

Topic 24. The Decree of God

“the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11)

Part 5: The Decree of God

Introduction to Part 5: Our epitomizing text features three crucial distinctions that categorize our thinking. First, it identifies God’s decree as an eternal determination his of will: “the counsel of his will.” Second, it depicts predestination as a specific aspect of God’s decree: “having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his will.” Third, it distinguishes the eternal formulation of God’s decree from its historical execution: “who works all things after the counsel of his will.” Thus, Scripture presents God’s will and decree in concentric circles. Predestination, God’s decree to save, is an aspect of God’s eternal determination, which is an act of God’s faculty of will. In accord with this testimony, I address God’s will and decree both in Theology and in Christology. Bavinck comments on this order of presentation:¹

Many theologians of the early period discussed election in connection with the doctrine of salvation instead of in connection with the doctrine of God. In this they followed the example of the apostle Paul who in Romans 9-11 begins with the doctrine of sin and grace and reasons back to election, and who in Eph.1:3 makes the blessings in Christ his point of departure...Whether predestination is made part of the doctrine of God (the a priori order) or is treated at the beginning or in the middle of the doctrine of salvation (the a posteriori order) does not necessarily imply an essential difference in principle. Nevertheless, it is a significant fact that the a priori order is usually followed by Reformed theologians; while Lutherans, Arminians, Roman Catholics and most of the more recent dogmaticians, have gradually begun to adopt the a posteriori order...the synthetic, a priori order is rooted in a deeply religious motive...in dogmatics we do not discuss truth as it subjectively enters the consciousness of the believer but as God has objectively revealed it in his word. The synthetic method alone is able to do justice to the glorification of God, as a religious interest.

In keeping with this religious interest to honor God’s Word, I expound the historical execution of God’s decree when we study his works of creation and salvation. I begin the Doctrine of Christ by expounding predestination, God’s decree to save. Now I expound God’s eternal decree. In Topic 14 I expounded God’s faculty of will. I defined God’s faculty of will as: “his faculty of self-determination, his supreme capacity to act intentionally (on purpose) and preferentially (as he pleases).” I introduced God’s decree as

¹ Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 358-359

the eternal act of his will: “by which, in its decretive function, he designed and determined in eternity, everything that happens in history.” Now I expound this idea.

Our text features the *essential nature* of God’s overall decree: “the purpose . . . the counsel.” It also intimates its *internal order*: “having been foreordained according to the purpose.” Finally, it commends its *practical application*: “the counsel of his will, to the end that we should be to the praise of his glory.” I expound God’s eternal decree accordingly.

Unit 1. The Essential Nature of God’s Decree

Scripture highlights the concept,² qualifications,³ and characteristics of God’s decree.⁴

I. The Concept of God’s Decree

God’s decree is: the eternal act of God’s will, in which, the triune God, emphatically the Father, solely out of his good pleasure, designed and determined in eternity everything that happens in history, unto the praise of his glory.

I now explain and support this definition. We consider its *author, cause, occasion, scope, and goal*.

A. The Author of God’s Decree: “the triune God, emphatically the Father”

The Triune God decreed to create. “Our Lord and our God” is the Father, Son, and Spirit.⁵ Scripture declares repeatedly in the plainest terms that God the Father especially decreed salvation.⁶ The Father decreed the redemptive mission of Christ⁷ and the salvation of his elect in Christ.⁸

² Job 23:13-14; Ps. 135:6; Acts 13:48, 17:26; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3-5, 11, 3:10, 11; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 2:8-9; Rev. 4:11

³ Gen. 50:20; Prov. 16:33; Isa. 10:5-7; Acts 2:23, 4:28; Rom. 9:19-20

⁴ Isa. 14:24, 27, 46:9-10; Rom. 9:19

⁵ Rev. 4:11: Worthy you are, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for you did create all things, and because of your will they were, and were created

⁶ Rom. 8:29: whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son. 1 Thess. 5:9: for God appointed us not to wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ

