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**Non-Theodicy of the Reformed Doctrine of
Predestination: John Owen’s Christocentric
Solution to the Lapsarian Dilemma**

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Introduction

The editors of *Testamentum Imperium* have asked me to contribute an article on the topic, “Does the Reformed Doctrine of Election Make God Unfair?—The Lapsarian Dilemma.” Before proceeding, I should qualify that “the Reformed doctrine of election” must not be understood as a singular, monotonous or even homogenous set of beliefs to which every Reformed theologian subscribes. As we shall see throughout this paper, there is rich diversity within Reformed orthodoxy with regard to the doctrine of election, as with most other doctrines. At the same time, however, it would be reasonable and proper for us to speak of the Reformed doctrine of election as a general framework developed upon a set of presuppositions that are normative within Reformed orthodoxy. One of the most fundamental of these presuppositions is the supreme authority of Scripture in the formulation of doctrines. Some biblical

passages, most notably Rom. 9, explicitly and perspicuously teach that God has chosen part of the human race unto salvation and rejected the rest from the gift of eternal life.¹ One of the perennial challenges to theological traditions that seek to remain faithful to Scripture—these include not only the Reformed, but also Lutheran, Arminian, Augustinian, Thomist, etc.—is to show that the biblical teaching of a double predestination, be it understood in a Calvinist way or otherwise,² does not render God unfair. Indeed, any doctrinal formulation of double predestination that renders God unfair would be explicitly contradictory to Scripture (Rom. 9:14).

There are still other presuppositions that are characteristically Reformed. For instance, Bavinck points out that “no Reformed believer” should see the fall of humanity as a frustration of God’s plan.³ This is based on the classical Reformed conviction that God is sovereign over all historical events by God’s predestination and providence.

Another starting point that any classical Reformed theologian must take into consideration is “the article by which the church stands or falls” (Luther) or “the main hinge upon which religion turns” (Calvin), viz. the Reformation’s strictly monergistic rendition of the doctrine of justification.⁴ In fact, Paul’s ultimate concern in Rom. 9 is not his explicit statement of double predestination, but to argue on the basis of double predestination that justification is by faith alone (Rom. 9:30). Indeed, how justification is to be understood consistently with predestination is a concern not only for the Calvinists, but also for other theological traditions, including the Arminians. Thus the Remonstrance of 1610 constitutes in an important sense an attempt to understand predestination in relation to justification with a strong

¹ Not only is Rom. 9 a key passage in Calvin’s discussion of predestination both in the *Institutes* and in his treatise against Pighius, but also, as Fesko has shown, it is *the* central biblical passage in the exegetical debates of the Lapsarian Controversy of the 17th Century. See J. V. Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Traditions: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Jackson: Reformed Academic Press, 2001).

² It has often been thought that double predestination is a specifically Calvinist doctrine. In reality, however, Arminians, too, acknowledge the biblical teaching of a two-sided predestination and seek to maintain God’s fairness by asserting that divine predestination is conditional upon free human choices.

³ *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 385.

⁴ Karla Wübbenhorst, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Justification: Variations on a Lutheran Theme” in Bruce McCormack, ed., *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 99-100.

emphasis on the presupposition of human responsibility and free moral agency. The Canons of Dort, too, does not stop short at stating that election is unconditional, but proceeds to present a Calvinist view of how Christ's work of atonement, proceeding from God's eternal predestination, is applied to totally depraved sinners by means of an irresistible grace, which Calvin himself would understand as a *duplex gratia* of both *mortificatio* and *vivificatio* in our union with Christ, hence the "perseverance of the saints".⁵

It is thus clear at this point that any attempt to answer the question, "Does the Reformed doctrine of election render God unfair?" must not focus exclusively on the doctrine of election in and of itself, but must look to the goodness and justice that God manifests to us in the person and work of Christ. In this paper I will present a major difficulty in the 17th-century Reformed formulation of double predestination that became manifest in the famous Lapsarian Controversy. The kind of doctrinal precision with which this 17th-century debate operated brings the question of God's fairness to a more intricate and complex level with more specific questions such as, "How can we maintain God's justice if God chose to elect some and reject others solely for God's good pleasure, without considering the elect or the reprobate to be fallen sinners?", or, "If we maintain that God's purpose in double predestination is to manifest God's glory in mercy and righteousness by electing some unto salvation out of grace and rejecting others out of justice, presupposing the elect and the reprobate to be fallen sinners, how can we explain the fall of humanity in the first place without losing sight of God's eternal sovereignty over all historical events including the fall?" Ultimately, then, the question of God's fairness in double predestination has developed through the Lapsarian Controversy into a "problem of evil": How can we affirm both God's eternal sovereignty and God's goodness when we consider the reality of humanity's fall and God's decision of reprobation? In this sense, the Lapsarian Controversy is essentially a theodicy debate aimed at answering the problem of evil within the boundaries of what may properly be called a Reformed doctrine of predestination.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

The scope of my paper will not allow a comprehensive survey of the Lapsarian Controversy. I will focus instead on John Owen's theological maturation, tracing his theological development in three major treatises, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647), *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), and *The Person of Christ* (1679). I will show that in the *Dissertation* of 1653 Owen abandons his earlier supralapsarianism set forth in *The Death of Death* and develops an infralapsarianism that seeks to maintain consistency between God's works and the attributes of God's being. While Owen still speaks of God's decrees in terms of causation and origin in 1653—which was the common way of doing theology among the Calvinists and Calvin himself, inherited from medieval scholasticism—the Owen of 1679 shifts his focus to a strong Christocentrism, avoiding the construal of an arbitrarily electing God above and behind the God self-revealed in the person and work of Christ, demonstrating God's goodness in all God's sovereign decrees in terms of God's concrete self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

I will conclude my paper with a brief engagement with Barth's critique of the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination and appeal to Loraine Boettner's comprehensive presentation of the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination to demonstrate, contra Barth, that Reformed orthodoxy finds its normative answer to the problem of evil in the very person and work of Christ rather than speculating about an arbitrarily electing God apart from Christ.

Supra- and Infralapsarianism: Definitions and Implications

Before proceeding to discuss Owen's lapsarian positions, it would be helpful to explain and clarify the schemes of supra- and infralapsarianism as defined in historic Reformed orthodoxy. Moreover, it would be reasonable to begin this task with a discussion of the various views regarding the *necessity* of the atonement, not only because the necessity of the atonement appears to be Owen's central concern when he switched to an infralapsarian position in 1653, but also the necessity of the Christ-event is at least implicitly, if not explicitly, the basis of divine election according to the full-fledged doctrine of election that Owen developed in 1679.

Note that "necessity" in the context of the current discussion has twofold meanings: 1. Subjectively, the need of fallen human beings for Christ's work of atonement to attain unto salvation, and 2.

necessity, as opposed to contingency, of the occurrence of the atonement as an objective event.

