

Supra, Infra and Biblical Theology

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The debate between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism has caused many a sound theologian to throw up his hands in bewilderment and utter words akin to R.L. Dabney's reaction: "In my opinion this is a question which never ought to have been raised."ⁱ But whether or not Dabney was right is beside the point at the present time, since more than 400 years of theologizing has stamped the ordering of the decrees upon the Reformed tradition. Positions have been taken, schemes have been developed, consequences have occurred. Thus, if we are going to *do* theology in the twenty-first century, we must be able to give an answer to such things and work out the most biblically consistent system.

This article will argue that of the two systems traditionally espoused (i.e. supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism), supralapsarianism is less consistent with the vital biblical-theological eschatology principle since it essentially makes creation a means to redemption. In order to unpack and defend this thesis, several brief observations will be made. First, comment must be made of the legitimacy of our inquiry. Second, the biblical-theological eschatology principle will be concisely explained from Scripture. Third, supralapsarianism's failure to adhere to this principle will be examined. Fourth, infra-lapsarianism as a more viable option will be presented. Finally, a reformulation of infralapsarianism will be offered in order to maintain its adherence to the eschatology principle while addressing valid supralapsarian concerns.

The Legitimacy of the Inquiry

Is it legitimate to speak of the decrees in the plural? The whole notion of ordering the decrees is often dismissed as an illegitimate argument since it seeks to separate and categorize hypothetical events that take place in the mind of God. Because God has archetypal knowledge of all things and his eternal decrees are ultimately one, arranging a plurality of decrees is seen by many as unjustifiable. But while it is clear that God's archetypal knowledge conceives of only one decree, his ectypal revelation, with which our finite minds must do theology, compels us to speak of the decrees as if they are many. The same is true of God's attributes: archetypally, God has one simple attribute (i.e. his perfection), but ectypally, we speak of many. As Louis Berkhof points out, we must understand this distinction while still embracing our necessary ectypal language:

There is, therefore, no series of decrees in God, but simply one comprehensive plan, embracing all that comes to pass. Our finite comprehension, however, constrains us to make distinctions, and this accounts for the fact that we often speak of the decrees of God in the plural. The manner of speaking is perfectly legitimate, provided we do not lose sight of the unity of the divine decree, and of the inseparable connection of the various decrees as we conceive of them.ⁱⁱ

The Creator/creature distinction is what drives our ordering of the decrees and our systematizing of theology in general. The following analysis, therefore, is legitimate and in no way “off limits.”

The Eschatology Principle

The biblical-theological principle of eschatology, in its most basic form, simply means that Adam was not created in order to fall and be redeemed, but was created in order to enjoy eschatological life. When Adam breached the Covenant of Works, he destroyed the possibility of entering in to the glory of God’s consummate kingdom with all of his progeny. Redemption by the second Adam, who fulfilled the Covenant of Works (and the *Pactum Salutis*), was introduced in order to bring all of God’s elect to their eschatological goal of resurrection life in the eschaton.

While no explicit promise of the consummation is given in the opening chapters of Genesis, it is nevertheless entailed by the presence of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2.9; 3.22; cf. Rev 22.14) and clearly implied in the rest of Scripture. We read in Romans 3.23, for example, that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The sin and fall that Paul has in mind here is *Adam’s* sin and consequent fall, of which all humanity is guilty because Adam was our federal head and representative. This is clear from Paul’s use of the clause “glory of God,” which are the same words he uses in 5.12 to explain the effects of original sin in Adam’s covenantal headship. Thus, had man (i.e. Adam and all those he represented) *not* sinned, man would have attained the glory of God. This “glory of God” Paul explains in 8.18ff as eschatological glory, viz., the glory of resurrection life in the age to come. Falling short of the consummation, the elect are brought to their blessed end only through faith in the perfect obedience of Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another crucial text to observe is 1 Corinthians 15.45-49. In his breathtaking explanation and defense of bodily resurrection in chapter 15, Paul brings his readers face to face with the eschatological goal of creation. In verses 45-49, which is the center of his cosmological argument, Paul explains that God’s revealed order of life is *first* the natural (*psucikon*), *then* the spiritual (*pneumatikon*). Paul deliberately cites Gen 2.7 to highlight Adam’s sinless, prelapsarian state in comparison to Christ’s resurrected, glorified state. By asserting such, Paul is showing that the Fall is not condoned by God as the necessary “first” episode. As Peter Jones points out, “[I]n Paul’s thinking, sin is not the ‘first’ event. The good creation is. So it is not Adam as the ‘first’ sinner, but Adam as the ‘first’ created human being that Paul has in mind in v.45.”^{iv}

