The Doctrine of God

Herman Bavinck

Born on December 13, 1854, in Hoogeveen, Drenthe, Holland, Herman Bavinck was the son of the Reverend Jan Bavinck, a leading figure in the secession from the State Church of the Netherlands in 1834. After theological study in Kampen, and at the University of Leiden, he graduated in 1880, and served as the minister of the congregation at Franeker, Friesland, for a year. According to his biographers, large crowds gathered to hear his outstanding exposition of the Scriptures.

In 1882, he was appointed a Professor of theology at Kampen, and taught there from 1883 until his appointment, in 1902, to the chair of systematic Theology in the Free University of Amsterdam, where he succeeded the great Abraham Kuyper, then recently appointed Prime Minister of the Netherlands. In this capacity — an appointment he had twice before declined — Bavinck served until his death in 1921.

F. The Development of the Doctrine of Predestination among the Reformed (continued): the Controversy in regard to Infra- and Supralapsarianism:

(1) This controversy is rooted in the struggle between Augustine and Pelagius. According to Pelagianism both original and actual sin (unbelief) logically precede election and reprobation; according to Augustine ONLY original sin precedes predestination. According to supra, predestination logically precedes not only actual but also original sin. Hence, Pelagianism: original sin, actual sin, predestination; Augustinianism or infralapsarianism: original sin, predestination, actual sin; supralapsarianism: predestination, original sin, actual sin.

(2) Many followers of Augustine accepted the doctrine of two-fold predestination: a predestination unto glory and a predestination unto death.

(3) The three Reformers: Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, arrived at the supralapsarian view: election and reprobation are deeds of God's sovereignty, logically preceding God's decree concerning the fall. Nevertheless, Calvin often follows the infralapsarian reasoning.

(4) For the order of the elements of the decree see III C.

(5) The Synod of Dort expressed itself in an infralapsarian manner but did not in any sense condemn supralapsarianism. It rejected Arminianism.
Among the Reformed another controversy soon arose, namely, in regard to supra- and infralapsarianism. This controversy is rooted in the struggle between Augustine and Pelagius. With the Pelagians the order in the elements of God's counsel was as follows:

1. A decree to create man.
2. A decree to send Christ in order to redeem fallen humanity, to cause him to die for all and to be proclaimed to all, and to grant to all "grace sufficient" unto salvation.
3. A decree determining the eternal salvation of some on the ground of foreseen faith, and the eternal punishment of others on the ground of foreseen unbelief.

A totally different order was presented by Augustine. At times he makes reprobation a part of predestination, but even then he views foreknowledge not as something negative and passive but as a divine activity. For, God's will is the "necessary ground of things"; what happens "contrary to his will does not defeat his will"; when God "permits" something, this permission is positive, efficacious. "Surely, he permits willingly, not unwillingly." The supralapsarian position, viz., that reprobation is an act of God's sovereignty, is already implied in this view. Usually, however, Augustine uses the words *divine foreknowledge* and *permission* when he speaks about the fall. Augustine has the following order:

1. A decree to create man and to permit him to fall.
2. A decree to elect some out of this corrupt mass unto eternal life, and to allow others to remain in the perdition wherein they have involved themselves. Accordingly, both election and reprobation presuppose a fallen humanity, a "corrupt mass." From this it appears that Augustine usually favors the infralapsarian representation; in his reasoning he does not go back beyond the fall; he views reprobation as an act of God's justice. "God is good, God is just. Because he is good, he is able to deliver some that are undeserving of salvation; because he is just, he is not able to condemn any one who is undeserving of condemnation."

Now, although Augustine does not view the decree of predestination as preceding both original and actual sin (the supra position), neither does he place the decree of election and reprobation after both of these (the Pelagian position). According to Augustine, *only* original sin logically precedes predestination. Moreover, he considers original sin to be a sufficient ground for reprobation. Actual sins are not taken into account in the decree of reprobation although they are considered in connection with the determination of the degree of punishment. Augustine derived this order in the elements of God's counsel from Rom. 9:11, 12 ("... for the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto her, `The elder shall serve the younger.' Even as it is written, `Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.'") and from the fate of children dying
in infancy unbaptized. Nevertheless, although original sin is a sufficient ground for reprobation, Augustine does not view it as the final and deepest ground. According to him God's sovereignty, as expressed in Rom. 9:18, (“So then, he hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth”) is the only answer to the question why God rejected some and chose others, particularly, why this person was rejected and that one elected.

