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The Lapsarian Dilemma and Karl Barth's Christocentric Doctrine of Election

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Christianity affirms that God is sovereign and perfect. Understanding the sovereignty of God's will and perfections of God's being becomes a challenge when the presence of evil is taken seriously: How can there be evil in this world if God is good and almighty? In this paper, I will discuss Calvinism's answer to the problem of evil and demonstrate an intrinsic difficulty in the Calvinist-Augustinian formulation of predestination played out in the lapsarian controversy of the 17th Century. I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Karl Barth's Christological formulation of the doctrine of election and how it hints to a way out of the lapsarian dilemma. Finally, I will appeal to John Owen's Christological treatment of the doctrine of predestination to suggest a Reformed orthodoxy solution.

Supra- and Infralapsarianism

In Reformed theology, the cause of the existence of evil is generally attributed to God's permissive eternal foreordination of humanity's fall. Calvin introduces this Augustinian understanding to set the tone for later Reformed theology in explaining the presence of evil:

We make most sound confession... that God the Lord of all things, who made all things very good, foreknew that evil would arise out of this good, and also knew that it contributed more to His glory to bring good out of evil than not to allow evil at all; so He ordained the life of men and angels so that in it He might first show what freewill could do, and then what the gift of His grace and the judgment of His justice could do.¹

¹ *De Correptione et Gratia* 10, quoted in John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1961), 67. In this treatise Calvin cites numerous passages from Augustine, mostly from *De Gratia et Correptione*, stating that humanity's fall took place by God's *permissive* decree. In the *Institutes*, however, Calvin stresses that the decree of humanity's sin is "no mere permission," 1.18.1. Later Reformed theology however, generally adopts the notion of a permissive decree in explaining humanity's fall, even among most so-called "high

Calvinists therefore speak of humanity's fall as a divine "decree." Thus formulated, the Reformed doctrine of predestination begs the question: On what ground did God decree something so contrary to God's nature? This question developed into the famous lapsarian controversy of the 17th Century. The point of contention between the two major camps, supra- and infralapsarianism, is whether God's double-decree of election and reprobation logically precedes or follows God's decrees to create the world and permit the fall. More concretely, as Boettner puts it: "When the decrees of election and reprobation came into existence were men considered as fallen or as unfallen?"²

According to supralapsarianism, the logical order of God's decrees is: 1. election and reprobation; 2. creation; 3. the fall of humanity (by a permissive decree); 4. Christ's work of atonement; and 5. the salvific works of the Holy Spirit.³ Here the decrees of creation and the fall presuppose double predestination, thus the object of predestination is considered unfallen.

According to infralapsarianism, the logical order of God's decrees is: 1. creation; 2. the fall of humanity (by a permissive decree); 3. election and reprobation; 4. the atonement of Christ;

Calvinists."

² Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (New Jersey: P&R, 1932), 126.

³ *Ibid.* See also: Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans., ed. William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 382-383. I have included the fifth decree to account for the possibility of a third lapsarian scheme, known as "sublapsarianism," a view held by the Amyraldians. See Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

and 5. the salvific works of the Holy Spirit.⁴ In this scheme double predestination presupposes the decrees of creation and the fall, thus the object of predestination is considered fallen.

Note that when Reformed theologians speak of God's *eternal* decrees, they have in mind a Boethian view of eternity as *successionlessness* and *simultaneity*: "The divine decree is eternal in the sense that it lies entirely in eternity. The decree... partakes of the *simultaneousness* and the *successionlessness* of the eternal."⁵ This implies that in the different lapsarian schemes, "the order in which the different elements... stand to each other may not be regarded as temporal, but only as logical. There is a real chronological order in the events as effectuated, but not in the decree respecting them."⁶

In other words, when infralapsarians say that the *object of predestination (obiectum praedestinationis)* is *created and fallen (creatus et lapsus)*, they do not mean that divine predestination took place temporally after the fall. Rather, in both supra- and infralapsarianism, predestination is pre-temporal and eternal.

We may thus sum up the basic positions of the two lapsarian theories: The fundamental supralapsarian thesis is that God's eternal decrees of creation and the fall logically presuppose the double-decree of election and reprobation, thus the *obiectum praedestinationis* (object of

⁴ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 127; Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 382-383.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 104. Emphases mine.