Furthermore, Paul’s analogy of Adam and Christ in 15.21-22 gives added weight to 15.45b; the basis of the last Adam *becoming* a life-giving spirit is His fulfillment of that which the first Adam failed to accomplish, viz., the Covenant of Works. Thus, Paul is developing the eschatological implications that he finds in Gen 2.7,^v thereby showing that the spiritual, resurrected body is *not* the fulfillment of the body of sin, but the eschatological fulfillment of the natural, created body in the garden.

Supralapsarianism's Inconsistency

While God's revelation in redemptive history reveals that Adam was not created for the purpose of sin and redemption, supralapsarianism ultimately affirms such by ordering the decrees in the following manner:

1. The glory of God in Christ and His church.
2. The election of Christ as the Head of the church.
3. The elect church in Christ. (and reprobation)
4. The fall of all men.
5. The creation of the world and man.^{vi}

By placing the decree to save and damn rational creatures *before* (or “above,” hence the Latin “supra”) the decree to permit the Fall, reprobation and election become equally absolute. The decree to permit the Fall is thereby executed in order to obtain the goal of election and reprobation. Likewise, the decree to create is necessary in order to save and damn for the glory of God. In other words, election and reprobation is what it's all about. The *Fall* and *creation* are mere means to accomplish that end.^{vii}

By rigidly applying this teleological principle to the divine decrees, however, supralapsarianism cannot do justice to the biblical-theological eschatology principle. Considering 1 Cor 15.45-49, supralapsarianism finds itself at odds with the Pauline eschatology. While Paul establishes the *spiritual* to be the eschatological fulfillment of the *natural*, supralapsarianism on the other hand, seems to affirm the *spiritual* to be the eschatological fulfillment of the *Fall*. This cannot be escaped by the supralapsarians since their system asserts the objective of the divine decrees as God's glory in election and reprobation.^{viii}

Infralapsarianism: A More Biblical Solution?

The classic alternative to supralapsarianism is infralapsarianism (also known as “sub-lapsarianism”), which typically runs as follows:

God, with the design to reveal his own glory, that is, the perfections of his own nature, determined to:

1. Create the world.
2. Permit the fall of man.
3. Elect from the mass of fallen men a multitude whom no man could number as “vessels of mercy.”
4. Send his Son for their redemption.
5. Leave the residue of mankind, as He left the fallen angels, to suffer the just punishment of their sins.^{ix}

Infralapsarianism, which is favored by the language of most Reformed confessions, is generally accepted because it does a better job of avoiding the problem of making God the active author of sin.^x Whereas the supralapsarian scheme posits sin as a necessary means to effect election and reprobation, infralapsarianism sees the opposite; election and reprobation are decrees of God in response to His permitting the Fall of man.^{xi} Consequently, in the supralapsarian view, God reprobates by electing rational creatures to

damnation without the consideration of sin or justice. On the other hand, infralapsarians believe God reprobates by electing His chosen ones for salvation from a common mass of sinners and leaving the rest in their sins to face their rightful judgment. The former views sin and reprobation positively; the latter views sin and reprobation negatively.

There is considerable biblical evidence for infralapsarianism. Jesus told His disciples: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you...I chose you *out of the world*” (Jn 15.16, 19; italics mine). Here we see that it is a larger mass of individuals from which Christ chose His own. Likewise, Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “He chose us *in Him* [that is, Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1.4; italics mine). Our election is *in Christ*; this clearly shows that we are conceived as fallen and in need of a redeemer.

