaphors would help, try these. The "perfect plan of God" is like walking a tightrope. God is the coach at the far end of the wire calling us to keep our balance and warning us to make no mistakes. All of our energies go into staying on the wire without falling off. One wrong choice and the "perfect" will is lost.

However, if we can exercise genuine human decision that affects how history tracks (some like to call this the "permissive" will of God, although that idea has other problems), then we can say that human existence under God is like a journey in a broad river. God is the pilot on the boat with us, pointing out dangerous currents and sandbars, and also sights along the way. There are many ways to navigate the river, but as long as we are in the river the journey continues. We can stop and explore islands and have a picnic, we can speed up or slow down, or we can just sit on the deck and enjoy the trip. The only serious problems arise when we no longer want God as the pilot, when we no longer listen to his instructions and warnings, or when we no longer want to navigate the river at all.

Another aspect of this issue is that we tend to defend the omni-doctrines by projecting God beyond our level of existence. I have no doubt that there is some aspect of God beyond us. But by definition, *we do not know what that is*. We can affirm all day that God is infinite. But what exactly does that mean to us? As noted earlier, how can a finite creature define the infinite!?! How can we talk about what God is beyond what He has revealed to us about himself. And that revelation has always been within the confines of human experience. We have never known an infinite God. We have only known a God within our human history, within time and space. Whatever else He may be, we only know ***THIS God***. Maybe we need to stick to what God has revealed about Himself (as witnessed in Scripture), rather than creating new categories for Him that, in the final analysis, are our ideas of what He ought to be.

If we are going to talk about God's knowledge, probably the question should be focused on what God knows, and how He uses that knowledge, rather than assuming what he knows as if we really knew what God knows. And maybe we should deal with those questions in modes of thought that do not assume the answer from the beginning.

God's Sovereignty and Power

One way to begin thinking about the nature of God in terms of what he knows or what power he has, is to make the distinction between what God **can** do and what he actually *does* do. While I agree that God does know what He will do in terms of how He will act in relation to human beings (Scripture seems to support this idea solidly), I think it is quite another thing to say that He has determined ahead of time what He will do in terms of specific actions, and that "will" is irrevocable (certain). This still leaves the future predestined and removes human freedom.

If God must "force" human beings to certain actions to accomplish His will, even if that means working out a predetermined divine plan, then human beings have no freedom. It is not a matter of a percentage free, in that *most* of the time we are free but are not at the crucial times when God wants to accomplish His will. Either we are free moral agents with the responsibility that entails, or we are not. For whatever reason, God has chosen to **persuade** us to work out His will in the world, not **force** us to accomplish it.

Also, to some degree, the idea that God must force human beings to certain actions in order to accomplish his will (predetermined plan) removes the sovereignty and freedom of God. In this case, God is bound to His own predetermined will and does not have the freedom to act in relation to human circumstances. If God is locked in to His own predetermined will, and that will is irrevocable, then **God** is not free.

This is an aspect that most predestinationists have not really addressed. In this sense, God was actually only sovereign at the moment he issued the decrees and decided on a predetermined plan, because now he is bound by that decision no matter what other circumstances might exist. Of course, if the system is logically coherent, it could easily be countered that God does not need any further freedom since he already knew all of the outcomes anyway because of his decrees. But that is precisely the point. This reduces the sovereignty to a single instant rather than being a characteristic of God.

Now I would quickly add that God may, and has/does enter human history in non-contingent ways, such as the Exodus or the Incarnation. But even then, it is not in a forcible way that interferes with human freedom. It is still an invitation to respond, not a coercion. This leaves us with the conclusion that God's actions in history are not unilateral, God imposing his divine "plan" apart from human beings, but that God actually is in interaction with humanity, and that in some sense his actions in history are contingent on human response (see [Torah As Holiness: Old Testament "Law" as Response to Divine Grace](#)).

I think Scripture addresses this very issue in numerous places. There are many times in the Old Testament where God specifically states that He will do something, but then changes His mind based on human decision. A few examples, which deserve more detailed attention than I can provide here: 1) Ninevites in Jonah, where God said He would destroy the city in 40 days, but changed His mind when the people repented; 2) the city of Jerusalem, which He said through Micah and Isaiah that He would allow to be destroyed by the Assyrians, but then delivered because of the reforms of Hezekiah; 3) the reign of the Davidic dynasty, promised as eternal in 2 Samuel 7, but which ended with Jehoikim, which 2 Chronicles interprets as a result of the people's sin; 4) the Israelite possession of the land of Canaan, which Jeremiah and Isaiah say God had promised forever, but which they lost twice, once to the Babylonians and later to the Romans. There are many other examples we could use.

