



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 16.5 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

#### Other Related Questions

It is important that we clearly understand the meaning of the word “foreknowledge” and the way it is used in Romans 8. The Bible teaches that God knows everything that will come to pass in the future as though it had already occurred. This is probably the most common understanding of what this word means. From eternity God has known absolutely everything that has happened in time from creation to the present time, as well as what will happen from the present time to the end of the world. Job said to God: **“Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You”** (Job 14:5). When the prophet Daniel was asked to tell King Nebuchadnezzar his dream and its meaning, he said to him: **“There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days”** (Daniel 2:28). Jesus’ brother James testified at a meeting of Christians in Jerusalem: **“Known to God from eternity are all His works”** (Acts 15:18). It is because of this foreknowledge of God that He is able to make prophecies concerning the future that always come to pass exactly as He prophesied. This is the way God distinguished Himself from the gods of the heathen.

Nevertheless, the word **“foreknew”** in Romans 8:29 does not simply mean that God knew something ahead of time. If that were its meaning, then when the text says: **“Whom God foreknew”**, it would in that case refer to every person in the entire world, for God knows everyone in advance. But not everyone ends up in glory, i.e. is **“glorified”**, which is what Romans 8:30 states will happen to those **“whom God foreknew”**. Instead, the word **“foreknew”** in Romans 8:29 and in other places in Scripture has the meaning of “making a choice in love”, just as the word “know” in the Bible often means more than just plain knowledge. It includes the ideas of emotion and choice. For that reason, we explained the word **“foreknew”** in Romans 8:29 as meaning that God in love chose certain persons from eternity to be His, and He then predestined these same persons to be members of His holy family. These are the ones He then called by the Gospel to learn of Jesus’ sacrificial death for the world and to come to faith in Jesus. It was God’s choice to bring them the Gospel and persuade them to believe it, and all of this was by grace, without any original desire on their part to accept God’s offer. In other words, they were unable to cooperate in their own conversion; their conversion was entirely a matter of grace. In summary, God knows in advance everyone in the whole world from eternity, but in the sense of Romans 8:29 God **“foreknew”** only some persons whom He then predestined, called, justified, and glorified.

The Greek word translated **“foreknew”** (*proginōskō* προγινώσκω) in Romans 8:29 does not mean “to know in advance” in an intellectual way but “to know in advance” in a loving or emotional way. The apostle Peter uses the word in the same way when he calls the Christians to whom he is writing **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father”** (1 Peter 1:2). So also Paul wrote: **“God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew”** (Romans 11:2).

There are others who have misunderstood the word **“foreknew”** in another way. They have understood the apostle Paul as saying that God saw ahead of time which persons would believe in Jesus when the Gospel was brought to them, and these persons that God foresaw to be believers are the ones that God then chose to be His own. But this is to add words to Scripture that are not there. They understand Paul to be saying: “Whom God foreknew as believers in Christ, these are the ones He predestined and chose as His.” But the words “as believers in Christ” are not in the text.

Did God choose certain persons to be His own because He saw that they were going to believe the Gospel? In other words, was their future faith in Jesus (which God could see ahead of time) the reason or cause for God to elect or choose them? This may make some sense to our human thinking, but it is not the teaching of Scripture. We read in Acts 13:48: **“As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”** Notice that God’s appointing to eternal life is the cause of their faith. It is not the other way around, their faith is not the cause of God’s appointing them. Even some Lutherans misunderstood Paul’s words and taught that God chooses or elects persons to be His “in view of their faith”, even though Scripture does not teach this. In fact this idea is even contrary to our Lutheran confessions, which plainly teach that God’s election is the cause of our faith in Jesus, and not the other way around.

What we teach and confess as confessional Lutherans is contrary to both Calvinists and Arminians. The Calvinists teach that we are saved by grace alone, but they deny the equally Biblical teaching of universal grace. The Arminians teach universal grace, but they deny the equally Biblical teaching that we are saved by grace alone. Both Calvinists and Arminians claim that one must choose between “grace alone” or “universal grace”. They say that one cannot reasonably teach both, because the one teaching seems to contradict the other. But since both concepts are clearly taught in Scripture, we, as confessional, Lutherans teach both: salvation by grace alone and universal grace. It is not our task to harmonize Bible doctrines to make them easier for our human reason, but simply to believe, teach, and confess what God teaches us in His Word.