The point of contention between *absolute necessity* and *hypothetical necessity* is this: To what degree and in what sense is the atonement as an objective event necessary, and to what degree and in what sense is it contingent? Moreover, to what degree can we say that Christ's atonement is necessary for the salvation of sinners? It should be noted that in the Reformed tradition, both views are opposed to the extreme nominalist or voluntarist position of the *non-necessity* of the atonement. The following are two major historic views on the necessity of the atonement.

1. Absolute Necessity:

The absolute necessity position holds that the work of atonement accomplished by Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the only way in which God could pardon sin and satisfy God's justice. The necessity of the atonement is contingent upon creation and the fall: God's nature is such that it requires satisfaction to be made to God's justice after the fall of humanity. In other words, once sin has come into existence, it is necessary for God to decree Christ's work of atonement, and not by any other means.

The term "necessity" may be confusing and problematic in some ways. As a note of clarification, according to the champions of the absolute necessity view of the atonement, God is not compelled to create the world or decree the fall. Thus, the term "absolute necessity" does not imply that God's sending God's Son is a coerced act on God's part. The atonement is said to be "absolutely necessary" only under the condition that God has created the world and allowed the fall of humanity. Therefore, the atonement is not "eternally necessary" like, for instance, the operation *ad intra* of the eternal generation of the Son. In any case, while Irenaeus already asserted an absolute necessity view of the atonement, Anselm is the most well known champion of this position. Among Reformed theologians, Voetius, Turretin and the later Beza were of this view.⁶ This was Owen's later position.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 369.

2. Hypothetical Necessity:

The hypothetical necessity view of the atonement holds that God is driven only by God's own will to carry out the atonement. In other words, the atonement is necessary only because God has willed it, and nothing, not even God's own being and decisions, can contradict what God has willed. On this view, the atonement is contingent upon the decision of God, and is freely willed by God. God determined with completely sovereignty that sin should be pardoned in no other way, therefore humanity can be forgiven only through Christ's atonement. This implies that God could have willed the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of humanity in any other way.

The earlier champions of this view include Athanasius, Augustine and Aquinas. Among Reformed theologians, Calvin, the earlier Beza, Twisse and Rutherford were also of this opinion.⁷ This was Owen's earlier position.

The explanations above already alluded to the order of God's decrees. Note that one of these decrees is the fall of humanity. For classical Reformed theologians, supralapsarian and infralapsarian alike, the sovereignty of God is such that nothing can happen without God's plan and willing, therefore the reality of sin is spoken of as a "decree" of God, be it active or efficaciously permissive. Supra- and infralapsarianism are two logical schemes of ordering God's eternal decrees aimed at taking into account the reality of evil without compromising divine sovereignty and perfections. The following is a construal of the two schemes.

Supra- and Infralapsarianism

The point of contention between 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. Both views agree that all God's decrees were made in eternity before the world was created. As such the order of decrees of which the lapsarian theories speak is only logical and not chronological. There is no succession in the mind of God.

Originally, the question was whether the fall took place by God's active decree (supralapsarianism), or by an efficacious permission

⁷ *Ibid.*, 369-370.

(infralapsarianism). In this sense, Calvin was “clearly a supralapsarian,” and Augustine tended to be infralapsarian.⁸ In fact, “in the order of decrees [Augustine] had the decree of predestination follow that of creation and the fall.”⁹

In 17th-century Reformed orthodoxy, these two positions developed into more rigorous schemes, where both camps would usually agree that the fall was a part of God’s eternal decrees (since all things that come to pass must be foreordained by God), albeit an efficaciously permissive one (since God cannot be the author of sin). The point in dispute became the *order* of God’s decrees. Boettner puts the question succinctly: “When the decrees of election and reprobation came into existence were men considered as fallen or as unfallen?”¹⁰

According to the supralapsarian scheme, the logical order of God’s decrees is as follows: 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.¹¹ The emphasis in this scheme is that the decrees of creation and the fall presuppose double predestination.

According to the infralapsarian scheme, the logical order of God’s decrees is as follows: 1. creation; 2. the fall of humanity (by a permissive decree); 3. election and reprobation; 4. the atonement of Christ; and 5. the salvific works of the Holy Spirit.¹² The emphasis in this scheme is that double predestination presuppose the decrees of creation and the fall.

Note again that these orders are not temporal or chronological. Rather, in the lapsarian theories of the 17th Century, these orders of divine decrees are strictly logical and exist only in the eternal and thus successionless mind of God. They are as such to be strictly

⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 383.

¹⁰ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (New Jersey: P&R, 1932), 126.

¹¹ *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).

¹² Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 127; Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 382-383.

distinguished from the chronological order of God's works in the sphere of creation. Therefore, when infralapsarians speak of the *obiectum praedestinationis* as *homo lapsus*, they do not refer to human being already existent on the plane of created history, but human being that is *considered* fallen in the eternal mind of God prior to the work of creation.

It is not our present task to evaluate the positions of supra- and infralapsarianism. Suffice it to say that the supralapsarian scheme places a stronger emphasis on the freedom of God's will, whereas infralapsarians tend to be more concerned about safeguarding the consistency between God's nature and decrees. The former stresses that God is free to predestine human beings unto eternal damnation even if God does not consider them sinful; the latter stresses that God's decision to condemn sinners corresponds to the perfect holiness of God's being, and that God does not condemn those whom God does not consider sinful.

Furthermore, supralapsarianism emphasizes that God wills creation and the fall to serve the purpose of election and reprobation; infralapsarianism emphasizes that the objects of God's grace and wrath are not neutral, empty entities, but are sinful creatures that are responsible for their own predicament. Since both emphases are important, Bavinck concludes that both supra- and infralapsarianism are "inadequate."¹³ However, Owen's later infralapsarian position does succeed at least to some degree in maintaining a balance between the two emphases via Christological considerations, as we shall see later.

In any case, we can see that supralapsarianism places stronger emphasis on the freedom of God's will, and infralapsarianism stresses the ontological priority of God's being over God's will and hence the necessity for God's will to correspond to God's being. Because of these different emphases, most of those who hold to the hypothetical necessity view of the atonement (the view that emphasizes the freedom of God's will), such as Zanchius, Twisse, Rutherford, the earlier Beza and the earlier Owen are also supralapsarians, while many of those who hold to the absolute necessity view of the atonement (the view that emphasizes the harmony between God's will

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics II*, 388-392.

and God's being), such as Mastricht, Turretin, à Mark and the later Owen, are infralapsarians.¹⁴ There are of course exceptions, such as Voetius, a supralapsarian who holds that the atonement is absolutely necessary.¹⁵ Beza, too, switched to an absolute necessity view of the atonement in his later years while retaining his supralapsarian position, though it is often believed that Beza's supralapsarianism was softened in his later years.¹⁶

With these preliminary considerations we are now ready to trace the development of Owen's lapsarian position and appreciate the importance of his deeply Christocentric outlook in his discussion of the doctrine of election in 1679. We may begin with a brief biographical survey.