In other words, God's expressed will *in history* still seems contingent on human decision. While God, sovereign God that He is, *can* do what He wills, we are brought back to the idea of what God *chooses* to do in relation to his commitment to His creation and to humanity (Genesis 6-9, the Noah story, is instructive here). I would still affirm that God knows what He will do in response to any given human decision, but that "will" is not absolute, in that He will not forcibly impose that will on humanity; it is always in relation to genuine God-enabled human freedom.

A question that some would raise here is whether God is limited, and if he is, does he have room for growth? Again, this is only an issue if we have already accepted the idea that God is immutable, based on the definitions that God exists on that level of reality defined by certain categories as perfect, infinite, etc.

And again, that is an idea that comes from Greek philosophy, not from Scripture. There are a few passages in both Testaments that seem to suggest this (e.g., Mal 3:6, 1 Sam 15:29; Num 23:19; Heb 13:8; Jas 1:17). But the context in all of those passages is the stability and faithfulness of God in history, not a statement about the absolute essence of His being (ontological). And there are other passages that make it clear that the immutability of God is a category alien to Scripture.

The fact is, the only way we have ever experienced God, and from which our revealed knowledge of God comes, is his revelation of Himself in our time and history. And that revelation does not lend itself to categories like "infinite" or "immutable." I don't know if "growth" is the proper term or not here to describe God, but if we reject the idea of the immutability of God, which is tied to the Greek idea of "perfection," it certainly raises the possibility that God may be much more dynamic in relation with his creation than the previous categories have allowed. It would certainly be compatible with the idea of a contingent future that is not totally predestined.

As far as God being limited, the same factors apply. This is only an issue if we have *a priori* assumed that for God to be God he must be without limits of any kind. In other words, we have defined God in a certain way, and then assumed that our definition is the way he really is, and then concluded that any way of thinking that does not affirm that

definition is somehow taking something away from God. In reality, the only thing that loses anything is our own definition with which we began!

That's why I see no reason to use the term "limitation" in this context. This implies that the "limitation" of God is somehow a negative thing. This is still operating from the paradigm of "perfection" and therefore anything less than absolute perfection is somehow "limited." Therefore, "limitation" somehow lessens God, because it reduces His perfection. Actually, I see what some want to term "limitation" of God (in allowing human freedom) as a positive category, an expression of His sovereignty and freedom as God. He is free to respond in love and mercy to a humanity to which He has granted the freedom to make their own decisions. **It is not a limitation, it is a freedom** that is not to be found in any predestination or deterministic system!

Another aspect of this is the issue of the nature of God as a personal being, rather than as a cosmic force. Classical Christian philosophy, concerned as it was to define God in terms of absolutes, left God with few of the characteristics that we associate with a personal being. "Attributes" such as infinity and immutability (negatives of human experience), along with the rejection of any idea that God could suffer (called Patripassianism, considered a heresy until a couple of centuries ago), were appealing from a worldview that wanted to emphasize the transcendence of God by asking questions of ultimate reality. But those definitions left God virtually incapable of any meaningful ongoing interaction with his creation.

When those ideas were processed through Enlightenment rationalism, Deism emerged. This is the idea of God as the master clockmaker, who created the world as one would make and wind a clock and then left it to run on its own.

Yet this is not the God of the biblical testimony. However we struggle with defining it in human terms, the idea of God as personal, a God who loves, suffers, and interacts with his creation in meaningful and genuine ways, is an unambiguous and essential feature of the biblical witness. While some have challenged the idea of God as personal (reacting to a system of metaphysics called personalism), it is difficult to understand the biblical testimony to God's self-revelation without some concept of God as personal.