In our work as ambassadors for Christ we should follow the order of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The main thing is the Gospel of Jesus, as Paul says in Romans 1:16. As preparation for the Gospel, we proclaim God’s condemning law, as Paul does in Romans 1:18 – 3:20. Then Paul goes into detail regarding the Gospel itself, the Gospel of universal grace (Romans 3:24), emphasizing that the only way to receive the Gospel is by faith, not by works (Romans 3:21 – 5:21). The freedom that we have in Christ is explained in Romans 6 – 8. It is only when he speaks of the persecutions and troubles endured by Christians that he brings up the doctrine of election in Romans 8. Thus, the purpose of the doctrine of election is to strengthen our faith in our gracious God and thus preserve us in this faith to the end. Our personal faith in Christ is not the result of chance nor of our own choice but the result of God’s plan for us from eternity.

In Romans 9-11 Paul deals with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian Church, and in his final chapters (Romans 12-16) he shows how the Gospel of God’s grace affects and changes the way we live as Christians. Rightly taught, the doctrine of election does not lead to carnal security. In Scripture the doctrine is used in order to encourage the living of the Christian life. Paul wrote to the Colossians: **“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do”** (Colossians 3:12-13).

When we are talking to the general public, including unbelievers, we do not introduce the topic of election, but we present the Gospel of God’s love for all sinners, as demonstrated by His coming into the world and suffering and dying for all on the cross, as well as His glorious resurrection. We call on individual sinners to recognize that since Jesus died for the world, He died also for them. We encourage them, we **“plead”** with them and **“implore”** them to accept God’s gift of forgiveness in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:20). Afterwards, when believers are troubled by all their difficulties, we present the doctrine of election to assure them that since God has brought them to faith in Jesus, this means that God has chosen them from eternity to be His, that He will be with them and sustain them in this faith to the end, and that we should therefore put our trust in Him. In this way we are teaching the doctrine of election in its proper place.

The *Formula of Concord* of 1577 has an article that explains election according to Scripture, without falling into the ditches of Calvinism or Arminianism on either side of the true path. We present a few

quotations here: *“God’s foreknowledge is nothing else than that God knows all things before they happen. ... This foreknowledge extends equally over godly people and evil people, but it is not a cause of evil. ... Predestination, however, or God’s eternal election, extends only to the righteous, God-pleasing children of God. It is a cause of their salvation, which God brings about. ... This election ... is to be sought in the Word. ... However, the Word of God leads us to Christ. ... This Christ calls all sinners to Himself and promises them refreshment. He is utterly serious in His desire that all people should come to Him. ... He offers Himself to them in the Word. ... He wants no one to be lost but rather that everyone repent and believe on the Lord Christ. ... Paul first of all points people to repentance, acknowledgment of their sins, and then to faith in Christ and obedience to God before he speaks of the mystery of God’s eternal election. ... The reason for condemnation lies in their not hearing God’s Word at all or arrogantly despising it. ... The fault lies not with God and His election but with their own wickedness. ... In Christ we are to seek the Father’s eternal election. He has decreed in His eternal, divine counsel that He will save no one apart from those who acknowledge His Son Christ and truly believe in Him. ... We have a glorious comfort in this salutary teaching, that we know how we have been chosen for eternal life in Christ out of sheer grace, without any merit of our own, and that no one can tear us out of His hand”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, pp. 517-518).

Because of a serious controversy among American Lutherans concerning the doctrine of election, confessional Lutherans drew up the *Brief Statement* of 1932, in which the doctrine of election is summarized in this way: *“All those who by the grace of God alone, for Christ’s sake, through the means of grace, are brought to faith, are justified, sanctified, and preserved in faith here in time ... have already from eternity been endowed by God with faith, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith, and this for the same reason, namely, by grace alone, for Christ’s sake, and by way of the means of grace”* (Brief Statement of 1932: #35).

## Questions

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1. What does the word “foreknowledge” usually mean?
2. What does “foreknew” mean in Romans 8:29?
3. Which statement is true? Explain your answer.  
One: Faith is the cause of election.  
Two: Election is the cause of faith.
4. Which statement is true? Explain your answer.  
One: Faith comes before election.  
Two: Election comes before faith.
5. What teaching is denied by the Calvinists?
6. What teaching is denied by the Arminians?
7. In what way does confessional Lutheranism disagree with both Calvinism and Arminianism?
8. Which teachings of God's Word should we present first to unbelievers?