Owen's Shift to Infralapsarianism: A Brief Biographical Sketch

Puritan Nonconformist pastor and theologian John Owen was born in 1616—the year Shakespeare died—in post-Elizabethan England. As the passing away of Elizabeth I signified the end of a period of relative peace in England, the relative doctrinal stability in the Church of England was gone with this golden era. During the Elizabethan period, Puritans and Anglicans alike held to the Calvinist view of predestination. In the time of Owen, however, many Anglicans had become Arminians, while some Puritans, such as Richard Baxter, had adopted compromised versions of Calvinism. Owen, a strong advocate of the position of the Synod of Dort (1618), published his first book *A Display of Arminianism* in 1642 in defense of Reformed orthodoxy.

The Civil War began in 1642 and ended in 1646, the year in which Owen became a Congregationalist. His masterpiece, *The Death of Death*, was published in the following year. In this treatise he presented a supralapsarian view that resembled the majority of his orthodox Calvinist colleagues and predecessors in England.¹⁷

In 1651, Owen was appointed Dean of Christ Church at Oxford, and the next year he became Vice-Chancellor of the University. It was

¹⁴ Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 118, 368-369.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (Lewes: Focus Christian Ministries, 1992), 6-11.

¹⁷ Lynne Courter Boughton, "Supralapsarianism and the Role of Metaphysics in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 63-96.

during his time at Oxford that he began to shift his focus from Arminianism to Socinianism, as he had exhausted almost every argument against the Arminians in his previous works and no longer saw them as a threat to orthodoxy.¹⁸

Dealing with the Socinians prompted Owen to reflect on his previous lapsarian position. Socinians, in addition to denying a whole array of orthodox doctrines including the deity of Christ, rejected the idea of divine punitive justice. This was in effect a challenge against the tradition handed down to the Puritans from Anselm through the Reformers, who held that God's justice by nature demands satisfaction. Berkhof explains the Socinian view:

The justice which is commonly so called and which is opposed to mercy is not an immanent attribute of God, but only the effect of His will. This also holds for that mercy of God which is opposed to justice. It is not an internal quality in God, but is merely an effect of His free choice.¹⁹

Owen, in the endeavor to refute this extreme voluntarism, found his previous supralapsarian viewpoints—shared by many of his orthodox contemporaries such as Twisse and Rutherford²⁰—to share some of the errors of Socinianism. Therefore, in *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), Owen officially renounced the supralapsarian position and became an infralapsarian.

The main concern of the *Dissertation*, however, was not predestination, but the necessity of punitive or vindicatory justice and the atonement. Owen's newly adopted infralapsarianism was only a little more than implicit in this work. Nevertheless, it was this infralapsarian scheme that undergirds the arguments of the entire *Dissertation*.

Supralapsarianism and Hypothetical Necessity in Owen's *Death of Death*

Like Calvin, the entire structure of Owen's theology is predicated upon the Augustinian understanding of divine sovereignty. In the

¹⁸ Carl Trueman, "John Owen's *Dissertation on Divine Justice*: An Exercise in Christocentric Scholasticism," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998), 91.

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969), 184.

²⁰ Rutherford's supralapsarian view may not have been as extreme as Owen depicts in the *Dissertation*. See Guy M. Richard, "Samuel Rutherford's supralapsarianism revealed: a key to the lapsarian position of the Westminster Confession of Faith?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59 (2006), 27-44.

words of R. S. Franks, “it was, above all, the idea of absolute predestination, which dominated the greatest of the Puritan theologians, John Owen, whose treatise on the work of Christ, ‘The Death of Death in the Death of Christ’, is entirely consecrated to the complete subjugation of the doctrine to this idea.”²¹

In this treatise, Owen’s aim is, negatively, to refute the Arminian doctrine of universal redemption, and, positively, to argue the case for limited atonement—the central doctrine in the Five Points of Calvinism. In addition to Arminianism, Owen also sets out in the present treatise to refute the hypothetical universalism of the School of Saumur, which makes “a general conditionate decree of redemption to be antecedaneous to election; which they assert to be the first discriminating purpose concerning the sons of men, and to depend on the alone good pleasure of God.”²² Another opponent named in the treatise is Thomas More, whose book *The Universality of God’s Free Grace* is also aimed at proving the universality of redemption.²³

Universal redemption is not to be confused with universalism, the notion that all humanity will be saved, though the term “universalism” was also applied to universal redemption in Owen’s time. Most, if not all, of Owen’s contemporary mainline Protestants believed that only some are saved and the rest of humanity would be lost in perdition. The notion of universal redemption holds that Christ’s work of atonement is offered to all—even to those who will eventually perish forever. Arminians and Amyraldians differ on other issues, such as whether election is conditional, but they share in common the idea of universal redemption.

Owen’s treatise consists of four books, the first two of which are aimed at setting forth and defending the doctrine of redemption as having the glory of God through the saving of the elect (and none but the elect) as its ultimate end. In reply to the universalist position, Owen contends:

²¹ Robert Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ In Its Ecclesiastical Development*, Vol. II (London: Hodder and Stoughton, year unspecified), 136.

²² John Owen, *Death of Death in Works* Vol. X, 149.

²³ *Ibid.*, Chap. 6.

A spreading persuasion there is of a general ransom to be paid by Christ for all; that he died to redeem all and every one, — not only for many, his church, the elect of God, but for every one also of the posterity of Adam. Now, the masters of this opinion do see full well and easily, that if that be the end of the death of Christ which we have from the Scripture asserted, if those before recounted be the immediate fruits and products thereof, then one of these two things will necessarily follow:— that either, first, God and Christ failed of their end proposed, and did not accomplish that which they intended, the death of Christ being not a fitly-proportioned means for the attaining of that end (for any cause of failing cannot be assigned); which to assert seems to us blasphemously injurious to the wisdom, power, and perfection of God, as likewise derogatory to the worth and value of the death of Christ; — or else, that all men, all the posterity of Adam, must be saved, purged, sanctified, and glorified; which surely they will not maintain, at least the Scripture and the woeful experience of millions will not allow.²⁴

The quote above represents the central point of Owen’s treatise, the third book of which consists of sixteen arguments, all centered on this line of thought, aimed at setting forth the doctrine of limited atonement. The fourth book consists of careful exegeses to refute universalist interpretations of biblical texts that Owen’s opponents believe to teach universal redemption.

Like Calvin, Owen appeals to Augustine as an authority. On the basis that God foreordained everything including the fall of humanity,²⁵ Augustine asserts—quoted by Owen—that “by him the Mediator, the Lord declareth himself to make those whom he hath redeemed with his blood, of evil, good to eternity.”²⁶

It should be noted that Augustine’s lapsarian view does not correlate rigorously and consistently with his position on the necessity of the atonement, as neither of these notions was anywhere near fully developed in Augustine’s theology. Owen, however, conveniently appeals to Augustine in asserting the hypothetical necessity of the atonement:

If any one shall deny this, we will try what the Lord will enable us to say unto it, and in the meantime rest contented in that of Augustine: “Though other ways of saving us were not wanting to his infinite wisdom, yet certainly the way which

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁵ *De Corrept. et Grat.*, X.