⁶ *Ibid.*

predestination) is *homo creabilis et labilis* (the creatable and lapsable man). In contrast, the fundamental infralapsarian thesis is that God's eternal double-decree of election and reprobation presupposes the decrees of creation and the fall, thus the *obiectum praedestinationis* is *homo creatus et lapsus* (created and fallen man).

The Lapsarian Dilemma and Barth's Solution

Supra- and infralapsarianism as presented in Reformed scholasticism face the common dilemma that they cannot avoid the logical entailment of a dark, arbitrary element in the will of God. Bavinck points out that by ascribing logical priority to the decree of reprobation over the decree to permit the fall, supralapsarians cannot answer the question why God rejected the reprobate, whom supralapsarians do not presuppose to be sinful, except to say that God does everything by God's "good pleasure."⁷ Infralapsarianism attempts to soften this arbitrariness in the will of God by explaining that the reprobate are considered *homo lapsus* in God's mind, and therefore the decree of reprobation corresponds to the natural justice of God. However, Bavinck points out:

...if in the divine consciousness the decree of reprobation did not occur until after the decree to permit sin, the question inevitably arises: then why did [God] permit sin? Did that permission consist in an act of bare foreknowledge, and was the fall actually a frustration of God's plan? But no Reformed believers, even if they are infralapsarians, can or may ever say such a thing. Reformed believers must in a sense include the fall in God's decree and conceive of it as having

⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics II: God and Creation*. Ed. John Bolt. Trans. John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2004, 385.

been foreordained. But why did God, by an act of efficacious permission, foreordain the fall? Infralapsarianism has no answer to this question other than God's good pleasure, but in that case it says the same thing as supralapsarianism. Reprobation cannot be explained as an act of divine justice, for the first sinful act at any rate was permitted by God's sovereignty.⁸

Barth offers a similar critique of supra- and infralapsarianism in his excursus at the end of §33 in *Church Dogmatics* (henceforth abbreviated as *CD*, or *KD* if referring to the German version, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*) II/2, but he goes one step further than Bavinck by blaming the notion of divine *decretum absolutum* (absolute decree, the notion that by an eternal, absolute and unchangeable divine decree humanity is separated into two fixed masses of individuals, one predestined for salvation and the other for perdition) as the root of the dilemma.⁹ For Barth, the classical Reformed formulation of double predestination inevitably entails an arbitrarily electing God. Barth's solution is to replace the notion of *decretum absolutum* with the vicarious reprobation of Christ. For Barth, double predestination does not mean that God elected a fixed number of creatures and rejected others, but that Christ is the only reprobate, and in Christ all humans are elected.¹⁰

Barth's Doctrine of Election in CD II/2: Election in, by and of Jesus Christ

Barth's central thesis in his doctrine of election is that election is *in* Christ. Barth

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *CD* II/2, 140.

¹⁰ I argued in my Th.M. thesis at Princeton Theological Seminary that Barth in fact holds to an infralapsarian logic. He labels his doctrine of election as a "purified supralapsarianism" out of some fundamental mistakes in defining the terms *homo lapsus* and *homo labilis*.

emphasizes that we can know no other God than the God who has entered into loving relationship with us. Concretely speaking, Jesus Christ *is* this relationship. In Weber's words, this is the "fundamental thesis" (*grundlegende These*) of Barth's doctrine of election, which Weber summarizes as follows: "When we talk about God's election, we are not talking about some dark secret (*Dunkel*) beside, behind or above the revealed God, but rather we gaze exclusively 'upon the name Jesus Christ and the existence and history (*Geschichte*) of the people actualized (*verwirklichte*) in Him, whereof the beginning and end are determined in the mystery (*Geheimnis*) of His name."¹¹ This means that "we do not talk about an abstract God, but about God in Christ."¹²

This "*grundlegender These*" is crystallized in Barth's identification of Jesus Christ as "Electing and Elected."¹³ This is a Nicene-Chalcedonian understanding of election, the crux whereof is expressed at the beginning of §33: "Between God and man there stands the person of Jesus Christ, Himself God and Himself man, and so mediating between the two."¹⁴ Barth's next move is to identify Jesus Christ with God's highest decree:

He is the decree of God behind and above which there can be no earlier or higher decree and beside which there can be no other, since all others serve only the fulfillment of this decree... He is the election of God before which and without which and beside which God cannot make any other

¹¹ Otto Weber, *Karl Barths Kirchliche Dogmatik: Ein einführender Bericht* (Düsseldorf: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), 69. Translation mine.