⁷ Acts 4:27-28: against your holy Servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever your hand and your counsel foreordained to come to pass

⁸ Eph. 1:3-5: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world . . . having foreordained us unto adoption as sons . . . according to the good pleasure of his will. 2 Tim. 1:9: who saved us and called us . . . according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal

B. The Cause of God's Decree: "solely out of his good pleasure"

The Bible says simply that God's decree rests in "the good pleasure of His will."⁹ In Topic 14 we studied this passage in detail. God decided to create and save, without external constraint, only because he wanted to do so. God ordered all of history as seemed good to him,¹⁰ in accord with his good pleasure.¹¹ He even ordered the sufferings of his saints as it pleased him.¹²

C. The Occasion of God's Decree: "in eternity"

Scripture asserts, explicitly¹³ and by necessary implication,¹⁴ that God's decree is eternal. He decided to create and save before the foundation of the world.

D. The Scope of God's Decree: "everything that happens in history"

In its scope God's decree includes "all things" (Eph. 1:11). Scripture emphatically affirms its universal extent. God's decree includes: creation,¹⁵ all "random" events,¹⁶ all the inter-workings of the universe,¹⁷ every event in the history of every nation,¹⁸ every event in each man's life,¹⁹ every sin of every creature,²⁰ every event in every church in every generation,²¹ the

⁹ Eph. 1:5, 11

¹⁰ *Ps. 135:6*: Whatsoever Jehovah pleased, that has he done, in heaven and earth, in the seas and in all the deeps

¹¹ *Isa. 46:9-10*: I am God, and there is none like me; declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done; saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure

¹² *Job 23:13-14*: But he is of one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desires, even that he does. For he performs that which is appointed for me: and many such things are with him. Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am afraid of him

¹³ Eph. 1:3-4, 3:10-11; 2 Tim. 1:9

¹⁴ Rev. 4:11

¹⁵ Rev. 4:11

¹⁶ *Prov. 16:33*: The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of Jehovah

¹⁷ *Ps. 135:6*: Whatsoever Jehovah pleased, that has he done, in heaven and earth, in the seas and in all the deeps

¹⁸ *Acts 17:26*: having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitations

¹⁹ *Job 23:13-14*

²⁰ *Acts 4:27-28*: against your holy Servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever your hand and your counsel foreordained to come to pass

²¹ *Eph. 3:10-11*: might be made manifest through the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Jesus Christ our Lord

salvation of every elect saint,²² and the damnation of every reprobate sinner.²³ No wonder Paul exclaims: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out . . . For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things” (Rom. 11:33-36).

E. The Goal of God’s Decree: “unto the praise of his glory”

God’s decree aims to achieve “the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph. 1:6). Here is the ultimate end of God’s eternal counsel: “To whom be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36). God, from all eternity, ordained creation, fall, and redemption for his own glory. God uses everything to honor and glorify his name. When men design evil, he employs their evil designs for good, to the praise of his glorious wisdom, goodness, grace, and justice.²⁴ In the final analysis, even sin does not overthrow God’s design to magnify his name. God even ordained sin to display his glory in salvation and in damnation.

II. Qualifications of God’s Decree

The 1689 London Confession affirms the biblical concept of God’s decree:

LCF 3:1: God has decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass:

It then adds qualifying remarks that highlight three striking corollaries or qualifications of God’s decree:

LCF 3:1: . . . yet so as thereby God is neither the author of sin, nor has any fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

They observe that God’s decree is consistent with divine purity, moral free agency, and with instrumental liberty and contingency. We now consider these qualifications.