²⁶ Owen, *Death of Death in Works* Vol. X, 423.

he did proceed in was the most convenient, because we find he proceeded therein.”²⁷

Owen provides the reason for this hypothetical necessity in the same paragraph: “Supposing the decree, purpose, and constitution of God that so it should be, that so he would manifest his glory, by the way of vindicative justice, it was impossible that it should otherwise be...; but to assert positively, that absolutely and antecedently to his constitution he could not have done it, is to me an unwritten tradition, the Scripture affirming no such thing.”²⁸ This is essentially the same statement that Calvin has made: “If someone asks why [the Incarnation] is necessary, there has been no simple or absolute necessity. Rather, it has stemmed from a *heavenly decree* on which men’s salvation depended.”²⁹ In other words, for the Owen of 1647, as for Calvin, the necessity of the atonement is predicated upon the free decision of God alone.

In following Calvin and basing the necessity of the atonement on divine election, Owen is aware that his voluntaristic tendencies may be accused of leading into teaching the non-necessity of the atonement, and he is careful to deny such allegations:

First, That a non-necessity of satisfaction by Christ, as a consequent of eternal election, was more than once, for the substance of it, objected to Augustine by the old Pelagian heretics, upon his clearing and vindicating that doctrine, is most apparent. The same objection, renewed by others, is also answered by Calvin, Institut. lib. ii. cap. 16; as also divers schoolmen had before, in their way, proposed it to themselves, as Thom. iii. g. 49, a. 4.³⁰

Having thus appealed to the authorities of Augustine, Calvin, and Aquinas, Owen now employs an Aristotelian argument to make the same point:

Consider what is the eternal love of God. Is it an affection in his eternal nature, as love is in ours? It were no less than blasphemy once so to conceive. His pure and holy nature, wherein there is neither change nor shadow of turning, is not

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Institutes* II.XII.1.

³⁰ John Owen, *Death of Death* in *Works* Vol. X, 275.

subject to any such passion; it must be, then, an eternal act of his will, and that alone.³¹

The point that Owen tries to make here by appealing to the notion of divine impassibility is that it is by an eternal act of God's will that the atonement is necessary. The voluntaristic tendency is clear here. This tendency is compatible with a clear statement of Owen's supralapsarian beliefs in the paragraph that follows immediately:

God hold[s] the lump of mankind in his own power, as the clay in the hand of the potter, determining to make some vessels unto honour, for the praise of his glorious grace, and others to dishonour, for the manifestation of his revenging justice, and to this end suffer them all to fall into sin and the guilt of condemnation, whereby they became all liable to his wrath and curse; his purpose to save some of these doth not at all exempt or free them from the common condition of the rest, in respect of themselves and the truth of their estate, until some actual thing be accomplished for the bringing of them nigh unto himself: so that notwithstanding his eternal purpose, his wrath, in respect of the effects, abideth on them until that eternal purpose do make out itself in some distinguishing act of free grace.³²

Note in this lengthy quote that Owen's exegesis of Rom. 9 places God's election and reprobation logically prior to the decree of the fall. Owen argues in this passage that the decree of election does not make the atonement unnecessary. On the contrary, because election is God's decree, it must be fulfilled, and its fulfillment is found in the "distinguishing act of free grace." This, argues Owen, makes the atonement hypothetically necessary. This passage, in the current analysis, then, is exemplary of the correlation between supralapsarianism and the hypothetical necessity of the atonement.

Infralapsarianism and Absolute Necessity in Owen's *Dissertation*

When Owen published *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* in 1653, however, it was clear immediately in the Preface to the Reader that his position on the necessity of the atonement had changed during his Oxford years. He comments that it has been "four months and upwards since, in the usual course of duty, in defending certain theological theses in our university, it fell to my lot to discourse and

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

dispute on the vindicatory justice of God, and the necessity of its exercise, on the supposition of the existence of sin.”³³

What is clear immediately is that the necessity of the satisfaction of divine justice is now, for Owen, no longer predicated upon the decree of election and reprobation alone or directly, but the “existence of sin.” Implicit in this statement is Owen’s conversion to infralapsarianism, because for infralapsarians, it is God’s decree of the fall in conjunction with the decree of election and reprobation that necessitate the decree of Christ’s work of atonement.

In the *Dissertation*, Owen retains his previous position on limited atonement.³⁴ However, in terms of the necessity of the atonement, which is the predominant theme in the present work, Owen aligns himself with the professors at Saumur against his beloved Augustine and Calvin, in addition to Musculus, Twisse, and Vossius.³⁵ Of the Amyraldians at Saumur, Owen says that they, “after the spreading of the poison of Socinianism, have with great accuracy and caution investigated and cleared up this truth, I easily got rid of any uneasiness from that quarter.”³⁶

As pointed out earlier, Owen finds his previous supralapsarian position to share some basic presuppositions with Socinianism, and recognizes that the voluntaristic tendencies in the supralapsarian scheme can easily lead into the non-necessity view of the atonement—a fact that he tries to deny in *The Death of Death*. In the *Dissertation* of 1653, Owen presents a clearly different view.

The *Dissertation* consists of eighteen chapters, divided into two parts. In the first part, comprised of the first seven chapters, Owen sets forth the issue at hand, providing arguments and proofs for the absolute necessity of satisfaction to the vindicatory justice of God. In the second part, Owen engages in controversy with various opponents. The final chapter is a summary of the applications of the doctrine.

The central thesis of the treatise is stated in Chapter 3 against Owen’s “enemies and friends from whom [he] dissent[s]”:

³³ John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice in Works* Vol. X, 486.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 616.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 488.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

“...Punitive justice is natural to God, and necessary as to its egresses respecting sin.”³⁷

Owen makes an important correlation between God’s essential attributes and the outworking of these attributes in God’s external acts and works, which, for Owen, must all be in perfect harmony. On this ground Owen formulates four arguments, the thrust of which is found in the first of these: “He who cannot but hate all sin cannot but punish sin; for to hate sin is, as to the affection, to will to punish it, and as to the effect, the punishment itself. And to be unable not to will the punishment of sin is the same with the necessity of punishing it; for he who cannot but will to punish sin cannot but punish it.”³⁸ Note that Owen is concerned here to ensure the harmony between God’s nature, will, acts and works.

Owen’s second argument draws upon Scripture’s description of God as “‘a consuming fire,’ ‘everlasting burnings,’ a God who ‘will by no means clear the guilty.’”³⁹ Owen argues that “as... consuming fire cannot but burn and consume stubble..., so neither can God do otherwise than punish sin.”⁴⁰ Note here that Owen explicitly states that God *cannot* but punish sin. To the objection of Rutherford, Owen’s supralapsarian contemporary, that God as a “consuming fire” is “an intelligent and rational one, not a natural and insensible one,” Owen replies that “although [God] acts by will and understanding, we have said that his nature *necessarily requires* him to punish any sin committed, as natural and insensible fire burns the combustible matter that is applied to it.”⁴¹

Owen’s third argument, again, concerns the consistency between God’s nature and willed actions: “It is absolutely necessary that God should preserve his glory entire to all eternity; but *sin being supposed*, without the infliction of the punishment due to it he cannot preserve his glory free from violation: therefore, it is necessary that he should punish it.”⁴² Note that this statement is implicitly infralapsarian. As explained earlier, for Owen, divine punishment is the result of the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 512.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 550.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 553. Cf. Heb. 12:29; Deut. 4:24; Isa. 33:14; Exod. 34:7; Isa. 5:24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 553-554. Emphases mine.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 554-555. Emphasis mine.

divine will or decree to punish. The decree of punishment, or reprobation, is the reverse side of the decree of election. For Owen, reprobation and election go hand in hand as “double predestination.” Owen states in the argument above that punishment is necessary when sin is supposed, which implies that double predestination presupposes the fall. An implicit correlation between infralapsarianism and the necessity for God to punish sin is thus evident in this passage.