3. Finally, a decree determining the means whereby the end in view will be realized.

Augustine does not directly deduce a decree establishing the means unto perdition from the decree of reprobation as such. He does teach that even in regard to sin God proceeds in an active and positive manner; God is the “Disposer of sins,” he deemed it right that there should be sin, he punishes sin with sin; but Augustine generally views reprobation negatively, i.e., as preterition or dereliction (passing by or abandonment), and he does not as a rule view it as part of predestination, but identifies the latter with election, and subsumes both election and reprobation under God's providence. On the other hand there is a predestination of the means unto salvation. With Augustine predestination or election is always a predestination unto grace. It implies foreordination unto grace. Accordingly, foreseen faith and good works are not the ground of election, neither is Christ the final ground. But election is foreordination unto the desired goal, hence, unto the means whereby this goal will be realized, i.e., unto Christ who was himself predestinated, and thus unto calling, baptism, faith, and the gift of perseverance; predestination is a preparation for grace. Accordingly, the elect, by way of grace in Christ, will surely obtain heavenly salvation. Therefore, in later years many followers of Augustine arrived at the doctrine of twofold predestination: a “predestination unto death” began to be coordinated with a “predestination unto glory.” Nevertheless, the former could not be construed in the same sense as the latter; hence, a distinction was made between a negative and a positive reprobation. The negative reprobation logically precedes the fall; it is an act of God's sovereignty; it does not depend upon foreseen demerits any more than election depends upon foreseen merits; it implies “the decree to permit certain individuals to fall into a state of guilt” and it is “the cause of dereliction.” Thus many Thomists, Alvarez, the Salmanticenses, Estius, Sylvius. etc., taught that negative reprobation precedes the fall and that it is purely an act of God's sovereignty and good pleasure. Nevertheless, this supralapsarian reprobation was viewed as wholly negative, i.e., as God's purpose not to elect certain individuals, to permit them to fall, and afterward to ordain them to everlasting punishment (positive reprobation). Essentially, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and all supralapsarian Reformed theologians never went beyond this point. They neither taught a “predestination unto sins” nor did they represent God as the author of sin, as is falsely charged by Roman Catholics, who advance this accusation against the Predestinationists of the fifth century, Gottschalk, Bradwardina, Wyclif, and especially against the Reformers. They do this merely in order to
justify their own Semi-Pelagian view, and to harmonize it with the teachings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Essentially the teaching of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in regard to predestination was accepted by the Reformers: the modifications introduced by them were slight and unessential, if we except the doctrine of assurance. The Reformers agreed with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas on many points; viz., they, too, believed that election is not conditioned upon foreseen merits, but that it is the source of faith and good works; that predestination unto glory always implies predestination unto grace; that negative reprobation is not to be explained as an act of God's justice but as an act of his sovereignty, and that it logically precedes sin; that this negative reprobation is followed by a decree to permit sin and to allow some to remain in their fallen state and that positive reprobation takes sin into account. To all this they added, however, that the concepts foreknowledge and permission, though not wrong in themselves, cannot and should not be interpreted in a merely passive sense; that even if they could be so construed, they would offer no real solution of the problem; and that the distinction between positive and negative reprobation has very little value. Thus, all three Reformers arrived at the so-called supralapsarian view of the doctrine of predestination, according to which both election and reprobation are to be viewed as acts of God's sovereignty, logically preceding God's decree concerning the fall, sin, and redemption through Christ. But it is especially Calvin who often purposely refuses to go beyond the secondary causes of salvation and perdition, and therefore often reasons in an infralapsarian manner. Let not the reprobate view God's decree as the cause of his perdition, but let him rather look upon his own corrupt nature with respect to which he himself is guilty. The elect and the reprobate were equally guilty but God is merciful toward the former, just toward the latter. In Romans 9:21 the "clay" indicates men in their fallen condition, of whom God elects some while he leaves others "in their own ruin, to which by nature all are exposed." The fall in Adam is the nearest cause of reprobation. God hates only sin in us. And of this representation: "that out of the race doomed in Adam God elected those whom he was pleased to elect, and reprobated those whom he willed to reprobate." Calvin says, "just as it is a great deal more suitable unto the cultivation of faith, so it is discussed with greater profit... is not only more conducive unto piety, but, it seems to me, more theological, more suitable to practical Christianity, and also more conducive unto edification." Nevertheless, this does not fully satisfy Calvin. Sin may be the proximate cause of perdition, it is, nevertheless, not the deepest cause. For the theory that God apart from any previous plan decided to create man, then sat down, as it were, in a watchtower to see what man would do, and having seen and foreseen this, only afterward proceeded to the act of election and reprobation, is altogether untenable. Foreknowledge and permission do not solve the problem. because God, foreseeing the fall, could have prevented it; accordingly, he voluntarily permitted the fall because it seemed good to him. Accordingly, the fall of Adam, sin in general, and all evil, were not only foreseen by God but in a certain sense were willed and determined by him. Accordingly,
there must have been a reason, unknown to us, why God willed the fall: there is "a deeper divine decree" logically preceding the fall. Hence, when Pighius answers Calvin by objecting that according to the latter's view there would have been in the divine mind a "distinction between elect and reprobate previous to the fall of man," Calvin indeed answers that Pighius fails to distinguish between "proximate and remote causes," that every reprobate must consider his own sin to be the direct cause of his perdition, and that the opposite view is handicapped with the same objections, he does not deny the validity of the conclusion drawn by Pighius: there is a "secret divine decree" antecedent the fall, The final and deepest cause of reprobation as well as of election is the will of God. Hence, with Calvin the supralapsarian and infralapsarian representation alternates. This is also true of most of the later theologians who embraced supralapsarianism. They regard the supralapsarian view to be admissible they do not think of condemning infralapsarianism or of demanding that their view be embodied in the official confession of the church as the only standard of truth. They do not ask that their own view he substituted for the infralapsarian representation but they plead for actual recognition of both views.

