

**A Response to David Chen,  
“Has Francis Turretin been faithful to John Calvin’s Doctrine of Election?”**

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A very fine paper on Turretin’s doctrine of predestination has been written, owing to efforts of my friend David Chen. I am especially thankful for his defense of 17<sup>th</sup>-century scholasticism and his critique of the “Calvin-against-the-Calvinists” thesis, which, in fact, did not end with the Amyraut Controversy, but has persisted well into recent theological scholarship, as shown in the works of E. J. Dowey, J. B. Rogers, R. T. Kendall, etc. Since Calvin and Puritan studies are still in their infancy stages among Chinese Christians, works such as Chen’s are especially important in challenging innovative re-interpretations of Calvin and Reformed theology that explicitly or implicitly oppose Reformed orthodoxy, as found in the works of popular Chinese writers like Hong-Hsin Lin.

I was a little surprised, however, that in discussing Turretin’s view of predestination, Chen would choose to focus on the differences between Turretin and Amyraldus. While Turretin does engage sporadically with Amyraldianism in his treatment of the Doctrine of Predestination in the Fourth Topic of his *Institutes*, there is in fact only one place wherein Turretin devotes an entire section to systematically refute the notion of hypothetical universalism taught by Amyraldus. This is found as a sub-section under his “Eighteenth Question: The Order of the Divine Decrees in Predestination.”<sup>1</sup> What concerns Turretin here is not contention against the School of Saumur over the birthright, as it were, of Calvinism, nor is Turretin engaging in the so-called Amyraut Controversy. Rather, in his refutation of Amyraldianism, Turretin is wrestling with a more important debate of his time, viz. the Lapsarian Controversy. In fact, the logical framework of

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* I, trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), 417.

Turretin's lapsarian scheme undergirds the entire Fourth Topic, while his contention against Amyraldianism is relatively minor.

The point of contention in the Lapsarian Controversy is whether double predestination (the decrees of election and reprobation) logically precedes or follows God's decrees to create the world and permit humanity's fall. If double predestination logically precedes the decrees of creation and the fall, the object of election and reprobation would then be creatable and lapsable (i.e. not-yet-created and not-yet-fallen) humans. Otherwise, the object of election and reprobation would be considered as created and fallen in God's mind.

The first lapsarian position that Turretin refutes is that of the supralapsarians, who contend that "the decree of [double] predestination should be made to precede the decree of creation and the permission of the fall."<sup>2</sup> Turretin's refutation of this position consists in four parts. First, if God determined to reject some of God's creatures while they are not considered in God's mind as fallen and thus worthy of reprobation (be it a positive damnation or negative dereliction), then "the first act of God's will towards some of his creatures [would be] made to be an act of hatred."<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Turretin earlier asserts over against a voluntaristic understanding of God's will, all decrees of God are essential to God's being "as immanent acts of his will with a relation and termination outside of him."<sup>4</sup> Thus the supralapsarian position would render hatred essential to God's being, which Turretin finds repugnant.

In the second argument, Turretin asserts that the notion that God created humans "for the purpose of illustrating his justice in their damnation" would seem to "indicate that he is neither perfectly good nor perfectly wise and just."<sup>5</sup> In the third argument, Turretin contends that if the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

object of God's merciful election is "neither miserable nor guilty; yea, who are not even conceived of as yet existing," then such mercy would be quite void of meaning. Lastly, Turretin argues that the supralapsarian order of divine decrees renders creation and the fall subservient to election and reprobation, which would imply that God caused Adam to sin simply because God willed to reprobate some of God's creatures. On the basis of these four concise and yet powerful arguments that basically sums up the concerns of the majority of Reformed theologians of his time with regards to supralapsarianism, Turretin rejects the supralapsarian position as dubious.

The second position that Turretin refutes is that of the Arminians, who, according to Turretin, have "fallen into the other but far more dangerous extreme."<sup>6</sup> Turretin's refutation of Arminianism needs no elaboration on my part, as it is common knowledge among students of Reformed theology today that the Arminians unduly ascribe to human free will logical priority over divine election and thereby deprive God of any truly biblical sense of sovereignty.

The third position that Turretin refutes is that of hypothetical universalism, which states, in line with Turretin's own conviction, that the object of predestination is considered created and fallen in God's mind and thus worthy of reprobation and in want of mercy, while alleging, contrary to Reformed orthodoxy, that there is also a universal decree of God by which salvation is offered to all God's creatures alike, and not just to the elect. This subsection seems to be what Chen has chosen to focus on in his paper. As Chen demonstrates, Turretin has successfully shown this hypothetical-universalist position to be clearly contradictory to Scripture. Note that Turretin's refutation of hypothetical universalism, as well as that of supralapsarianism and Arminianism, is only a sort of a *reductio ad absurdum* to arrive at the positive construal of his own lapsarian scheme.

The last position that Turretin names in the Eighteenth Question on the order of God's

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

decrees is that to which Turretin himself subscribes, viz. infralapsarianism. Already in the Ninth Question on the object of predestination, Turretin denies that “men creatable and lapsable” (read: not-yet-created and not-yet-fallen in God’s plan) are the object of predestination, and affirms the infralapsarian position that God elected and reprobated God’s creatures as fallen humans worthy of damnation and in want of mercy.<sup>7</sup> In the Eighteenth Question Turretin offers an equally extensive justification of infralapsarianism. I will not elaborate on his arguments here, since I have discussed the Lapsarian Controversy in some depth already in my own paper. Suffice it to say that Turretin and the majority of Reformed theologians of his time, including his earlier contemporary John Owen, who was hailed by many at that time as the most representative figure of Puritan theology, had found infralapsarianism to be much closer to Scripture than its counterparts.