A. God’s Decree does not Contradict God’s Impeccability.

LCF affirms this qualification: “yet so as thereby God is neither the author of sin nor has any fellowship therein.” God’s decree of sin does not make him its author. Nor does it erase human responsibility and culpability for

²² *Acts 13:48:* and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed

²³ *1 Pet. 2:8-9:* for they stumble at the word, being disobedient; whereunto they were also appointed. But you are an elect race

²⁴ *Gen. 50:20; Isa. 10:5-7; Acts 2:23, 4:28*

sin.²⁵ Sinners purpose and perpetrate evil: “you meant evil against me.” God purposes to use human evil for good: “but God meant it for good.”²⁶ Sinners are exclusively to blame for sin. The holy God has neither fellowship with sin nor culpability for it. Rather, he hates and forbids it. Sin is transgression of his law, his revealed will. In Topic 14 I addressed the incomprehensible mystery associated with God’s sovereignty over sin.²⁷

B. God’s Decree does not Contradict Moral Free Agency.

The 1689 Confession also affirms this qualification: “nor is violence offered to the will of the creature.” Man is not a puppet: “howbeit he means not so.”²⁸ God’s decree does not cancel man’s purposes, even his wicked ones. Rather, it uses them in ways man knows not. God does not force the Assyrian against his will to be the rod of his anger. The Assyrian has no intention whatsoever of serving God. The Assyrian freely pursues his own purposes and plans. Yet God before the foundation of the world determined and fixed these free choices of the Assyrian for his own holy and just ends. Such is the wisdom and power of the incomprehensible God with whom we have to do.

C. God’s Decree does not Contradict Instrumental Liberty or Contingency.

The 1689 Confession also affirms this qualification: “nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” God’s decree is not fatalistic. The God who ordains the ends, also ordains the means. Thus Paul says: “except these abide in the ship you cannot be saved.” (Acts 27:31). God decreed their deliverance but they still must remain in the ship. Further, God even decreed what appear to us as random events.²⁹ God controls chance, what people call “luck.” Again, who can begin to fathom the depths of the wisdom and power of God? Thus, LCF concludes: “in which appears his wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing his decree.”

²⁵ Acts 2:23: him, being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, you by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay

²⁶ Gen. 50:20: you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive

²⁷ Rom. 9:19-20: You will then say unto me, Why does he yet find fault? For who withstands his will? Nay but, O man, who are you that replies against God?

²⁸ Isa. 10:5-7: Ho Assyrian, the rod of mine anger . . . I will send him against a profane nation . . . Howbeit he means not so, neither does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy

²⁹ Prov. 16:33: The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of Jehovah

III. Characteristics of God's Decree

God's decree has the stamp of his supremacy, especially, of his supreme power, virtue, and wisdom. It is unconditional, immutable, effectual, ideal, and incomprehensible.

A. God's Decree is Unconditional.

God's decree must be unconditional because he is self-existent. He decided as he did only because it pleased him: "*whatsoever Jehovah pleased, that has he done.*"³⁰ God declares the future before it happens because God in his good pleasure ordained the future.³¹ Jesus confirms that God's decree is unconditional. He affirms that God destroyed Sodom even though he foresaw that they would have repented at Christ's mighty works.³² Paul affirms explicitly that God ordained our adoption, not according to our works or merit, but because it pleased him.³³ The London Confession stresses this remarkable trait of God's decree:

LCF 3:2: Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions, yet he has not decreed anything, because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions"

The Confession stresses this truth to honor God's sovereignty in the salvation and damnation of sinners. We study reprobation and election in the Doctrine of Christ. We show that God determined to save some sinners and damn others, all equally condemned in Adam and justly deserving hell, solely because of his just good pleasure. We prove he decided to save unconditionally, not because he foresaw that some would cooperate with moral ability he supposedly give equally to all. Some may not find this distinctive of God's decree to their liking. Nevertheless, we must please God rather than men.

³⁰ *Ps. 135:6*: Whatsoever Jehovah pleased, that has he done, in heaven and earth, in the seas and in all the deeps.