If we take this idea seriously, it considerably shifts the basis of discussion about God from absolute categories and ultimate reality to the ongoing interaction of God with the world. While that certainly cannot be encompassed by human terms and imagery, nor reduced to the limitations of human experience, neither can it be totally apart from them. Since God's self-revelation to humanity has always been within human time and space, if we are going to take seriously the biblical witness to God we are left with the necessity of conceptualizing God in terms of his commitment to his creation in ways that allow him to respond to it. From many of the biblical narratives, for example the flood story in Genesis 6-9, we are confronted with a God who is portrayed as responding in new ways to situations that human beings have created by their decisions. That suggests that, in spite of problems that might be associated with speaking of God as personal, to be

faithful to the biblical testimony we must incorporate this dimension of interaction and even change, however defined, in our concepts of God.

Another question is often raised here. If God is not all of those “omni-” things, and gives genuine freedom to humanity, is there room for failure on God’s part? There is some biblical evidence that human beings have made decisions that took God’s creation in different directions than he wanted it to go, or took events in a different direction than he intended. Again, the Noah story might suggest this. Or the appointment of Saul as King. Or the establishment of the Davidic dynasty. Or the establishment of the Israelite people to be a blessing to the nations. Or even the Eden story.

This really boils down to how we define “failure” and how we think human freedom could interfere with the work of God and cause human history to go different directions than he intended. There are numerous biblical examples of human beings thwarting God’s work in the world by their decisions. For example, Matthew (13:58) tells us that lack of faith prevented Jesus from doing “many deeds of power.”

The biblical witness portrays human beings with a tendency through the exercise of their God-given freedom to pervert God’s intentions and purposes for them and to ignore his instructions (*torah*) for living in his creation. The consequence is a perversion of God’s creation from what he created it to be. This sense of deterioration in creation as a result of human decision is a central feature of the macrostructure of the Torah and Former Prophets, and on a different level and in different conceptual categories, is also central to Pauline theology in the Epistles.

Yet God is presented as responding to this deterioration, often expressed in the culturally specific metaphors of chaos and dis-creation (see [Speaking the Language of Canaan](#)), in deliberate and purposeful ways in order to restore (re-create) that which human beings have perverted (note Paul’s comment in Rom 8:19-23). The Incarnation itself might be a good example of God’s response to human decision (see [Did Jesus Have to Die?](#) and [The Death of Jesus: Historically Contingent or Divinely Ordained?](#)).

It is common for some who try to preserve the idealistic model simply to respond that God knew that the failures would occur. Since he knew that, he simply included in his decrees the solution so that history would unfold with no “bumps.” While this attempts to preserve the classical position of the absolute foreknowledge of God, it still falls under the problems discussed earlier, that we cannot really separate absolute foreknowledge from determinism.

This leads to the logical problem that, since God knew about human failures and actually planned for them, God is somehow implicitly, or even explicitly, involved in human failure. It presents a nearly duplicitous God who goes through the motions of interacting with humanity while knowing that such interaction will not succeed, and will in fact be destructive. While this may seem to be a defense of God’s justice, since we can have him say, “I tried,” it presents insurmountable problems both from the perspective of the biblical narratives and in terms of the integrity of God.

For example, in the appointment of Saul to be king, God appears to choose Saul. He offers him promises, knowing that he will fail and that David will really be king instead. Without resorting to the parachute of paradox at this point, we are left with God directly involved in creating a situation that he knows will result in the destruction of Saul. Saul's failure is a necessary prerequisite to the ascension of David, since God has already decreed that David should be king in Saul's place. Once again, human freedom is illusionary. Only in this case, God has no redemptive purpose for Saul, only for David, since he knows Saul will fail.

This presents us with an even greater logical and theological problem. At worst, this puts God in the position of creating the failures of humanity so he could provide a solution. At best, it allows God to accept human failure as part of his "plan," without any redemptive effort in dealing with that failure directly (what one writer called the "dilemma of the inevitable"). That would mean, for example, that the appeals of God through the prophet Jeremiah for the people to return to God were perfunctory and meaningless, since the failure of the people was a necessary part of the decrees of God that had already assumed that failure in providing a longer range solution.

I think that is far more illogical, bordering on the ludicrous, than trying to understand God's sovereignty as he responds to genuine human freedom that he has granted as the exercise of his sovereignty. Here the biblical narratives, if taken seriously, provide a far better picture of God than do the classical theological formulations that stress categories of absoluteness, immutability, and divine passivity.

God's Control and Human Freedom

I think I understand what most people mean when they say "God is in control." It is a way to affirm the sovereignty of God over His creation, without necessarily affirming all the baggage that might go with that or without making fine theological distinctions.

