



# Notes on Supralapsarianism & Infralapsarianism

*"Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21).*

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**This page looks at four major ways** of ordering the soteriological elements of God's eternal decree—with a particular focus on the difference between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. I have summarized the differences in a side-by-side comparison below. Explanatory notes follow.

### Summary of Views

Supralapsarianism	Infralapsarianism	Amyraldism	Arminianism
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Elect some, reprobate rest</li> <li>2. Create</li> <li>3. Permit Fall</li> <li>4. Provide salvation for elect</li> <li>5. Call elect to salvation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create</li> <li>2. Permit Fall</li> <li>3. Elect some, pass over the rest</li> <li>4. Provide salvation for elect</li> <li>5. Call elect to salvation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create</li> <li>2. Permit Fall</li> <li>3. Provide salvation sufficient for all</li> <li>4. Elect some, pass over rest</li> <li>5. Call elect to salvation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create</li> <li>2. Permit Fall</li> <li>3. Provide salvation for all</li> <li>4. Call all to salvation</li> <li>5. Elect those who believe</li> </ol>

The distinction between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism has to do with the *logical order* of God's eternal decrees, not the timing of election. Neither side suggests that the elect were chosen *after* Adam sinned. God made His choice before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)—long before Adam sinned. Both infras and supras (and even many Arminians) agree on this.

**SUPRALAPSARIANISM** is the view that God, contemplating man as yet unfallen, chose some to receive eternal life and rejected all others. So a supralapsarian would say that the reprobate (non-elect)—vessels of wrath fitted for destruction (Rom. 9:22)—were first ordained to that role, and *then* the means by which they fell into sin was ordained. In other words, supralapsarianism suggests that God's decree of election *logically* preceded His decree to permit Adam's fall—so that their damnation is first of all an act of divine sovereignty, and only secondarily an act of divine justice.

Supralapsarianism is sometimes mistakenly equated with "double predestination." The term "double predestination" itself is often used in a misleading and ambiguous fashion. Some use it to mean nothing more than the view that the eternal destiny of both elect and reprobate is settled by the eternal decree of God. In that sense of the term, *all* genuine Calvinists hold to "double predestination"—and the fact that the destiny of the reprobate is eternally settled is clearly a biblical doctrine (cf. 1 Peter 2:8; Romans 9:22; Jude 4). But more often, the expression "double predestination" is employed as a pejorative term to describe the view of those who suggest that God is as active in keeping the reprobate out of heaven as He is in getting the elect in. (There's an even more sinister form of "double predestination," which suggests that God is as active in making the reprobate evil as He is in making the elect holy.)

This view (that God is as active in reprobating the non-elect as He is in redeeming the elect) is more properly labeled "equal ultimacy" (cf. R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 142). It is actually a form of [hyper-Calvinism](#) and has nothing to do with true, historic Calvinism. Though all who hold such a view would also hold to the supralapsarian scheme, the view itself is not a necessary ramification of supralapsarianism.

Supralapsarianism is also sometimes wrongly equated with hyper-Calvinism. All [hyper-Calvinists](#) are supralapsarians, though not all supras are hyper-Calvinists.

Supralapsarianism is sometimes called "high" Calvinism, and its most extreme adherents tend to reject the notion that God has any degree of sincere goodwill or meaningful compassion toward the non-elect. Historically, a minority of Calvinists have held this view.

But Boettner's comment that "there is not more than one Calvinist in a hundred that holds

the supralapsarian view," is no doubt an exaggeration. And in the past decade or so, the supralapsarian view seems to have gained popularity.

**INFRALAPSARIANISM** (also known sometimes as "sublapsarianism") suggests that God's decree to permit the fall logically preceded His decree of election. So when God chose the elect and passed over the non-elect, He was contemplating them all as fallen creatures.

Those are the two major *Calvinistic* views. Under the **supralapsarian** scheme, God first rejects the reprobate out of His sovereign good pleasure; then He ordains the means of their damnation through the fall. In the **infralapsarian** order, the non-elect are first seen as fallen individuals, and they are damned solely because of their own sin. Infralapsarians tend to emphasize God's "passing over" the non-elect (*preterition*) in His decree of election.

