

## The Logical Order of the Divine Decrees

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There are usually three logical plans given by dispensationalists which attempt to answer the question, “In what logical order did God plan His redemptive acts?” These are known respectively as *supralapsarianism*, *infralapsarianism*, and *sublapsarianism*.<sup>1</sup> The term “Lapsarian” is from the Latin word *lapse* meaning “fall.” Hence, *lapsarianism* has to do with belief in the Fall of Adam and its concomitants. This is especially the case as regards the relation of the Fall to the eternal decrees of God. Since God foreknew that Adam would fall (and that mankind would fall in him), and that He would send His Son to restore those whom He elected to save, the question arises as to the order - both scriptural and logical - of the soteric decrees. It also must relate the soteric decrees to the creative decrees so as to insure harmony in God's eternal plan. Therefore, theologians have posited various orders of the decrees to try to address the problem.

### The Supralapsarian Order

The supralapsarian (supra - over) position teaches that in the order of the decrees the decree to elect certain individuals and to reprobate others is logically prior to all the rest. Chafer<sup>2</sup> lists the order set forth by supralapsarianism as follows:

1. Decree to *elect* some to be saved and to reprobate all others.
2. Decree to create men both elect and nonelect.
3. Decree to permit the fall.

4. Decree to *provide* salvation to the elect.
5. Decree to apply salvation to the elect.

In this order there are some obvious difficulties. First, the question comes up right away as to how God can logically contemplate elect and reprobate men before He can contemplate them as men generally. Second, if God has decided to create men as elect and non-elect then how can Paul use the analogy of the saved and the lost originating from “one lump” in Romans 9:21? Third, there is the problem of theodicy. As Chafer says, “In reality, by this system men are consigned to perdition before they sin and without a cause, except it be by the sovereign will of God.”<sup>3</sup>

These problems have traditionally led most Calvinists to avoid the supralapsarian scheme (although such prominent leaders like Beza, Gomarus, Perkins, Gerhaardus Vos, and Gordon H. Clark have embraced it).

One modern advocate of the supralapsarian order of decrees is Robert Reymond. He has recently proposed a changed order:

1. The *election* of some sinful men to salvation in Christ (and the reprobation of the rest of sinful mankind in order to make known the riches of God's gracious mercy to the elect).
2. The decree to apply Christ's redemptive benefits to the elect sinners.
3. The decree to *redeem* the elect sinners by the cross work of Christ.
4. The decree that men should fall.
5. The decree to create the world and men.<sup>4</sup>

What Reymond accomplishes by this revised delineation is an avoidance of the dualism inherent in a decree which, at the very outset, separates the group of the elect from the group of the non-elect *without* viewing them as sinners. But the difficulty still remains in God comprehending a group (i.e. mankind) who He has not “first” comprehended as actual. Moreover, the problem of theodicy seems if anything to be heightened in this arrangement, for it has God contemplating man-as-sinner even before man is created. Also, the fourth point (the decree that man should fall) appears superfluous in this scheme since man is already viewed as fallen in point 1.

### **The Infralapsarian Order**

Among those who call themselves Reformed this is the most common of the lapsarian positions. It is the acknowledged position as set forth in most of the historic Reformed creeds and confessions: e.g. the Westminster Confession; the Belgic Confession; and the Articles of Dordt (although none of these is *anti-supralapsarian*). The infralapsarian (i.e. after the Fall) order may be set down thus:

1. The decree to create men.
2. The decree to permit the fall
3. The decree to *elect* those who believe and to leave in just condemnation all who do not believe.
4. The decree to *provide* a Redeemer for the elect.