¹² "Wir reden nicht von einem abstrakten Gott, sondern von Gott in Christus!" *Ibid.*, 70. Translation mine.

¹³ *CD II/2*, §33.

¹⁴ *CD II/2*, 94.

choices. Before Him and without Him and beside Him God does not, then, elect or will anything.¹⁵

For Barth, to say that “Jesus Christ is Himself the divine election of grace” is to say that God’s works *ad extra* in the person of Christ “corresponds perfectly,” using T. F. Torrance’s words,¹⁶ to God’s being in himself: “He, Jesus Christ, is the free grace of God as not content simply to remain identical with the inward and eternal being of God, but operating *ad extra* in the ways and works of God.”¹⁷

Note that Barth is not suggesting that in operating *ad extra* Christ ceases to be identical to the inward and eternal being of God. Contrarily, to say that Christ does not “*simply* remain identical” with God-in-himself is to affirm that in operating *ad extra* Christ remains identical with the eternal Son of God. Barth insists that in the incarnation, which is the outworking of eternal election, “God does not cease to be God in becoming human.”¹⁸ McCormack rightly comments that the *Kenosis* (the “self-emptying” of Christ, Phil. 2:7) is “by addition and not by subtraction”; “nothing proper to deity is ‘left behind’ when the ‘Son’ takes on the form of a servant.”¹⁹ This means that Jesus Christ, the Son *ensarkos* (incarnate), manifests to us the full and true meaning of deity as well as humanity.²⁰

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 76.

¹⁷ *CD II/2*, 95.

¹⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Christology as Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 3 (July 2006): 248.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ This does not mean, however, that the Son of God is eternally or necessarily incarnate. As Hunsinger puts it, Jesus Christ is identical with the eternal Son *secundum quid* (in a certain sense) and not *simpliciter* (without

This move of identifying Christ as the decree of God has far-reaching implications. Barth is unhappy with the classical lapsarian formulations that inevitably detach God's will from God's being, making God's "good pleasure" incompatible with God's natural goodness. By identifying Christ as the outward decree of God that corresponds perfectly to God's inward nature, Barth is trying to rid his doctrine of every last hint of voluntarism.

Moving on, Barth says that as the Son of God, Jesus Christ is the electing God. At the same time, Jesus Christ is perfect in humanhood and truly human, and as such is the elected human. Note the Chalcedonian presuppositions here. In the Chalcedonian tradition, the insistence on Christ's consubstantiality with us in his humanity springs forth from the concern to ensure our union with God. Humankind is united to Christ's humanity, and Christ's humanity is united to full and true deity, such that *in Christ* humankind participates in the being of God with *abiding distinction* and *inseparable union*.

This Chalcedonian scheme serves as the underlying framework of Barth's doctrine of election. It is in this connection that Barth speaks of Christ as "Electing and Elected": As God Christ elects, and as human Christ is elected. "The name of Jesus Christ has within itself the double reference: the One called by this name is both *very God and very man*. Thus the simplest form of the dogma may be divided at once into the two assertions that Jesus Christ is the electing

qualification). See George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," 180-183.

God, and that He is also elected man.”²¹

It is important to note the *abiding distinction* between the subject and object of election in the person of Christ, since Christ constitutes “God’s dealings with the reality which is *distinct* from Himself.”²² Barth is thus very careful to state that “as the Son of the Father He has no need of any special election.”²³ However, because of the *inseparable union* between humanity and deity in Christ’s person, the Son of God is *secundum quid* (in a certain sense) elected by the Father in eternity: “Because as the Son of the Father He has no need of any election, we must add at once that He is the Son of God elected *in His oneness with man.*”²⁴ In other words, the Son of God is eternally elected (and thus reprobated, as we shall see later) *only in the sense* that his deity is inseparably united to humanity. By inference, this should clear the misunderstanding that Barth makes “one of the persons of the divine Trinity to be reprobate.”²⁵