In the final paragraph of this section, Owen notes that God’s glory in God’s “natural dominion... over rational creatures” cannot be preserved if God were only to punish the creatures for their own sins, for that would mean the destruction of all rational creatures.⁴³ Therefore, God’s “natural dominion” is “preserved or continued... by means of a *vicarious punishment*,” hence the necessity of Christ’s atonement rather than the destruction of creation.⁴⁴

Owen’s argument that God has to punish sin because God cannot choose not to hate sin presupposes that punishment is the only way to remove divine wrath. Owen seems to be aware that his equation of God’s hatred of sin to God’s will to punish sin can be perceived as a logical leap. A persistent challenge in modern theology to the forensic understanding of the atonement in classical Reformed theology is the question: Given that God is holy and cannot tolerate sin, what is the logical connection between God’s hatred of sin and God’s will to punish sin? Owen addresses this question in his fourth argument, asserting that “God hath imposed on mankind a law, ratified by a threatening of eternal death, and that they, by a violation of that law, have deserved the punishment threatened.”⁴⁵ In other words, the necessity to punish sin as an act of divine justice is intrinsic to the created order: “You will surely die.” (Gen. 2:17) God would be capricious if God were to contradict the order that God has set. Moreover, this created order reflects the “punitory justice” that is “essentially inherent in God.”⁴⁶ Owen quotes an array of biblical passages such as Job 8:3, Ps. 119:137, Rom. 1:18, 32, Gen. 18:25, etc. to show the correlation between divine justice and the punishment of

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 556.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 556.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 559.

sin. After all, it is in Scripture that Owen finds support for the idea of punitive justice. Of course, Owen's exegesis is open to question. One may also assert that Owen is influenced by a culturally conditioned forensic theory of atonement, but this statement would have to be defended in light of the fact that Owen quotes a large quantity of biblical texts, and nowhere does he appeal to any legal philosophy or forensic theory in the *Dissertation*.

It is not my present task to evaluate, much less to try to refute or defend, Owen's position, but simply to give an account thereof, and analyze it in terms of his infralapsarianism. Owen's position is that punitive justice is inherent to divine nature, and God punishes sin out of necessity. Owen is careful to explain that this by no means compromises God's sovereignty: "Now, when we say that God necessarily punishes sin, we mean, that on account of the rectitude and perfection of his nature, he cannot possess an indifference of will to punish; for it being supposed that God hates sin, he must hate it either by *nature* or by *choice*."⁴⁷ Owen then contends that if God hated sin by choice, then God could also have chosen not to hate sin; and if God's choice were indeed so free, then God could even have chosen to love sin, which is blasphemous to assert. Therefore, it must be that God hates sin by nature, which makes the case that God is necessitated by God's own nature to punish sin. With meticulous and extensive exegeses, Owen argues: "The holiness of God is natural to him; an essential, then, and necessary attribute of God requires the punishment of sinners."⁴⁸

Owen also asserts that divine justice cannot be satisfied in any other way than that accomplished by Christ. Owen opposes Augustine, who claims that "God might by other means have provided for the safety and honour of his justice, but that that way by the blood of his Son was more proper and becoming."⁴⁹

Regarding Christ's work of atonement, Owen retains his earlier position in the *Death of Death* that Christ was guilty in a real sense when He took on our sins⁵⁰—it was a "*translation* of guilt from us

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 550. Emphases mine.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 569.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 560.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 598.

upon Christ, constituting him sin for us.”⁵¹ Here Owen’s forensic understanding of the imputation of our sin to Christ is at one accord with Calvin: The forensic element is not a “legal fiction”, as it were, but a real translation of guilt in virtue of our mystical union with Christ.⁵² “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.’”⁵³ The vicarious punishment that Christ suffered, according to Owen, is the only way that could appease the wrath of God *and* acquit the sinners of their guilt. It is in this sense Christ’s atonement is absolutely necessary.

In the discussions above, Owen presupposes throughout that those chosen for salvation are sinful, which suggests that election logically presupposes God’s the permission of the fall.⁵⁴ Owen spells out this infralapsarianism explicitly: “This only we deny,—namely, that *supposing* a sinful creature, the will of God can be indifferent (by virtue of the punitive justice inherent in it) to inflict or not inflict punishment upon that creature, or to the volition of punishment or its opposite.”⁵⁵ This infralapsarian scheme, we may note, is not detached from Christology, but deeply rooted in Owen’s understanding of the imputation of our sin to Christ and Christ’s vicarious sacrifice for us.

Owen’s infralapsarian arguments, of course, are open to the criticism that he has compromised God’s sovereign freedom. In defending his position, Owen clarifies that God’s vindicatory justice is necessitated by God’s holy nature, which demands God to punish sinners when the existence of sin is a reality. The existence of sin, however, is contingent upon God’s decree of creation and permission of the fall, which are absolutely free on God’s part; God was in no way coerced into willing the work of creation and the permission of evil.⁵⁶ In other words, when God decreed to create the world and

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 566.

⁵² See George Hunsinger, “Justification and Mystical Union with Christ: Where Does Owen Stand?” Paper presented at John Owen Today Conference, Westminster College, Cambridge, 2008. Also see Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2007), 101ff.

⁵³ John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice in Works* Vol. X, 554.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 597, 598, 600.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 510. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 509-511.

permit the fall, God also had to decree, as necessitated by God's own nature, a means of satisfaction to God's justice; but since the decrees of creation and the fall are sovereign and free, so are the decrees of double predestination and of Christ's substitutionary atonement that are issued in eternal simultaneity with the previous decrees.

Owen's assertion here of the harmony between divine sovereignty and the absolute necessity of the atonement implies an infralapsarian view. This again becomes explicit when Owen states that "the decree of creating the world flowed from the free will of God," and that God freely "willed to permit creatures to transgress the law of their creation," which together necessitate that God either decrees and proceeds to punish the creatures "in their own persons, or in their surety standing in their room and stead."⁵⁷ The underlying order of God's decrees here is clearly infralapsarian.