5. The decree to apply salvation to the elect.

Note well that this list follows the standard Reformed works (e.g. Berkhof, Reymond), and differs from that which is set down by Chafer (see below under sublapsarianism).<sup>5</sup>

The infralapsarian view is often criticized as inconsistent with the doctrine of election as it applies to the angels. Also, since we are talking here about what went on in God's mind logically (not chronologically), it could be pointed out that infralapsarians turn logical planning on its head. The normal order is to design from the top down. That is, to use Berkhof's words, "in planning the rational mind passes from the end to the means in a retrograde movement, so that what is first in design is last in accomplishment."<sup>6</sup>

### **The Sublapsarian Order**

Although very few Reformed theologians recognize it, this is the position customarily set forth by dispensationalists. The order of decrees in the sublapsarian position is as follows:

1. The decree to create all men.
2. The decree to permit the fall.
3. The decree to *provide* salvation for [all] men.
4. The decree to *elect* those who do believe and to leave in just condemnation those who do not believe.
5. The decree to apply salvation to those who believe.

It will be noted that whereas the first two systems place the decree to elect some men *before* the decree of Christ's atonement, this latter view has the decree to send Christ at position 3 and the decree to elect certain sinners at position 4. A glance back at the *supralapsarian* and *infralapsarian* schemes will reveal that these positions are reversed. There is a good reason why five-point Calvinists cannot permit the *sublapsarian* order described above. To put the decree to redeem mankind prior to the decree to elect some *from among* mankind is to invite the strong possibility of a universal atonement.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, to reverse the order logically invites a limited atonement. For why would God provide an atonement for those He has already passed over in His decree of election? Thus, limited atonement implies *infra* or *supralapsarianism*, and this has crucial knock-on effects. If the decree to elect is logically prior to the decree to atone a universal atonement makes no sense. Not only that, but it would make no sense to give the gift of faith to anyone but the elect. And if faith is given only to the elect it would again seem logical that it is given them at the point when they are made alive or regenerated by the Holy Spirit. That would seem to require that the *ordo salutis* have regeneration coming logically before faith (another thing that five point Calvinists are insistent upon).

Now comes the rub. If this scenario is true it will be born out by exegesis of the text of Scripture. But, of course, this is what the vast majority of dispensationalists deny. One of the main reasons they give for this is "the normal and literal meaning" disallows a limited interpretation.<sup>8</sup> In short, dispensationalists are not by and large limited

redemptionists because of their hermeneutics. But this *ought to mean* that they cannot hold to regeneration preceding the gift of faith either. If they do we believe a little thought about our example about the order of the decrees will make obvious the logical force of them holding to an infralapsarian arrangement, which, in turn calls for a belief in limited atonement. Finally, this would mean that any search by a dispensationalist for “proof texts” to sustain a belief in regeneration preceding faith would invalidate their hermeneutical consistency, and so in principle, deny a key tenet of dispensationalism. Thus, just as consistent literal hermeneutics naturally leads to belief in pretribulationism, so also it ought to lead to a denial of regeneration before faith. We could argue the same way about other beliefs, such as infant baptism, which we hold to be an incongruity for a dispensational theologian to believe in. Our point is that a “theology from the ground up” – founded upon consistent normative interpretation, will produce its marks in every area of dispensational theology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted that Reformed writers will normally identify *sublapsarianism* with *infralapsarianism*.

<sup>2</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3.179.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 489.

<sup>5</sup> It may be worthwhile setting out Chafer’s infralapsarian order in comparison:

1. The decree to create all men
2. The decree to permit the fall
3. The decree to provide salvation for men (notice Chafer does not say “some men”)

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4. The decree to elect those who do believe and to leave in just condemnation all who do not believe (again, note that in the above list this stands third)
  5. The decree to apply salvation

It is even more surprising when Chafer himself (3.181) quotes Hodge who gives the correct order as we have presented it.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 119.

<sup>7</sup> It should be pointed out that the supposed problem of a universal atonement leading to universalism in salvation is avoided by separating the oblation or achievement at Calvary from its application. Notice how Dispensational methodology issues in biblical perspectivalism.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died: A Biblical Case for Unlimited Atonement*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 109.

<sup>9</sup> We say it with the greatest respect, but it is our belief that many dispensationalists have “piggy-backed” on Reformed theology, only fully dismounting once they reach eschatology.