Furthermore, there is an *abiding distinction* between God’s eternal decree and temporal works:

For these are two separate things: the Son of God in His oneness with the Son of Man, as foreordained from all eternity; and the universe which was created, and universal history which was willed for the sake of this oneness, in their communion with God, as foreordained from all eternity.... On the one hand, there is God’s eternal election of grace, and, on the other, God’s creation, reconciliation and redemption *grounded in* that election and ordained *with reference to* it.²⁶

²¹ CD II/2, 103. Emphasis mine.

²² *Ibid.*, 102. Emphasis mine.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103. Emphases mine.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

Note that despite the abiding distinction, Barth says here that God's temporal works are *grounded in* God's eternal decisions. The distinction between God's outward works and eternal decision does not abolish the *inseparable union*: "Even the fact that He is elected corresponds as closely as possible to His own electing."²⁷ This is because from all eternity God willed "the closest possible union" with humanity.²⁸ It is in this electing and elected hypostatic union that "the inner glory of God overflows."²⁹ In other words, God's inward decree and outward works correspond perfectly because of the inseparable hypostatic union.

Yet, the hypostatic union does not exhaust Barth's doctrine of election. The divide between God and creation is not merely ontological. The election of Jesus Christ is to overcome the gulf of sin and death that separates humanity from God. Barth wants to take sin seriously, and would even agree with Reformed orthodoxy on "total depravity": "Face to face with temptation [man] cannot maintain the goodness of his creation in the divine image and foreordination to the divine likeness... Exposed to the power of the divine negation, he is guilty of death."³⁰

Therefore, for Barth, the election of Christ has to deal with sin and death. Election entails incarnation, and incarnation entails humanity's sin, as the flesh assumed by God is a flesh in the likeness of sin:

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

“The Word became flesh” (Jn. 1¹⁴). This formulation of the message of Christmas already includes within itself the message of Good Friday. For “all flesh is as grass.” The election of the man Jesus means, then, that a wrath is kindled, a sentence pronounced and finally executed, a rejection actualized... From all eternity judgment has been foreseen—even in the overflowing of God’s inner glory...³¹

While Calvin only ventures to state that Christ’s humanity was “corrupt,” Barth adopts an unabashed “fallenness view” of Christ’s humanity.³² Already in *CD I/2*, Barth insists that Christ took on a “flesh of sin.”³³ The “sanctification,” “obedience” and “sinlessness” of Jesus is such that “he has judged sin in the flesh, whereby he set the Reconciliation in order, that is, whereby he, in the place of a sinner, was struck down under divine judgment and alone implored the grace of God.”³⁴ As such, “the rejection which all men incurred, the wrath of God under which all men lie, the death which all men must die, God in His love for men transfers from all eternity to Him in whom He loves and elects them, and whom He elects as their head and in their place.”³⁵

Christ alone suffered divine judgment in place of all humankind. There is thus “other than Him no reprobate.”³⁶ Moreover, it is “from all eternity” that “the elected man Jesus was foreordained to suffer and to die.”³⁷ Therefore, the reprobation of Christ took place in eternity:

³¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³² Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90-117.

³³ *KD I/2*, 171.

³⁴ „Er hat die Sünde im Fleische gerichtet, indem er die Ordnung der Versöhnung anerkannte, d.h. indem er sich, an die Stelle eines Sünders gestellt, unter das göttliche Urteil beugte und sich allein der Gnade Gottes anbefahl.“ *Ibid.*, 172. Translation mine.

³⁵ *CD II/2*, 123.

³⁶ “außer ihm keinen Verworfenen.” *KD II/2*, 389. Translation mine.

³⁷ *CD II/2*, 122.