Robert Reymond, himself a supralapsarian, proposes the following refinement of the supralapsarian view:

<b>Reymond's Modified Supralapsarianism</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Elect some <i>sinful men</i>, reprobate rest</li> <li>2. Apply redemptive benefits to the elect</li> <li>3. Provide salvation for elect</li> <li>4. Permit Fall</li> <li>5. Create</li> </ol>

Notice that in addition to reordering the decrees, Reymond's view deliberately stresses that in the decree of election and reprobation, God is contemplating men as sinners. Reymond writes, "In this scheme, *unlike the former* [the classic supra- order], God is represented as discriminating among men viewed as sinners and not among men viewed simply as men. (See Robert Reymond, *Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 489). Reymond's refinement avoids the criticism most commonly leveled against supralapsarianism—that the supralapsarian has God damning men to perdition before He even contemplates them as sinners. But Reymond's view also leaves unanswered the question of how and why God would regard all men as sinners even before it was determined that the human race would fall. (Some might even argue that Reymond's refinements result in a position that, as far as the key distinction is concerned, is implicitly infralapsarian.)

All the major Reformed Confessions are either explicitly infralapsarian, or else they carefully avoid language that favors either view. No major confession takes the supra position. (This whole issue was hotly debated throughout the Westminster Assembly. William Twisse, an ardent supralapsarian and chairman of the Assembly, ably defended his view. But the Assembly opted for language that clearly favors the infra position, yet without condemning supralapsarianism.)

"Bavinck has pointed out that the supralapsarian presentation 'has not been incorporated in a single Reformed Confession' but that the infra position has received an official place in the Confessions of the churches" (Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 259).

Louis Berkhof's discussion of the two views (in his *Systematic Theology*) is helpful, though he seems to favor supralapsarianism. I take the Infra view, as did Turretin, most of the Princeton theologians, and most of the leading Westminster Seminary men (e.g., John Murray). These issues were at the heart of the "common grace" controversy in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Herman Hoeksema and those who followed him took such a rigid supralapsarian position that they ultimately denied the very concept of common grace.

Finally, see the chart (*above*), which compares these two views with Amyraldism (a kind of four-point Calvinism) and Arminianism. My notes on each view (*below*) identify some of the major advocates of each view.

## NOTES ON THE ORDER OF THE DECREES

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### ***Supralapsarianism***

- Beza held this view. Although he is often credited with formulating the supralapsarian position, he did not.
- Other historic proponents include Gomarus, Twisse, Perkins, Voetus, Witsius, and Comrie.
- Louis Berkhof sees value in both views, but seems to lean slightly toward supralapsarianism (*Systematic Theology*, 120-25).
- Karl Barth felt supralapsarianism was more nearly correct than infralapsarianism.
- Robert Reymond's *Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* takes the supralapsarian view and includes a lengthy defense of supralapsarianism.
- Turretin says supralapsarianism is "harsher and less suitable" than infralapsarianism. He believes it "does not appear to agree sufficiently with [God's] unspeakable goodness" (*Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, 418).
- Herman Hoeksema and the entire leadership of the Protestant Reformed Churches (including Homer Hoeksema, Herman Hanko, and David Engelsma) are determined supralapsarians—often arguing both implicitly and explicitly that supralapsarianism is

the *only* logically consistent scheme. This presumption clearly contributes to the PRC's rejection of common grace.

- In fact, the same arguments used in favor of Supralapsarianism have been employed *against* common grace. So supralapsarianism may have in it a tendency that is hostile to the idea of common grace. (It is a fact that virtually all who deny "common grace" are supralapsarians.)
- Supralapsarianism is the position of all who hold to the harshest sort of "double predestination."
- It is hard to find exponents of supralapsarianism among the major systematic theologians. But the tide among some of the more modern authors may be turning toward the supra- view. Berkhof was sympathetic to the view; Reymond expressly defends it.
- R. A. Webb says supralapsarianism is "abhorrent to metaphysics, to ethics, and to the scriptures. It is propounded in no Calvinistic creed and can be charged only upon some extremists" (*Christian Salvation*, 16). While I am sympathetic to Webb's infra-convictions, I think he grossly exaggerates the case against supralapsarianism. [Webb is a 19th-cent. southern Presbyterian.]