In Romans 9, a passage often cited by supralapsarians in support of their view, Paul uses infralapsarian language: “Does not the potter have power over the clay, *from the same lump* to make one vessel for honor and one for dishonor?” (Rom 9.21; italics mine). We should not understand this “same lump” as one universal group of human beings in a common state of neutrality; rather, we should understand this “same lump” as one universal group of human beings in a common state of sin and misery. This should be clear from the fact that Paul calls these vessels, “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (9.22) and “vessels of mercy...prepared beforehand for glory” (9.23). While both vessels are described as “prepared,”^{xii} “mercy” and “wrath” imply that the elected objects are first conceived as sinful and deserving judgment. As Dabney rightly points out, “[T]hose virtues (mercy and justice) are relative, they pre-suppose their object, do not make it.”^{xiii} Sin is not on account of damnation; rather, damnation is on account of sin.

Infralapsarianism doesn’t claim to have a comprehensive answer for *why* God permitted sin to enter the cosmos. Ultimately, infralapsarians must concede that God decreed the Fall (an objection readily made by supralapsarians). Nevertheless, because it views reprobation and election as God’s response to the Fall (instead of vice-versa), infralapsarianism offers a system which more carefully protects the justice of God. But more to the point of our thesis, infralapsarianism also upholds the integrity of creation to a degree that supralapsarianism cannot. Infralapsarians do not posit creation as a means to redemption in the way that supralapsarians do.

For this reason, it must be accepted that infralapsarianism is more consistent with the eschatology principle. If the eschatological fulfillment of *good* creation is consummated re-creation, then redemption is not a necessary means to achieve that end. Redemption, rather, is God’s response to the Fall in order that creation will reach its eschatological goal. This is the point that supralapsarianism seems to miss altogether.

A Reformulation of Infralapsarianism

Of course, supralapsarians often protest that infralapsarianism fails to do justice to the teleological principle of the divine decrees and, consequently, the glory and sovereignty of God. The fact that Romans 5.14 testifies of Adam as a “type of the one who was to

come” may add weight to their objection. For this reason, a reformulation of infralapsarianism is offered below in order to answer this objection and still uphold the integrity of creation and its eschatological goal. In other words, it must be affirmed that while creation is not merely a means to the end of redemption, and while there would have been a glorious eschatological consummation if Adam had kept the covenant of works, nevertheless, God in his infinite wisdom foreordained Adam's covenant breach in order to magnify the glory of his grace by achieving the eschatological goal of creation via the redemption in Christ the second Adam. Thus, a possible modification might look something like this:

1. God, for the sake of His glory, decreed that human beings would attain eternal glory with Him by means of a federal covenant of works.
2. Decree to create all things.
3. Decree to subsume the human race under the federal headship of Adam in a covenant of works.
4. Decree to permit the Fall and thus allow the covenant with Adam not to be consummated.
5. Decree to elect from the mass of fallen humanity a countless multitude to possession of eternal glory through the covenant of works with Christ (his execution of the *Pactum Salutis*); and to reprobate the rest of fallen humanity to eternal perdition by leaving them, as he left the fallen angels, to suffer the just punishment of their sins.

There are several viable advantages to this scheme. First, it incorporates the best argument of the supralapsarians (i.e. the teleological principle) and of the infralapsarians (God elects and reprobates *sinner*s rather than neutral human beings). In this way, both God's sovereignty and justice are most protected. Second, it gives integrity to the original creation and the covenant of works. Third, the first Adam, while in a covenant with God, was from the very beginning a type of the One to come (Rom. 5:14). Fourth, it remedies the typical covenant-less character of most traditional treatments of the order of the decrees.

Conclusion

In many ways, finding the perfect method of ordering the decrees is like finding the perfect analogy to describe the Trinity. It is impossible. The ectypal theology of the pilgrim can only go so far. The Creator/creature distinction must not be pressed. Yet, as we must responsibly systematize our understanding of the revelation given to us, infralapsarianism (and/or its posited re-formulation) seems to offer the most biblically consistent scheme of such a profound subject. Among the number of its attractive advantages over supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism has the benefit of more readily

adhering to the biblical-theological eschatology principle and, consequently, upholding the integrity of God's good creation.