Sin and unbelief are thus defeated “*zum vornherein*” (in advance).³⁸

The sin of humanity cannot trump the grace of God, thus the reprobation of Christ, which is the result of human sin, cannot overrule God’s election of Christ. In Migliore’s words: “The grace of God includes judgment, and the judgment of God serves the purpose of grace.”³⁹ Or, in Hunsinger’s words: “Although God’s grace never occurs without judgment, nor God’s judgment without grace, *in* Jesus Christ it is always God’s grace, Barth believes, that is decisive.”⁴⁰ To be *in* Christ “means in His person, in His will, in His own divine choice, in the basic decision of God which He fulfils over against every man.”⁴¹

As such, all humankind is raised into the glory of God’s being—*aufgehoben*⁴²—as Christ is raised from the dead in his full and true humanity.⁴³ Through the mystical union, all humans participate in the glorified humanity of Christ which is united inseparably to God-in-himself, albeit with abiding distinction. This *Aufhebung* is the ultimate end of election in Christ. It is, in Hegelian terms, “the negation of the negation”: Sin as human negation of divine righteousness is “exposed to the power of the divine negation,” yet since that “divine negation” is imputed to Christ alone and defeated by his perfect obedience unto death, the negation of the negation

³⁸ *Ibid.* III/2, 175.

³⁹ *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 187. This quote is not a commentary on Barth’s theology, but it serves well as a summary of Barth’s position.

⁴⁰ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 142.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² The noun is *Aufhebung*, which is translated as “sublation” or “sublimation.” This Hegelian concept may be understood as a positive result rendered by the “negation of the negation.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 502.

resulted in Christ's exaltation and, *with* Christ, the exaltation of all humankind *in* him. The *Aufhebung* is thus God's "Yes" to all humankind in the grace of election, which includes within itself the divine "No" to Christ who carried humanity's sin.

Barth's Doctrine of Election: A Brief Critique

There are clear strengths in Barth's doctrine of election. Most importantly, Barth understands the lapsarian dilemma. On the one hand, Barth understands that ascribing logical priority to double predestination over the decree of the fall would make God a capricious tyrant. On the other hand, Barth wants to make all God's decrees subservient to double predestination, which infralapsarians are unable to do. Barth marries the strengths of supra- and infralapsarianism, i.e. Barth makes all God's decrees subordinate to double predestination while presupposing that double predestination presupposes the decree of the fall. Barth's infralapsarian logic is evident when we consider that in Barth's scheme, election presupposes reprobation, and reprobation presupposes the imputation of humanity's fall to Christ in the incarnation.⁴⁴ Yet, Barth is able to avoid the undesirable logical implication of infralapsarianism that God decreed the fall for no good reason other than God's sheer good pleasure. For Barth, the decree of the fall serves the "overflowing" of God's inner glory in the person and work of Christ, who is God's

⁴⁴ Barth considers himself a "purified supralapsarian," but I have contended in my Th.M. dissertation at Princeton Seminary that Barth in fact holds to an infralapsarian logic.

highest decree. Though ultimately we as Evangelicals cannot agree with Barth, we should applaud Barth for attempting to overcome the lapsarian dilemma that even Bavinck deems impossible to overcome.

Unfortunately, as a conservative Reformed Evangelical, I do not think that Barth has succeeded in answering the problem that he so sharply points out. Barth's first and most fundamental mistake is his rejection of biblical inerrancy. I wholeheartedly agree with Barth that we cannot know God apart from Christ. Barth would agree with us also that Christ cannot be known apart from Scripture. However, according to Barth, Scripture may misrepresent Christ, and not all propositions in Scripture are to be taken as equally valid. Moreover, Barth claims that God's Word may also come in the form of the Church's proclamation, including Chalcedon. Only Christ is God's definitive revelation; both Scripture and proclamation may err, and they *become* God's Word only in so far as God chooses to speak through them. Scripture is, on Barth's view, not God's direct revelation, but merely a witness to Jesus Christ. If Barth were right, then we must ask the question: How can we rely completely on divine revelation for our knowledge of Christ? If Scripture may err, then it would be up to autonomous human reason to judge the biblical witness of Christ. This unintentionally ascribes an authority to human reason above divine revelation, and such an idolatrous displacement of authority, as Barth himself observes, inevitably results in Feuerbach's charge of subjectivism and "anthropology in