However, if we push it very far, the concept of "control" raises huge problems on both a theological and practical level. I have dealt with too many people struggling to come to grips with tragedy in their lives (*e.g.*, the Oklahoma City bombing) for the idea of God being in control to have much meaning. The same can be said of the well intentioned formulation that "God had a reason for doing this." One Oklahoma City area pastor made that statement on TV the afternoon of the bombing. That puts an awful burden on God. I just don't think God was "in control" of the bombing, and I certainly don't think He did it for any reason, no matter how noble we might want it to be as we struggle to given meaning to such suffering.

I think the bombing, as most "evil" in the world, was the product of sin, a product of human beings' capacity to bring unspeakable horror and pain into the world. I want to affirm just as quickly that God can take the worst that sinners can do and create good from it (Rom 8:28). But that does not mean that He somehow orchestrated the evil act for some larger good. It may be a subtle distinction but I think it is an enormous one for how we develop our ideas about God and how He works in the world.

The same problems of the "total control" way of thinking work out in many other aspects of life. M.V. "Bud" Scutt, in the article [Renewing the Pioneer Spirit](#), put it this way:

Lamentably, some [Wesleyans] now (perhaps innocently) hold to a doctrine of predestination through absolute sovereignty. This doctrine embraces the idea that the predetermination of God is engineering every event in life, individual and collective, inside the church and in the world. That doctrine diametrically contradicts the Wesleyan theology of free agency by a view of God creating humanity in a dilemma of the inevitable. It says, "God is working out His purposes, so why bother." When calamities come or difficulties arise, you may hear, "God has a purpose in it." . . . It is a doctrine that literally destroys vision, because it leaves the final responsibility for God's purposes with Him alone. Remember, God did not just choose Abraham; Abraham chose God! When Abraham packed up his belongings to obey God in an adventure that had no logic for its basis and no known destination, it was called "faith," and God called that faith "righteousness." [see [Divine/Human Synergism in Ministry](#)]

So, I don't use the idea of "control" in talking about God. I use the idea of God working out his purpose in history. That purpose is the reconciliation of all of his creation to himself. Paul does not say that God will work out all things ahead of time so that they are good. The implication of his statement in Romans 8:28 is that God works in all things, no matter how bad they might be, to bring good from them "according to His purpose." The testimonies of countless people affirm that, including the pastor whose 6-year daughter was killed by a lady speeding through a school zone. He now writes and gives seminars on how to deal with grief, and operates a foundation that has a similar ministry via radio in several countries. He would never say that God killed his daughter. But he would quickly say that God brought good out of that tragedy, enabled him to have a larger vision of ministry, and used it for His purpose in the world.

We sometimes want God to be "in control" to give us some stability and meaning in a world that too often seems out of control. But our security is not in having a predictable and stable world. We will never have that. We simply have to admit that sometimes sin dominates our world and can have devastating consequences even on the innocent. We cannot rationalize that away simply because we don't want it to be so! Our only security is in God who has promised that He will always be with us, and that He can take the worst that anyone can do and work good from it. That's frightening sometimes. But it is faith.

This invariably leads to a question about what God's will really is for our lives. If there is not a "perfect plan" for us to follow, what is God's will?

As I suggested earlier, I think our popular religious thinking has been unduly influenced by assumptions about "finding" God's perfect will, meaning a certain specific course of action to follow in all the details of life. As a result we have continually expanded the idea of God's will to include virtually everything we do. I have heard people say that they pray for God's guidance to know in which space to park lest they somehow miss an opportunity to fulfill God's plan about something.

I think God's will, in the sense of "those things that are definitely God's will for us," should probably be left in the general area of salvation, discipleship and Christian growth, and perhaps God's call into specific ministry (although in many cases I think this would fall into the area of decision making). The rest of life is lived out under God's presence and leadership in our lives as we make decisions and allow God to work in those decisions.

Why not just identify God's will for our lives as our salvation and sanctification, God's grace and our response to it? God's will, remember, is the entire river in which we journey, with a great deal of freedom left to us as to how to navigate it. I would question why we need to add any adjective like "perfect" to "God's will." That implies that there is a will of God that is less than perfect ("permissive will," or whatever we name it), which in turn, leads to the idea of a "second best" will of God. I simply, and totally, reject the idea of a "second best" will of God. Otherwise forgiveness and transformation by the work of the Holy Spirit has little meaning, especially since, as I said earlier, all of us without exception live in the "second best." If we did not, then we would have somehow managed to live a sinless life.