According to the supralapsarian view a divine knowledge of all possibilities precedes every decree, a "knowledge of simple intelligence." According to the rule "what is ultimate in execution is first in design," supra teaches the following order in the elements of God's counsel:

1. A decree determining the purpose for which God would create and govern all things, namely, the revelation of his virtues, esp. of his mercy and of his justice; respectively, in the eternal salvation of a definite number of men conceived as yet only as possibles, "creatable and fallible." and in the eternal punishment of another definite number. The manifestation of these virtues necessitated:

2. A second decree determining the existence of human beings who would be so wretched and pitiable that they would be fit objects of God's mercy and justice. The actual existence of such human beings necessitated:

3. A third decree to create a man adorned with the image of God to be the head of humanity, and "by an efficacious permission" to allow him to fall so that he would involve his entire posterity in that fall.

4. Finally, a decree to manifest God's mercy in the elect by providing a Mediator for them and by granting them the gifts of faith and perseverance, and to show God's justice in the reprobate by withholding saving grace from them and by giving them up unto sin.

In this order of the decrees election and reprobation precede not only faith and unbelief, regeneration and hardening, but also creation and the fall. However, one difficulty presents itself immediately: it was the established Reformed doctrine that the election of Christ and of the church are not to be separated and that both are included in one single decree that has as its object "the mystic Christ." But in the supralapsarian scheme the election of the church is separated
from the election of Christ by the two decrees of creation and the fall. Comrie, however, tried to overcome this objection by teaching that before the decree of creation and the fall the believers are chosen unto union with Christ. This union is so close and unbreakable that when those chosen fall, as is determined in a subsequent decree, Christ, who had been elected as Head, is now also chosen to be the Mediator of redemption. From this it is clear that Comrie understood that the election of the church as the body of Christ cannot be separated from the election of Christ as the Head of the Church. Accordingly, he placed the election of both before the decree of creation and the fall. However, in this manner not only men considered as mere possibilities but also a merely possible Christ was made the object of the decree of election.

The churches, however, always objected to this supralapsarian view. As a result, there is not a single Reformed confession that offers this representation. At the Synod of Dort there were a few adherents of this view, esp. Gomarus and Maccovius; moreover, the delegates of South Holland, Overisel, and Friesland preferred to leave the question undecided and to use an expression that would satisfy both parties. But although the “opinions” of the Dutch and of the foreign delegates, also of those from Geneva, were definitely Reformed in character, nevertheless, they were without exception infralapsarian and clothed in mild and moderate terms. And the Synod at length defined election as “the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, he hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude, into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to salvation in Christ, whom he from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation.” Nevertheless, the Synod purposely refused to condemn supralapsarianism; for, various theologians, among whom were Calvin, Beza, Piscator, Perkins, Hommins, Bogerman, etc., had at times used strong expression; e.g., “that some men are created in order that they may be damned; that men viewed as innocent are reprobated or damned; that God hates men irrespective of sin; that men were predestinated unto sin; that God has need of man as a sinner; that God willed and brought about the fact that men sinned; that God acted insincerely in the calling of certain persons,” etc. At the conference held in the Hague the Remonstrants had made ready use of these expressions and of the difference between infra- and supralapsarianism; consequently, the members of the synod were intent on avoiding such “phrases that were too harsh.” But when the delegates from England, Bremen, and Hesse insisted that these expressions be condemned, the Synod refused to grant this request. In defence of this refusal Synod stated that Scripture also uses very strong expressions at times, that such phrases may have a much milder meaning when examined in their context than they appear to have when considered apart from their context, and that the responsibility for them rests with the respective authors. In addition, Synod admonished against the use of immoderate phrases without mentioning any specifically and against “many other things of the same kind,” and at a later session administered a severe rebuke to Maccovius because
of the manner in which he had conducted himself. Accordingly, although the supralapsarian view was not embodied in the confession, neither was it condemned. The Westminster Assembly purposely refrained from attempting to decide this question and from siding with either the infra- or the supralapsarian party. For that reason many continued to favor supralapsarianism although the rights of infralapsarianism were at the same time recognized inasmuch as the latter view had been embodied in the confession of the churches, was zealously and ably defended by many theologians, and was usually placed in the foreground in the preaching of the Gospel.