To sum up, then, this is Owen's infralapsarian scheme in the *Dissertation*: 1. God freely decides to create the world; 2. God freely decides to permit the fall of humanity; 3. God is compelled by God's own nature to punish sinners; 4. God does this in two ways—God chooses some unto salvation and sends Christ to take on their guilt and die in their stead, while passing over others and punishing them in their own persons with the consuming fires of justice. We see in this scheme that the atonement is absolutely necessary when God has decreed the fall of humanity. On this view, infralapsarianism as presented by Owen is an approach to the question of God's fairness or goodness by insisting on the consistency between divine nature and volition, perfections and freedom. The infralapsarian Owen tells us that Golgotha is, using contemporary Reformed language, the "overflowing" of God's natural perfections. Owen's infralapsarianism affirms in the face evil that God is both good and sovereign.

Owen's Infralapsarianism and Christological Treatment of Election

Owen's attempt to affirm divine freedom and sovereignty in the infralapsarian scheme by arguing that God freely decreed creation and the fall, however, educes a difficult question: Does God have a purpose in the decrees of creation and the fall? In the supralapsarian

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 596-598.

scheme, the purpose of God's decrees is clear: God willed the fall of humanity in order to show forth the glory of God's justice and mercy in reprobation and election. Since supralapsarians ascribe logical priority to double predestination over all of God's decrees, the whole set of divine decrees would serve the purpose of manifesting God's glory in mercy and justice through double predestination. Infralapsarians, on the other hand, place the decree of double predestination logically after the decrees of creation and the fall, so it becomes difficult for infralapsarians to ascribe the same purposefulness to creation and the fall. Barth rightly observes that "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."⁵⁸ Bavinck also comments that "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?"⁵⁹

Moreover, supra- and infralapsarianism as presented in Reformed scholasticism must deal with the difficulty of avoiding 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 except to say that God does everything by God's "good pleasure."⁶⁰ Infralapsarianism attempts to soften this arbitrariness in the will of God by explaining that the reprobate are considered *homo lapsus* (fallen human) in God's mind, and therefore the act 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

⁵⁸ *CD II/2*, 129.

⁵⁹ *Reformed Dogmatics II*, 385. The "good pleasure" language is from Eph. 1:5. The lapsarian theories tend to speak of God's "good pleasure" as an arbitrary will of God, but in the context of Eph. 1, God's "good pleasure" is God's will for the elect *in Christ*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

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 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.⁶¹

Owen seems to be well ahead of his time in recognizing this lapsarian dilemma, and his solution is explicitly Christo-centric. In *The Person of Christ* (1679), Owen, who is now an infralapsarian, 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."⁶² Owen does not concede that infralapsarianism is incapable of recognizing any divine purpose for creation and the fall. In characteristically Reformed manner, Owen states that the purpose of all God's decrees and works is nothing but God's glory—*Soli Deo Gloria*. Owen concedes 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."⁶³ Owen seems to recognize that from his infralapsarian viewpoint, it is difficult to ascribe to the decrees of creation and the fall any known or knowable purpose.

The genius of Owen's solution 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"; in and of itself this origin is a hidden mystery.⁶⁴ However, "the *design* of [the] accomplishment [of the eternal decrees] 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."⁶⁵ Here, rather than explaining the purpose of all God's decrees in terms of God's glory in election and reprobation,

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Works* Vol. I, 61.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

Owen asserts that Jesus Christ is 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."⁶⁶

For Owen, 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."⁶⁷ Owen also suggests an eschatological dimension to election in Christ as the ground of all God's decrees: "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."⁶⁸

Again, the genius of Owen's solution to the lapsarian dilemma is his Christological focus on the *design* of God's decrees rather than the *origin*. The origin is God's wisdom in and of Godself, which is unknowable in and of itself—this is not a Kantian or Barthian discovery, but has always been one of Christianity's fundamental convictions, viz. the transcendence of God. However, the design of God's decrees as they are concretely accomplished by Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, reveals God's hidden "essential wisdom" to us, as Jesus Christ himself "was the essential wisdom of God."⁶⁹ On other words, neither God's being nor God's will can be known apart from the incarnate Son Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the one Triune God who became human without ceasing to be God, thus revealing the wisdom—the will and attributes—of the transcendent God to humanity. Owen applies this Nicene-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 work of Jesus Christ the wisdom of God which is otherwise unknown and unknowable is revealed to us.

Another ingenious element in Owen's origin-design distinction is Owen's recognition of the eternity, timelessness and

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

successionlessness of the divine mind. This is an Augustinian-Bothian view of eternity that has become a normative standard in Reformed orthodoxy, a standard that various lapsarian theories in the 17th Century sought to maintain. Owen, however, recognizes that when one confines oneself to tracing the *origin* of divine decrees by following the logical steps in the lapsarian schemes, one inevitably falls into the trap of thinking of the decrees in terms of successions. On the other hand, to focus on the *design* of God's decrees means to take seriously the *simultaneity* of the divine mind. Though there is a logical order in the divine decrees, these decrees were never issued in succession. The entire scheme of divine counsels was issued simultaneously in God's eternal mind, so that the purpose and foundation of the decrees are to be found by looking at the entire scheme simultaneously rather than by tracing the logical steps one at a time.

Owen tells us that by thus focusing on the design of the decrees, we find that each decree points us not to the decree that logically precedes it, but to Jesus Christ who is God's "wisdom."⁷⁰ Christ is the foundation of all the decrees. As a logical first step, God decided to create the world, and all things were created through Jesus Christ; God decided in the second logical step to permit the fall in order to restore all things in Jesus Christ; election in Christ is the decree that corresponds to the restoration of all things. "As [Christ] 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."⁷¹ As such, although the decrees of creation and the fall logically precede election, the prior decrees are *by design* subordinate to the decree of election in Christ. All God's decrees are issued in Christ and aimed at God's good purpose in the act of election in Christ—the purpose of restoring all things and bringing all things into God's glory in Christ.

To sum up this section, the 17th-century supralapsarian framework dictates that God's self-glorification through double predestination is the ultimate purpose that lends meaning to all God's decrees. This classical supralapsarianism, taken rigidly without

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

significant modification, leaves no room for the consideration of other grounds for God’s decrees. The classical infralapsarian framework generally lacks an explanation for God’s purposes in deciding to create the world and permit the fall. Even a great exponent of infralapsarianism like Turretin is unable to overcome this difficulty, as Barth rightly observes.⁷² However, since infralapsarians are free from the constraint to view God’s decrees exclusively in terms of the *decretum absolutum* in double predestination, the infralapsarian Owen is able to shift his focus from the logical sequence of the decrees to the design thereof, thus grounding all God’s decrees in Jesus Christ, recognizing that God’s eternal will is not empty, capricious, or unknowable, but revealed in and through the particular person and work of Jesus Christ, who is himself the Son of God who became human without ceasing to be God.

“Is God Unfair?”—A Classical Reformed Response to Barth

Now we may return to the question posed at the beginning: Does the Reformed doctrine of election render God unfair? We have seen that through the Lapsarian Controversy this question has become more complex and intricate: How can we affirm God’s goodness and sovereignty when we recognize that God not only permitted the fall, but also chose to leave a portion of the human race to suffer the ruinous consequences of the fall forever? As we have seen, this question has led to what I call a “lapsarian dilemma”, to which Owen found a solution in an ingenious Christocentric approach to the doctrine of election.