disguise.”⁴⁵

Second, Barth’s view of Scripture gives him the freedom to neglect or deconstruct, so to say, biblical passages that clearly speak of the elect and the reprobate in the plural as fixed numbers of individuals, e.g. Rom. 9:17-18, 21-22; Jud. 4. In light of these biblical passages, Barth’s rejection of *decretum absolutum* as a solution to the lapsarian dilemma seems too convenient. By removing the presupposition of *decretum absolutum*, the questions regarding the basis of God’s decision to permit the fall (the infralapsarian difficulty) or to reject the reprobate (the supralapsarian difficulty) disappear altogether. Is such a convenient solution really as creative and ingenious as some Barthians claim? To me, such a solution is very much analogous to process theologians’ answer to the problem of evil—it renders a logically coherent theological model by eliminating one or more of the fundamental premises clearly taught in Scripture.

Third, Barth’s rejection of *decretum absolutum* leads to an imaginative renovation of the central Reformation doctrine—justification by faith. Strictly speaking, as Warfield observes, there is no such thing as “justifying faith,” but only Christ who justifies *through* faith. Calvin thus speaks of faith as a “vessel” of justification. Therefore, according to the Reformation, faith as a gift of the Holy Spirit (Calvin) first wrought in the person of Christ (Luther) is a necessary condition for justification. Barth, however, rejects the idea of *decretum absolutum* and says that

⁴⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (NY: Prometheus, 1989).

in Christ all humans—the faithful as well as the faithless—are justified. To be sure, Barth does devote an entire section in *CD IV/1* to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Barth even quotes Calvin and says that faith is an “empty vessel.” However, whereas Calvin speaks of faith as an “instrumental cause” of justification, Barth rejects the understanding that faith is in any sense a *cause* of justification. Humanity is justified with or without faith. For Barth, “justification by faith” is a very misleading expression which only means to say that faith “apprehends” Christ’s righteousness imputed to us.⁴⁶ It is an apprehension of the fact that we are already justified even before we apprehended that fact. This “apprehension” is not merely noetic; it is a “real apprehension” which empowers us to live this life manifestly as individuals who are *in Christ*—the life of *imitatio Christi* as Barth calls it.⁴⁷ It thus seems to me that Barth is only paying lip service to the words “justification by faith,” while what he really means is “sanctification by faith.” Not only does this raise all kinds of exegetical difficulties, but also we may wonder whether Barth has remained true to the core doctrine of the Reformation.

A Reformed Orthodox Solution: Owen on Christ and Predestination

Taking into account Barth’s strengths and weaknesses in dealing with the lapsarian dilemma, I have chosen to appeal to Owen to construe a Reformed-orthodoxy solution to the problem.

⁴⁶ *CD IV/1*, 629.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 636.

Owen lived in a post-Synod-of-Dort era when classical Reformed formulations of the doctrine of predestination had become full-fledged. Prior to and during this era, most Anglo-Reformed theologians were supralapsarians, though infralapsarianism was the majority view among the churches.⁴⁸ After Owen, infralapsarianism had become the majority view among academic theologians.⁴⁹ Owen was the first major 17th-century Reformed theologian to switch from supra- to infralapsarianism, and is, to my knowledge, the only Reformed theologian who has consistently worked out the full doctrinal implications of the two lapsarian positions.

Like Barth, the later Owen understands that placing double predestination logically prior to the decree of the fall would result in an extremely voluntaristic view of God. Owen's infralapsarian position, however, educes the difficult question: Did God has a purpose in the decrees of creation and the fall? For supralapsarians, God's decrees of creation and the fall both serve the purpose of manifesting God's glorious mercy and justice through the first decree of double predestination. In other words, supralapsarians make double predestination logically antecedent to all other divine decrees, so that the whole set of divine decrees would serve the purpose of manifesting God's glory in mercy and justice by election and reprobation. By placing double predestination logically after the decrees of creation and the fall, it becomes difficult for

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Also see Guy M. Richards, "Samuel Rutherford's supralapsarianism revealed: a key to the lapsarian position of the Westminster Confession of Faith?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59, no. 1 (2006): 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

infralapsarians to ascribe the same purposefulness to creation and the fall. Barth points out this problem astutely: “Unlike the Supralapsarian..., the Infralapsarian does not think that he has any exact knowledge either of the content of God’s primal and basic plan or of the reasons for the divine decree in respect of creation and the fall. On the contrary, he holds that the reasons for this decree are ultimately unknown and unknowable.”⁵⁰ In Bavinck’s words, “if in the divine consciousness the decree of reprobation did not occur until after the decree to permit sin, the question inevitably arises: then why did [God] permit sin?”⁵¹