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### ***Infralapsarianism***

- This view is also called "sublapsarianism."
- John Calvin said some things that seem to indicate he would have been in sympathy with this view, though the debate did not occur in his lifetime (see *Calvin's Calvinism*, trans. by Henry Cole, 89ff; also William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 364ff)
- W. G. T. Shedd, Charles Hodge, L. Boettner, and Anthony Hoekema held this view.
- Both R. L. Dabney and William Cunningham lean decidedly to this view but resist arguing the point. They believe the whole debate goes beyond scripture and is therefore unnecessary. Dabney, for example, says "This is a question which ought never to have been raised" (*Systematic Theology*, 233). Twisse, the supralapsarian, virtually agreed with this. He called the difference "merely *apex logicus*, a point of logic. And were it not a mere madness to make a breach of unity or charity in the church merely upon a point of logic?" (cited in Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 363). G.C. Berkouwer also agrees: "We face here a controversy which owes its existence to a trespassing of the boundaries set by revelation." Berkouwer wonders aloud whether we are "obeying the teaching of Scripture if we refuse to make a choice here" (*Divine Election*, 254-55).
- Thornwell does not agree that the issue is moot. He says the issue "involves something more than a question of logical method. It is really a question of the highest moral significance. . . . Conviction and hanging are parts of the same process, but it is something more than a question of arrangement whether a man shall be hung before he is convicted" (*Collected Writings*, 2:20). Thornwell is vehemently infralapsarian.
- Infralapsarianism was affirmed by the synod of Dordt but only implied in the Westminster standards. Twisse, a supralapsarian, was the first president of the Westminster Assembly, which evidently decided the wisest course was to ignore the controversy altogether (though Westminster's bias was arguably infralapsarian) . The Westminster Confession, therefore, along with most of the Reformed Confessions, implicitly affirmed what the Synod of Utrecht (1905) would later explicitly declare: "That our confessions, certainly with respect to the doctrine of election, follow the infralapsarian presentation, [but] this does not at all imply an exclusion or condemnation of the supralapsarian presentation."

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### ***Amyraldism***

- *Amyraldism* (is the preferred spelling, not *AmyraldIANism*).
- Amyraldism is the doctrine formulated by Moise Amyraut, a French theologian from the Saumur school. (This same school spawned another aggravating deviation from Reformed orthodoxy: Placaesus' view involving the mediate imputation of Adam's guilt).
- By making the decree to atone for sin logically antecedent to the decree of election, Amyraut could view the atonement as hypothetically universal, but efficacious for the elect alone. Therefore the view is sometimes called "hypothetical universalism."
- Puritan Richard Baxter embraced this view, or one very nearly like it. He seems to have been the only major Puritan leader who was not a thoroughgoing Calvinist. Some would dispute whether Baxter was a true Amyraldian. (See, e.g. George Smeaton, *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 reprint], Appendix, 542.) But Baxter seemed to regard *himself* as Amyraldian.
- This is a sophisticated way of formulating "four-point Calvinism," while still accounting for an eternal decree of election.

- But Amyraldism probably should not be equated with all brands of so-called "four-point Calvinism." In my own experience, most self-styled four-pointers are unable to articulate *any* coherent explanation of how the atonement can be universal but election unconditional. So I wouldn't glorify their position by labeling it Amyraldism. (Would that they were as committed to the doctrine of divine sovereignty as Moise Amyraut! Most who call themselves four-pointers are actually crypto-Arminians.)
- A. H. Strong held this view (*Systematic Theology*, 778). He called it (incorrectly) "sublapsarianism."
- Henry Thiessen, evidently following Strong, also mislabeled this view "sublapsarianism" (and contrasted it with "infralapsarianism") in the original edition of his *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (343). His discussion in this edition is very confusing and patently wrong at points. In later editions of his book this section was completely rewritten.

### Arminianism

- Henry Thiessen argued for essentially this view in the original edition of his *Systematic Theology*. The revised edition no longer explicitly defends this order of the decrees, but Thiessen's fundamental Arminianism is still clearly evident.
- Most Arminian theologians decline to deal with God's eternal decree, and extreme Arminians even deny the very concept of an eternal decree. Those who acknowledge the divine decree, however, *must* end up making election contingent upon the believer's response to the call of the gospel. Indeed, this is the whole gist of Arminianism.



Phil Johnson

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