It seems that Owen’s later Christological treatment of the doctrine of election has remained unnoticed through the centuries. Barth is probably completely unaware of Owen when Barth offers his sharp critique of the classical Reformed doctrine of election in the long excursus at the end of §33 on the Lapsarian Controversy. Barth’s analyses of both supra- and infralapsarianism are astute, albeit it with several technical misinterpretations,⁷³ and constitute in my opinion

⁷² *CD II/2*, 129-130.

⁷³ Barth fails to appreciate that the most fundamental position of infralapsarianism is that double predestination presuppose that the elect and the reprobate are all fallen. Barth calls himself a “purified supralapsarian”, but in fact, both McCormack, representing the “revisionist” interpretation of Barth, and Hunsinger, representing the “traditionalists”, understand Barth to be saying that election presupposes the fall of humanity. See Bruce McCormack, “Justitia aliena: Karl Barth in Conversation with the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

one of the most insightful challenges to the classical Reformed doctrine of election in centuries.

For Barth, the common dilemma shared by both supra- and infralapsarianism, viz. inevitably referring to an arbitrary divine good pleasure as the cause of either reprobation or the fall of humanity, shows that the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination inevitably formulates the will of God as what Barth calls the “caprice of a tyrant” and renders God unfair.⁷⁴ Barth’s critique of Reformed-scholastic lapsarianism in the long excursus at the end of §33 is similar to that of Bavinck, which I quoted earlier, but Barth takes a further step to argue that the notion of divine *decretum absolutum* (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) is the root of the dilemma.⁷⁵ For Barth, the classical Reformed formulation of double predestination inevitably posits an arbitrarily electing God above and behind the God self-revealed in Jesus Christ.

The solution that Barth proposes is to replace the notion of *decretum absolutum* with a Chalcedonian understanding of election, a solution similar to that of Owen, though Owen would never deny the explicit biblical teaching of the *decretum absolutum* by the kind of innovative eisegesis that Barth employs.⁷⁶ It is not within the scope of my current paper to discuss Barth’s doctrine of election. Suffice it to say that while I find Barth’s rejection of the notion of *decretum absolutum* unbiblical, I actually think that there is much to think about in Barth’s insightful doctrine of election. My present task is only to evaluate Barth’s critique of the classical Reformed doctrine of election.

As we have seen, through the Lapsarian Controversy an inseparable connection between the problem of evil and the doctrine of election in Reformed orthodoxy has been established. Therefore, in addition to discussing Barth’s critique of the classical Reformed

Evangelical Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness” in *Justification in Perspective*, 191. Also see George Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology*, 24 (2008), 198.

⁷⁴ *CD* II/2, 22.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷⁶ Karl Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1936), 13.

doctrine of election, we may also consider Barth's complaints about Reformed orthodoxy's approach to the problem of evil.

Barth concludes §50 on "God and Nothingness" with a discussion on "the problem of nothingness."⁷⁷ Barth says that questions about divine goodness and omnipotence as well as the goodness of God's creation, as found in traditional formulations of the problem of evil, have been raised because the various elements are "considered abstractly and as it were detachedly" apart from God's covenantal grace revealed in Christ.⁷⁸ For Barth, Classical Reformed theology also sought to answer the problem of evil with a high view of divine sovereignty apart from Christological considerations, and reduced God to a "capricious tyrant". According to Barth, theodicy, understood as a human attempt to vindicate God, is doomed to fail because sinners are not in the place to defend God. God justifies sinners; sinners do not justify God. God answers the problem of evil by justifying the sinner, i.e. by imputing humanity's sin to Godself and subjecting Godself to the powers of nothingness.

How can there be evil if God is good and almighty, and why does creation groan under bondage to decay? Barth refuses to speculate about an answer. Rather, Barth wants to look to the biblical witness to Christ. In his discussion of nothingness, Barth constantly reminds his reader that in our present sufferings God is *with us* in Christ. God "is not too great" to participate in the sufferings of God's covenant partner.⁷⁹ Yet, unlike process theologians, Barth is emphatically insistent that God's sovereignty or transcendence must not be compromised. This is hardly surprising, since the idea of God's wholly-otherness, which seems to be completely lacking in Moltmann and Pannenberg, is axiomatic to Barth's theology. In his doctrine of election Barth declares that in Christ, evil—Barth calls it "nothingness"⁸⁰—*has been defeated a priori (zum vornherein)* and therefore *will* be defeated, for even nothingness falls under God's universal dominion. On the other hand, Barth thinks that he has corrected classical Reformed theologians who, according to Barth's

⁷⁷ CD III/2, 365.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁸⁰ Barth's terminology is somewhat confusing. By "nothingness" Barth refers to what we commonly understand as "evil", while what Barth calls "evil" is a form of nothingness alongside sin and death.

interpretation, absolutize God's sovereign will to the degree that it becomes capricious and incompatible with God's covenantal goodness revealed in Christ.

Is Barth's assessment of Reformed orthodoxy correct on this point? This is related to the question we asked at the beginning of this paper: Does the Reformed doctrine of election render God unfair or unjust, like Barth says it does? Moreover, has Reformed orthodoxy sought to know too much about God and God's decrees in its classical doctrine of predestination? Is Barth right in his appraisal of Reformed orthodoxy as an attempt to know the electing grace of God apart from the God self-revealed in Christ?

First of all, we must reiterate the caveat issued at the beginning of this paper: We must keep in mind that so-called Reformed orthodoxy is not a monotonous theological system. We have already seen that classical Reformed theologians have been divided over the issue of lapsarianism, and that supra- and infralapsarianism are but two clear poles between which there are a variety of modified views. We have also briefly mentioned that the later Owen treats predestination (including the decree of the fall) Christologically while Turretin, also an infralapsarian, adopts a causation model similar to that of Calvin. Classical Reformed theologians are similarly divided on other related doctrinal issues, such as whether the imputed righteousness of Christ is merely passive (e.g. Twisse) or both passive and active (e.g. Owen).⁸¹ When we consider the diversity within the classical Reformed tradition, we become aware that the question whether Barth's assessment of Reformed orthodoxy is correct cannot be answered with any simplistic yes or no.

However, precisely because Reformed orthodoxy is not a monotonous theological system, we can at least say that Barth's criticism thereof is too crude and simplistic. With one simple stroke Barth deems the traditional Reformed doctrine of predestination to be inherently speculative in its attempt to explain the cause and origin of evil apart from God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. At this point, we may at least say that Barth's appraisal does not apply to John Owen,

⁸¹ Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2007), 101ff.

who is according to many scholars today the theologian most representative of 17th-century Reformed orthodoxy.

I have already presented Owen's Christological solution to the lapsarian dilemma, and it is clear that Barth's criticism does not apply in the case of Owen. In fact, I think there is more we can say about the broader orthodox Reformed tradition besides Owen. While bearing in mind the rich variety within Reformed orthodoxy, we may acknowledge that there is a large consensus among traditional Reformed theologians on the overall doctrinal framework of Reformed theology, as expressed in its historic confessions and catechisms such as Dort, Westminster and Heidelberg. Is Barth's evaluation of classical Reformed theology correct in view of such doctrinal consensus in the Reformed tradition?

