

"THE GREAT PLAN OF GOD"

(Romans 8:29-30)

Douglas Moo

If [Romans] 8:28 gives assurance for the present life, verses 29-30 focus again on the future. God has a plan, Paul says. That plan begins with his foreknowing us, and then leads to his predestining, calling, justifying, and finally glorifying us. This series has been the focus of a lot of theological debate over the years. We cannot really apply the verses until we understand just what the theology is here.

Calvinist theologians think these verses provide evidence for two characteristic teachings in that view of salvation: that becoming a Christian is ultimately rooted in God's free choice, and that those whom God chooses and then become his people will always be saved in the last day. We usually call these doctrines, respectively, unconditional election and eternal security. Calvinists insist that the verb "foreknow" means "choose beforehand." Thus, the whole process by which God brings people into relationship with himself starts with him. He chooses, and because he does so, we believe and thus are justified. They also argue that the series of verbs in verses 29-30 is an unbreakable chain. All whom God chooses and then justifies he will also glorify. There can be no change or variation: Every justified believer will be saved in the end.

One can easily see how Calvinists can use these verses to support their distinctive view of salvation. But how would Arminians respond? First of all, the Arminian theologian insists on viewing these verses in light of the whole picture. Throughout Romans, Paul has proclaimed that believing in Jesus Christ is the way to be saved, and believing is a real choice that human beings must make. Thus, the whole process cannot simply be predetermined.

Arminians also note that the Calvinist interpretation of 8:29-30 rests on three key decisions. (1) First is the decision to interpret "foreknow" in terms of choosing. As we saw above in the *Original Meaning* section, this verb can also mean "know ahead of time." What Paul may be saying, then, is that God knows about every person's decision to believe or not believe ahead of time; and it is those who choose to believe whom he predestines, calls, and justifies. We do not believe because God has chosen us (the Calvinist view), we are chosen because we believe.

(2) Many (though not all) Arminians also contest the decision of Calvinists to interpret verses 28-29 in individual terms. What Paul teaches here, they allege, is that God has chosen the church. It is the body of Christ as a whole that God has elected by his grace, and individuals become members of that elect body through their faith.

(3) Arminians also question whether it is fair to view the series of verbs in these verses as an unbreakable chain. What Paul describes, they



claim, are the decisions God has made on our behalf. He is determined to glorify everyone whom he has justified. But Scripture teaches that believers have the freedom to refuse the gift God offers us, to opt out of the sequence of decisions he has made. A truly justified person may, indeed, fail to attain glory—not because God did not will it (for he did), but because that person chose to reject what God had willed.

The issue we raise here is massive, and we will have to return to it again when we comment on 9:6-29. As my interpretation above has revealed, I come down on the Calvinist side. I think that "foreknow" means "chose beforehand," that Paul is talking about individual people, and that God's will to glorify the believer cannot be thwarted—even by us. Naturally, this decision about the meaning of the verses affects my application. The idea that we can be "Calminians," combining Calvinism and Arminianism in one system, is attractive but irrational. I can logically be a Calvinist in one doctrine and Arminian in another; but I cannot be both with respect to the same doctrine. I cannot both believe my faith is based ultimately on God's choice and that God's choice is ultimately based on my faith. Or, at least, I cannot believe it and remain rational. I may as well believe that black is white.

Thus, I want to include in my application of these verses some specific points stemming from my Calvinistic exegesis. For instance, the knowledge that God has chosen me on the basis of his own free will alone should stimulate awe and wonder at what he has done and a deeper sense of thanksgiving for his unmerited gift.

But I would like to leave this great passage on a practical application that both Calvinist and Arminian can agree on: God has done all that is needed to secure our eternal glory. He has already made the decision: "Those whom he justified he glorified." We may disagree about whether believers can refuse to accept that decision. But from God's side at least, the matter has already been determined. That means that no genuine believer need ever wonder whether he or she "has what it takes" to get to heaven. None of us does. But that doesn't matter in the end. God himself has supplied all we need. As we have seen repeatedly in Romans 5—8, Paul is anxious to preserve a balance in which God's gift to us does not cancel our need to respond to that gift. This passage is about that gift, and that is what we must emphasize in our application.