There is simply no second best for Christians who are following Christ! As soon as we accept God, then we are in God's will. That is the nature of forgiveness, grace, and God's presence with us. There are certainly consequences to wrong decisions with which many have to live their entire lives. Grace does not erase the past. But I just don't think those consequences should be termed "God's will," no matter how we try to modify it with adjectives like permissive. It is **NOT** God's will for us to be second best Christians! We are either in God's will having accepted his grace, or we are not.

So how do we go about making decisions, and how does what God knows relate to our decisions? Let me return to the illustration used earlier. Suppose I leave home at exactly 10:00 PM this evening to run to the store to buy something. God knows that at exactly 10:04 I will be involved in a car accident at the corner of NW 63rd and MacArthur Blvd., and I am killed. Now, if God absolutely knows that historical event, then it is already a predetermined event, and nothing anyone does can change it in any way.

It makes no difference whether God caused it to happen or not; that event will occur in precisely the way that God knows it will occur. It is "determined" in the sense that there is no alternative to that happening. It does not matter what I will or what God wills, the event will unfold precisely as it is known. It does not matter that there are half a dozen other stores to which I could go; this absolutely known event means that I can only go the WalMart on NW Highway, passing through that intersection at that time (which eliminates catching the previous two lights red), and hitting a certain car that must also be at that particular spot at that exact instant. One of us is predetermined to do something wrong that causes that accident, and no medical heroism can save me.

Functionally, I have no choice in the matter, because I must be at that intersection at that time. I may have the appearance or the illusion of making choices, but I can only choose a course of action that will cause that event to occur. I have no actual freedom, but am

only living out what must be because it is absolutely known by God to be. The same would apply for the driver of the other car. Or for the people who might have been at that intersection at that moment if I did not have to be there. The world must always work precisely in a determined way to conform to what God already knows.

Now, if I have real freedom and there are real alternatives, then God did not absolutely "know" the exact sequence of events that would unfold. If I have real freedom, I could choose to go the other direction to the WalMart on Reno Street because it is closer, or stop by Walgreens to see if they have the item, or swing over to the new Eckerts, or even drive up to KMart and check out the late sale they are having. In any of these cases, if I have real freedom, then God does not know the specific event that *must* occur. He may know what all of those options might be, and the corresponding consequences of them all interfaced with the decisions of everyone else on the road (or not). But that suggests a considerably different definition of knowing than is presented by the idea of absolute foreknowledge. I think real freedom is a much more consistent conclusion, because there is simply no way to get around the idea that if God does indeed *know*, then that event *must* occur.

Now, none of this limits God. If I know the possibilities of decisions, I think God knows those possibilities as well, and probably an infinite number of others. It is not a specific future history that God knows, since that future does not yet exist and will be created by people making decisions. But God does know **people!** I think that is the only answer that provides any consistency to this issue, that God knows the possibilities inherent in people. He not only knows the possibilities of my own actions, he also knows the possibilities of the actions of everyone else. And he not only knows the possibilities *now*, he can likely calculate the consequences of those possibilities in my life compounded with the possibilities of everyone else's decision. If I am to have real freedom, then by his own act of sovereignty God does not know exactly what we will choose or what future we will create by those decisions (*e.g.*, Abraham in Gen 22:12), and so the world is not determined but contingent. But by that same act of sovereignty, God knows **me**.

If the world is contingent, that places a great deal of responsibility on us as human beings to live well and make good decisions. That emphasis on responsibility and accountability seems to be much more compatible with Scripture than any foreknowledge or predestination view. The idea of "free will" (or more correctly "free grace" that enables human freedom), that human beings have genuine freedom and not just an illusion of freedom, and that their freedom has ongoing consequences that flow directly from that freedom and not just from the will of God, is a central feature of Scripture. That is, the idea of accountable human freedom emerges from Scripture itself and is not imposed by asking philosophical questions about ultimate reality. "Free will" or "free moral agency" may have been systematized by theologians like Arminius and Wesley, but it is thoroughly biblical, beginning in Genesis 3.