In *The Person of Christ* (1679), the infralapsarian Owen affirms that “God had, from all eternity, laid in provisions of counsels for the recovery of all things into a better and more permanent estate than what was lost by sin.”⁵² Evidently, Owen is unwilling to concede that infralapsarianism is incapable of recognizing any divine purpose for creation and the fall. Like supralapsarians, Owen asserts that all God’s decrees are aimed at manifesting God’s glory. Owen does concede that “[the] first spring or original [of the eternal counsels of God] was in the divine will and wisdom alone, without respect unto any external moving cause. No reason can be given, no cause be assigned, of these counsels, but the will of God alone.”⁵³ In other words, Owen realizes that from his infralapsarian viewpoint, it is difficult to maintain that the divine decrees

⁵⁰ *CD* II/2, 129.

⁵¹ *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 385.

⁵² *Works* I, 61.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 62.

prior to election and reprobation, viz. the decrees of creation and the permission of the fall, and indeed all subsequent “eternal counsels of God,” have any known or knowable purpose.

Owen’s genius lies in his distinction between the *origin* and *design* of the eternal counsels or decrees of God. The origin “was in the divine will and wisdom alone” which, taken on its own, is a hidden mystery, and aside from this origin there is no other known or knowable basis of the divine decrees.⁵⁴ However, “the *design* of their accomplishment was laid in the person of the Son alone. As *he was the essential wisdom of God*, all things were at first created by him. But upon a prospect of the ruin of all by sin, God would in and by him—as he was fore-ordained to be incarnate—restore all things.”⁵⁵ Here, instead of holding together the whole array of divine decrees by God’s double purpose of self-glorification in salvation and damnation like the supralapsarians, Owen sees Jesus Christ as the ground that lends meaning to and reveals the purpose of all God’s decrees: “The whole counsel of God unto this end centred in him alone.”⁵⁶

Owen goes on to state that election in Christ is the foundation of all God’s decrees: “In him we were not actually, nor by faith, before the foundation of the world; yet were we then chosen in him, as the only foundation of the execution of all the counsels of God concerning our sanctification and salvation.”⁵⁷ Owen also intimates that election in Christ as the ground of all

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

God's decrees has an eschatological dimension: "Thus as all things were originally made and created by him, as he was the *essential* wisdom of God—so all things are renewed and recovered by him, as he is the *provisional* wisdom of God, in and by his incarnation."⁵⁸

Again, Owen's genius is that he focuses on the *design* of God's decrees rather than the *origin*. To seek the origin of divine decrees means to trace the logical steps of the lapsarian schemes, which is suspicious of treating these decrees as a series of successions. However, focusing on the design of the decrees entails taking seriously the *simultaneity* and *successionlessness* of God's eternal mind. This is in line with Barth's approach to the lapsarian schemes, where he stresses that we should "take into account the deity of the eternal God, and the possibility that with Him the last could actually be the first."⁵⁹

For Owen the origin of divine decrees is God's wisdom in and of itself, which, considered on its own, would be unknowable. However, the design of God's decrees as they are concretely accomplished by Jesus Christ, the incarnate "provisional wisdom" of God, reveals God's hidden "essential wisdom" to us, as Jesus Christ himself "was the essential wisdom of God."⁶⁰ This is to say that neither God's being nor God's will in and of itself can be known apart from the incarnate Son Jesus Christ, who is at once truly God and truly human, revealing the hidden God

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *CD II/2*, 136.

⁶⁰ *Works I*, 62.

to humanity truthfully. Owen applies this Chalcedonian Christology to his understanding of the decrees of God: Jesus Christ is the ground of creation, fall, election, and redemption, and in the person and works of Christ the wisdom of God which is otherwise unknown and unknowable is revealed to us.