Interestingly, Owen also engaged in controversy with the School of Saumur in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1646) when he was still a supralapsarian. At that time, Owen’s chief opponent was Arminianism, and there were elements in Amyraldianism that were in common with Arminianism. Therefore, in *The Death of Death* Owen found it necessary to refute Amyraldianism alongside Arminianism in safeguarding the doctrine of limited atonement. However, during Owen’s service at Oxford as Dean of Christ Church and later Vice Chancellor of the University, Arminianism was no longer seen as a threat to orthodoxy because of the weakness of its theological arguments. During these years, Owen began to shift his focus to Socinianism, which Turretin also saw as a threat. Aside from other heretical elements, one of Socinianism’s features is an extreme voluntarism with regard to the necessity of the atonement. This prompted Owen to contemplate on the relations between God’s will and God’s being, and Owen came to the conclusion that God’s decrees could in no way contradict God’s perfect

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 344

goodness. Therefore, Owen rejected supralapsarianism for reasons similar to those outlined in Turretin’s arguments summarized above. As Owen came to embrace infralapsarianism publicly in *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), he acknowledged that he had much more in common with the Amyraldians than with the supralapsarians, saying that the Amyraldians, “after the spreading of the poison of Socinianism, have with great accuracy and caution investigated and cleared up [the] truth,” and that he thus “easily got rid of any uneasiness from that quarter.”<sup>8</sup>

On the issue of the order of God’s decrees and consequently the necessity of the atonement (the doctrinal correlations between which I do not have space to elaborate here), Owen in fact aligned himself with the professors at Saumur against his beloved Augustine and Calvin, in addition to Rutherford, Musculus, Twisse and Vossius.<sup>9</sup> It is known that although Calvin never formulated a rigorous lapsarian scheme, his supralapsarian and voluntaristic tendencies are obvious.<sup>10</sup> Calvin even goes so far as saying that the fall of Adam was “no mere permission” in the *Institutes* (1.18.1)—an extreme form of supralapsarianism—even though in his refutation of Pighius and Georgius he conveniently uses the Augustinian notion of a “permissive decree.”<sup>11</sup>

Owen’s acknowledgment of the merits of Amyraldianism and his willingness to oppose his beloved Calvin, whose theology indeed continues to be Owen’s paradigmatic guide, serves as a good reminder for us today not to simplistically divide theology into different camps without seeing their true merits or faults.

In the case of Turretin, lapsarian logic undergirds his entire Fourth Topic on predestination, and his refutation of Amyraldianism is only mentioned in passing, which means that the Lapsarian Controversy is much more important and fundamental to Turretin than the Amyraut

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<sup>8</sup> John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* in *Works* Vol. X, 488.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 118.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1961), 67.

Controversy. It thus follows, in light of Owen's opposition against Calvin and alignment with the professors in Saumur in formulating lapsarianism in relation to the necessity of the atonement, that Turretin's position would actually be more amiable to that of the School of Saumur than to Calvin when it comes to Turretin's infralapsarian concerns.

It may be argued that Turretin's infralapsarianism is quite inconsistent and still retains strong hints of supralapsarianism. For instance, Turretin still insists, in line with supralapsarianism, that the sole basis of election and reprobation is God's "good pleasure," and fails to grasp the infralapsarian incentive to see the essential goodness and perfections of God's being as the foundation of all God's acts. With this inconsistency, Turretin makes the unfortunate move of detaching the Doctrine of Predestination from Christology, asserting that "Christ is *not* the foundation of election" because "election was made from God's *mere good pleasure*; therefore, not on account of Christ because good pleasure excludes every cause out of God upon which election may depend."<sup>12</sup> The infralapsarian Owen, on the other hand, would more consistently argue, with an infralapsarian logic, that the elect were "chosen in [Christ], as the only foundation of the execution of all the counsels of God concerning our sanctification and salvation."<sup>13</sup> In any case, with the inconsistency in Turretin's lapsarian scheme, it may be argued that Turretin's lapsarian position is closer to that of Calvin than to that of Amyraut.

However, I would still question whether Calvin would agree with the refutation of supralapsarianism and other infralapsarian contentions in Turretin's formulation of predestination. My hunch is that at least in some significant ways Amyraut would agree with Turretin more than Calvin would. If this is the case, then Chen's question about who between Turretin and Amyraut is the "true Calvinist" would become very complicated when it comes to their

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* I, 351. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> John Owen, *The Person of Christ* in *Works* Vol. I, 63.

understandings of the priorities of God's decrees in relation to God's being.

This is not to say that Calvin was not a "true Calvinist," nor am I trying to advertise Amyraldianism. For myself, I do not find Amyraldianism agreeable overall, while I find in Calvin—and Owen for that matter—the fundamental paradigms for my own theological inquiry. What I wish to express in this response is a caveat against simplistic theological divisions and labels. We should not deny that sometimes we may find in our opponents theological elements that are much more agreeable than those found in our theological allies. Overall, Turretin follows Calvin much more faithfully than Amyraut, but there are also important affinities between Turretin and Amyraldus that Calvin does not share. In this light, we may be reminded that while questions such as "Who is the true Calvinist?" can be helpful in some ways, they must be treated very carefully and not given any simplistic answer.

In any case, while I wish that Chen would have given a fairer treatment on the problem that he has chosen to tackle, I applaud him for his efforts, for at the end, I happily agree with him that overall, Turretin's theology as well as 17<sup>th</sup>-century Reformed orthodoxy in general are much more in harmony with Calvin compared to Amyraldianism.

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