If we bring this whole issue back around to prophecy from this perspective, it puts the whole issue in a different light. I simply do not think prophecy predicts predetermined historical events with absolute precision. Of course there are prophetic predictions. But

they are not absolute predictions of predestined events; they are predictions of *contingent* events, that relate both to human decision and God's purposes in relation to human decision. God can tell what He *will* do. And he knows what we *can* do. But He can also change His mind in response to what **we** do! That is not arbitrary or whimsical, but is in response to and interaction with humanity. History can be predicted to go a certain direction. But human decision can take it in a different direction because of how people make decisions.

Contrary to how some have tried to distort this position, it does not eliminate any predictive element to prophecy, *per se*. It does seriously challenge the logic of saying that a specific event can be absolutely predicted, and yet the event not be predestined. Either it is predicted and therefore predestined (must occur). Or it is not predestined (contingent), and therefore not absolutely predicted.

An Incarnational God

I will conclude by returning to the idea of an incarnational God. I think this is a far better way of understanding God and his work in the world than trying to define him in logical abstractions.

One of the most important affirmations about God in the Christian tradition, as well as in Judaism, is his sovereignty, and finally that is the question to which we return here. The real issue in most discussions is not **whether** God is sovereign, but **how** he exhibits that sovereignty. In philosophical terms, it is the distinction between ontological reality and existential encounter.

Now certainly John Wesley did not conceptualize the issue in those specific terms. But he did make the same distinction in a different way. For most Christians in the traditions that closely followed Augustine's formulations, the primary question was: "What is the nature of God?" (ontological reality). That led to a great deal of effort being focused on proper definitions of God (which is one reason the Reformed tradition has so many creeds). So, in that system, theology is worked from the top down, beginning with certain definitions of God, and then working other aspects of theology around that (eternal security, predestination, etc.)

However, Wesley operated with a different primary question: "How do I reach heaven?" That led him to focus on the relationship between God and humanity, how God actually meets human beings and transforms them into His people (existential encounter). For Wesleyans, theology is worked from the bottom up. That does not mean at all that it is totally humanistic or that it ignores God as the sole source of that relationship; only that Wesleyan theology is primarily soteriologically orientated (having to do with our salvation/relationship with God) rather than ontologically oriented (having to do with ultimate reality).

Understanding that fact shifts the focus of most theological discussions, including the sovereignty of God. That is why I think when we try to say the most about God, defining

him with all the "omni-" words we can think of and putting categories like "infinite" on Him, we may be saying the least! Not only do we not have any reliable way to know those things, they really do not impact us very much on a human level (in Wesley's terms, they don't help us get to heaven).

All this is to say that for Wesleyans, the whole issue is dealt with on a different level than trying to preserve some logical construct about the sovereignty of God as an absolute category of His being. The question would be: How does God demonstrate His sovereignty to humanity? There in specific reference to the issue of human freedom, I would respond that God demonstrated His sovereignty in an act of grace by granting to humanity their freedom to choose (Wesley called this "prevenient grace"), knowing that that freedom to choose could be used to choose something other than Him. In our human understanding, there is no greater expression of love than to grant another person the freedom to choose, as any parent who has raised a child understands all too well.

We cannot grant something that is not ours to give. And yet God chose to give away part of His sovereignty for the sake of authentic and real human freedom. For me, logically, if God (or the Devil!) is "in control" then humans are not authentically free, and therefore are not accountable or responsible. That does not eliminate God being able to work out His purposes in the world, or to bring about an ultimate and final reconciliation of all Creation to Himself, as Paul eloquently expresses in Romans. Nor does it interfere with His providential care for humanity. But it does mean that human decision can thwart God's purposes in the world, and we can choose the creature over the Creator. That choice is not without consequences, but it is a genuine choice.

Could God have taken a different course of action? Of course. But he didn't. Could He again take control of the world and eliminate human freedom? Yes, I think so. But He would not be the God that we affirm revealed Himself in Jesus Christ! Again, the issue is not what God **can** or **could** do, but what he actually does, and has done.

This also means that in a very real sense, the act of Creation itself was an act of incarnation, as God chose to work with human beings within the confines of time and space, the only arena in which we can exist as humans. And He chose to allow them to choose their own way in the world, as He calls them freely to respond to the One who gave them the freedom to respond. That gift of freedom, which in a very practical way was then a limitation that God imposed upon Himself, is the ultimate act of divine sovereignty.

-Dennis Bratcher, Copyright © , Dennis Bratcher - All Rights Reserved
[See Copyright and User Information Notice](#)