Owen's idea of the *origin* of divine decrees is in fact similar to Barth's understanding of God-in-himself, who is wholly other and wholly hidden. It is impossible to know God-in-himself by logical deduction. By tracing the final cause of each divine decree in a scholastic, Aristotelian fashion, one inevitably ends up with a dark, capricious unmoved Mover. For Barth, God-in-himself is unknowable apart from God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The difference between Barth and Owen is that Owen affirms the inerrancy (to use a modern word) of Scripture in his endeavor to know Christ. In a manner similar to Barth, however, Owen tells us that God-in-himself can be known only through special revelation which culminates in the person and works of Christ. Therefore, while the origin of divine decrees is unsearchable on its own, the *design* of the decrees has Jesus Christ as its center and foundation, such that God's good purpose is no longer a dark secret to humankind.

Conclusion: Jesus Christ, Our Only Comfort

Like Barth, Owen offers a thoroughly Christological interpretation of the doctrine of

predestination. Owen tells us that Jesus Christ is the ground of reprobation. While other infralapsarians would simply say that God rejected the reprobate because of their sin, Owen would make the statement concretely Christological: God rejected those who reject Jesus Christ.⁶¹ Jesus Christ is also the ground of God's decree of the fall: Through the fall of humanity God paves the way for the incarnation whereby the King of kings became a servant of servants. Owen puts it passionately: Sin is "poison, a stench, dung, a vomit, polluted blood, a plague, a pestilence, an abominable, detestable, cursed thing; which, by its most pernicious power of metamorphosing, hath transformed angels into devils, light into darkness, life into death, paradise into a desert, a pleasant, fruitful, blessed world into a vain, dark, accursed prison, and the Lord of all into a servant of servants."⁶²

Like Barth, Owen tells us here that it is in light of divine justice in the vicarious sufferings of Christ that we come to understand the true meaning and power of sin. For both Barth and Owen, Christ who was sinless was made sinful by a translation of guilt such that Christ really died as a sinner under God's justice. "God did not punish Christ as his most holy Son, but as our mediator and the surety of the covenant, 'whom he made sin for us, though he knew no sin.' Surely, 'he laid upon him our sins,' before 'the chastisement of our peace was upon him.'"⁶³

⁶¹ Of course, "no one who speaks by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3).

⁶² *Dissertation on Divine Justice* in *Works X*, 620.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 554

While Barth insists that all humans are justified in Christ and does not try to persuade anyone that faith in Christ is necessary for our salvation, Owen brings forth a most offensive question in the Christological light of humanity's sin and God's wrath and justice on Golgotha: "To address you who live, or rather are dead, under the guilt, dominion, power, and law of sin, 'how shall you escape the damnation of hell?'"⁶⁴

To answer this question, Owen exhorts his readers to fix their eyes on the invisible reality that Christ has accomplished for us: "If, then, you have the least concern or anxiety for your eternal state, hasten, 'while it is called To-day,' to 'lay hold on the whole that is set before you.' Give yourselves up entirely to him... But what and how bitter a sense of sin; how deep a humiliation, contrition, and dejection of heart and spirit; what self-hatred, condemnation, and contempt...; what esteem, what faith in the necessity, excellence, and dignity of the righteousness and satisfaction of Christ, especially if God hath graciously condescended to bestow his holy Spirit, to convince men's hearts of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment, and to excite and work such sentiments concerning the transgression of the divine law, the nature of sin, or the disobedience of the creatures!"⁶⁵

For Owen, a Christocentric knowledge of humanity's sin and of God's sovereignty and goodness in negating this sin renders the surety of faith whereby a sinner is reckoned righteous.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Then and only then may we appreciate God's permission of evil. Taking our cue from Owen after long considerations of the strengths and weaknesses of Barth's Christological doctrine of election, we may now answer the problem of evil raised at the beginning of this paper: Given the reality of evil and suffering, how can a Christian affirm God's sovereignty and goodness? As we have seen, this question can never be answered apart from the person and works of Jesus Christ as revealed infallibly in Scripture. The problem of evil makes every Christian uncomfortable. Jesus Christ is our only comfort in the midst of this miserable life overshadowed by the powers of sin and death. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it so beautifully, "What is thy only comfort in life and death?" "Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him."

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