ⁱ Dabney, R.L., *Systematic Theology* (1871, repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), p.233. It is worth noting that Dabney also adds: "Both schemes are illogical...[b]ut the Sublapsarian [or Infralapsarian] is far more Scriptural in its tendencies, and its general spirit far more honourable to God."

ⁱⁱ Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology* (1938, repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p.102

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul sets forth the same concept in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin [is] death, but the gift of God [is] eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Again, this is Adam's sin as federal head of all humanity. He (and by consequence *we*) has by his disobedience fallen short of the gift and glory of God that was laid out before him. It is only through the obedience of the Last Adam (Christ Jesus our Lord) that the gift and glory are attained.

^{iv} Peter Jones, "Paul Confronts Paganism in the Church: A Case Study of Corinthians 15:45," a paper delivered to the ETS in Toronto November 20, 2002 (presently unpublished), p.13

^v This point is even more impressive when considering his inspired and Apostolic modification of Gen 2.7 by his insertion of the word *protos*.

^{vi} Hoeksema, Herman, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), p.161. It should be noted that while Hoeksema (himself a militant supralapsarian) presents this order and defends it vigorously, he also offers his own personal modification of supralapsarianism in order to make room for the establishment of the covenant. It runs as follows: 1) God wants to reveal His own eternal glory in the establishment of His covenant. 2) For the realization of this purpose the Son becomes the Christ, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature, that in Him as the first begotten of the dead all the fullness of God might dwell. 3) For that Christ and the revelation of all His fullness the church is decreed and all the elect. 4) For the purpose of realizing this church in Christ, and, therefore, the glory of Christ, the reprobate are determined as vessels of wrath. 5) Finally, in the counsel of God all other things in heaven and on earth are designed as means to the realization of both election and reprobation, and therefore, of the glory of Christ and His church.

^{vii} See Turretin, Francis, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. I (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1994), p.341ff in which he makes this point in his argument against supralapsarianism.

^{viii} Perhaps this explains why many supralapsarians, such as H. Hoeksema, reject the notion of Adam being in a covenant of works, and consequently miss the biblical-theological eschatology principle. While it is sometimes noted that the biblical theology giant Geerhardus Vos was himself a supralapsarian, it remains unclear to me where and to what extent he spells this out in any detail. It should be understood that Vos' hand-written transcripts of his lectures on systematic theology (which exist only in Dutch), was penned during his first teaching job at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids (what is now Calvin Theological Seminary). During this time (1888-1893), Vos was responsible for a "wide range of subjects from Greek grammar to systematic theology and carried an instructional load that at times was as high as 25 hours per week" (see introduction to *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* [Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980], p.x). It wasn't until some forty years later, after decades of teaching as the chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, that Vos published *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930, repr. Phillipsburg: P & R, 1994).

^{ix} As found in Hodge, Charles, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp.319-20

^x While not explicitly repudiating supralapsarianism, the following are examples of clear and definite infralapsarian language in Reformed confessions: the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563): Art. XVII; the Irish Articles (1615): Arts. 13-14; the Canons of Dort (1618-19): I.7, 10, 15; the

Westminster Confession of Faith (1647): Art.3.6-7; the Larger Catechism (1648): QQ.12, 13, 30; the Shorter Catechism (1648): QQ.19-20.

^{xi} Hence the Latin “infra,” meaning “below.” The decree to elect is listed *below* the decree to permit the Fall, in contradistinction to *supralapsarianism*.

^{xii} It should be noted that Paul uses two different verbs with different constructions for “prepared” in vv.22-23. In v.22, Paul uses the Perfect Passive Participle *katertismena* which means “to prepare for a purpose” (BAGD). In v.23, Paul uses the Aorist Active Indicative, third-person, singular *proetoimasen* which means “prepare beforehand” (BAGD) and is only used one other time in the New Testament, viz., Eph 2.10. The difference in construction makes it very probable that we should not think of God as preparing these vessels in an equally absolute manner.

^{xiii} Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p.234