In trying to answer this question, we may refer to Loraine Boettner, one of the most significant exponents of the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination, whose work *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* remains a definitive and one of the most comprehensive accounts of the mainstream Reformed understanding of the doctrine since late 17th Century. Without going into a detailed historical survey, which is not within the scope of the current essay, we may refer to Boettner's work to get a sense of the mainstream understanding of classical Reformed theology's predestinarian approach to the problem of evil.

Barth complains that Reformed orthodoxy—both supra- and infralapsarian—seeks to speculate about the cause and origin of evil above and behind God's self-revelation in Christ. Indeed the “good pleasure” language in the Westminster Confession seems to suggest such a tendency, but Boettner points out:

The Westminster Standards, in treating of the *dread mystery of evil*, are very careful to guard the character of God from even the suggestion of evil. Sin is referred to the freedom which is given to the agent, and of all sinful acts whatever they emphatically affirm that “the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is, nor can be the author or approver of sin.” (V; 4.)⁸²

Of course, Barth would still find this article from the Westminster Confession unsettling, because although it calls evil a

⁸² Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 228. Emphasis mine.

“mystery” and emphasizes that God has nothing to do with evil, this article still attributes the cause and origin of evil to God’s creature. However, the wording of this article is only a way of saying that sin came into the world through Adam’s fall, and this article does not seek to explain the mystery of evil behind Adam’s fall, nor does it claim that Adam’s sin originated from any divine decree. In fact, Boettner proceeds immediately to clarify that “it is not ours to explain how God in His secret counsel rules and overrules the sinful acts of men” and that “it is ours to know that whatever God does He never deviates from His own perfect justice.”⁸³ Boettner makes it emphatically clear that “these deep workings of God are mysteries, which are to be adored, but not to be inquired into.”⁸⁴

Barth criticizes Reformed orthodoxy for attempting to rationalize evil, but Boettner begins his presentation of classical Reformed theology’s general consensus on the problem of evil by stating that “sin can never be explained on the grounds of logic and reason, for it is essentially illogical and unreasonable.”⁸⁵ It is true that Boettner still presents several classic views of sin and evil in Reformed theology that may seem like rational explanations, but Boettner is very careful in calling these “partial” explanations.⁸⁶

According to Barth, Reformed orthodoxy attempts to formulate these explanations apart from the graciously electing God revealed in Christ. This is a serious misinterpretation of the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination. The grace of God in Christ lies at the heart of the Reformed-orthodox understanding of evil in relation to God’s sovereignty.⁸⁷

Even when appealing to the grace of God in Christ, Boettner is careful not to refer to this grace as a logical reason *simpliciter*: “To a certain extent we can say that the reason for the permission of sin is that, ‘Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.’”⁸⁸ Boettner

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸⁷ Of course, certain exponents of Reformed orthodoxy explicitly deny the Christological character of predestination, e.g. Turretin. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* I (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), 350-355. In my opinion, Barth’s critique of Reformed orthodoxy rightly applies to the view that Turretin represents.

⁸⁸ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 232. Emphasis mine.

does not claim that this grace can become a possession of human reason, but calls it a “deep, unfathomable grace”.⁸⁹

However, this grace is not unknowable to human reason either. Barth may complain that classical Reformed theology seeks to understand God’s grace of election speculatively apart from God’s self-revelation in Christ. However, the grace of which Boettner speaks here is the very concrete grace of God as revealed in Christ. After stating that the reason of God’s permission of sin is *secundum quid* to manifest God’s grace, Boettner immediately proceeds to state what this grace is in its historical concreteness, viz. the incarnation:

When Christ became *incarnate*, human nature was, as it were, *taken into the very bosom of Deity*, and the redeemed reach a far more exalted position through *union with Christ* than Adam could have attained had he not fallen but persevered and been admitted into heaven.⁹⁰

In view of what God suffered on Golgotha through the inseparable union of deity and humanity in person of Christ, Boettner clears up the common misunderstanding—one to which Barth also holds—that according to classical Reformed theology, the impassible God issues forth the decrees of election and reprobation above and behind the God self-revealed in Christ. Boettner would not hesitate to state that the impassible God suffered without ceasing to be impassible. In fact, Boettner cites A. H. Strong in his consideration of the problem of evil: “*God suffers* from sin more than does the sinner.”⁹¹ This is not meant to rationalize the problem of evil. Far from it, what Boettner means to state here is that although we cannot rationally understand the cause or origin of evil, what we may know with assurance is that in the incarnate person of Christ God suffered more than does the sinner. This Christological understanding of divine predestination in relation—or, to be precise, non-relation—to evil is at one accord with Owen’s mature presentation of the doctrine of election in 1679.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, emphases mine.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 230. Emphasis mine.

Conclusion: The Reformed Doctrine of Election as Non-Theodicy

We may now derive from the discussions in the section above a summary of Reformed orthodoxy's general approach to the problem of evil. First, according to Boettner's exposition, evil is, on the classical Reformed view, something irrational and unexplainable; the existence of evil is absurd. Second, we may know of God's goodness and God's sovereignty over evil, but we cannot explain precisely how God's sovereignty is related to evil; in fact, we cannot rationally assert any relation between God and evil at all. Third, in the presence of evil we may affirm God's sovereign grace only in the person and work of Christ, who is at once God and human. Fourth, although we do not know why or how God permitted evil, we know through the person and work of Christ that God is Immanuel God-with-us in our sufferings and sins.

This emphatically Christocentric character of classical Reformed theology is clear at once if we consider the opening article of that classic account of the Reformed faith: "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."

In view of this deeply Christocentric catechism, we may appreciate that the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination does not seek to justify God in the presence of evil. Rather, this classic doctrine speaks of the God who justifies sinners by God's eternal decision and its historical actualization to become human without ceasing to be God. On this view, the classical Reformed approach to the problem of evil is not so much a theodicy. Rather, it is a non-theodicy in the sense that it does not seek to justify God but it proclaims the God who justifies sinners. I think this understanding of non-theodicy is the right way to interpret Owen's most mature theology presented in 1679.

In view of this non-theodicy, the Reformed doctrine of predestination in its normative spirit tends to refuse to answer the question of God's fairness. If one is to ask whether the Reformed doctrine of predestination renders God unfair, a good Reformed theologian should follow Paul's non-theodicy in Rom. 9:19: "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?", and point to the God who refuses to be justified by sinners but justifies the sinner who is in Christ by faith (Rom. 9:30-33). One who questions God's goodness or fairness in view of God's sovereignty and the reality of evil shall find no answer save in the God self-revealed in Jesus Christ. This Christocentric non-theodicy is not only Reformed but also Christian in the broader sense, thus even Pope John Paul II might agree with the first question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism when he comments that "the Book of Job poses in an extremely acute way the question of the 'why' of suffering; it also shows that suffering strikes the innocent, but it does not yet give the solution to the problem...This answer has been given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ."⁹²

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⁹² John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*. Available [on-line]: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris_en.html, accessed 22 April 2009.

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