³¹ *Isa. 46:9-10*: I am God, and there is none like me; declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done; saying: My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure

³² *Matt. 11:21, 23*: if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which were done in you, they would have repented . . . if the mighty works had been done in Sodom which were done in you, it would have remained until this day

³³ *Eph. 1:5*: having foreordained us unto adoption as sons . . . according to the good pleasure of his will.

*B. God's Decree is Immutable and Irreversible.*³⁴

Whatever God decided in eternity is fixed, certain, and irreversible, because God is unchangeable. I established this characteristic of God's decree when we expounded God's immutability in Topic 10.

C. God's Decree is Effectual and Invincible.

God's eternal decree is his blueprint for history. History unfolds exactly as he designed it. Nothing is lacking, nothing out of sequence, nothing added which he failed to plan. He never alters his "blueprint" for reality during the "construction phase." Thus, no man or devil can reverse God's eternal decision, or annul it,³⁵ or withstand it,³⁶ or prevent it, or overcome it. Everything God decided in eternity happens in history, exactly when God decided it would happen, and precisely how God decided it would happen.³⁷ Thus, his decree is both effectual and invincible. Yet, God's decree is not itself history. Creation, the fall, and salvation do not happen in eternity. They happen when God executes and implements the eternal plan that his will devised and resolved.³⁸

D. God's Decree is Ideal and Immaculate.

God's decree, designed by his infinite wisdom and virtue, cannot be improved. It is infinitely perfect. Thus, when the apostles contemplate God's decree in general,³⁹ and his decision to create⁴⁰ and to save⁴¹ in

³⁴ *Job 23:13-14:* But he is of one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desires, even that he does. For he performs that which is appointed for me: and many such things are with him. Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am afraid of him.

³⁵ *Isa. 14:24, 27:* Jehovah of hosts has sworn saying, Surely, as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand . . . For Jehovah of hosts has purposed, and who shall annul it?

³⁶ *Rom. 9:19-20:* You will then say unto me, Why does he yet find fault? For who withstands his will? Nay but, O man, who are you that replies against God?

³⁷ *Isa. 46:9-10*

³⁸ *Eph. 1:11*

³⁹ *Rom. 11:36:* For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To whom be the glory forever. Amen

⁴⁰ *Rev. 4:11:* Worthy you are, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for you did create all things, and because of your will they were, and were created.

⁴¹ *Eph. 1:3-5, 11:* Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world

particular, they praise and bless his name. They extol its manifold display of his wisdom,⁴² grace,⁴³ justice,⁴⁴ and glory.⁴⁵

*E. God's Decree is Incomprehensible.*⁴⁶

Who can fathom these things? God's decree leaves us gazing spellbound into the infinite expanse of divine wisdom. Thus, as we take up the internal order of decrees, remember that our finite minds cannot effectually restrain God's decree with the straightjacket of our logical schemes.

Unit 2. The Internal Order of God's Decree: *Its Unity and Diversity*

God's decree is one, indivisible. Paul speaks of God's plan as a unit, as single, all-embracing purpose, "*the counsel* of his will." All reality—everything that is, and all history—everything that happens, flow from one plan of God: "who works *all things after the counsel.*" God's plan is indivisible. Nevertheless, it has various aspects. God, in his infinite wisdom weaves diverse decrees, each interdependent and coordinate, into one cohesive whole, his eternal decree. For example, God does not have the same relation to creation that he has to sin. Creation is God's work, inherently good; sin is man's work, inherently evil, which God hates and forbids. Thus, his eternal decision respecting creation differs from his eternal decision respecting sin. Nor does he have the same relationship to salvation that he has to damnation. He delights when sinners repent, but has no pleasure in the death and damnation of the wicked: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). Thus, election, his eternal decision respecting salvation, differs from reprobation, his eternal decision respecting damnation. God's decisions respecting sin and damnation involve tension, a seeming contradiction with God's revealed will. In this respect, they differ from his decree to create and to save. Thus, God's eternal decree displays both unity and diversity. Further, this unity and diversity raise the issue of priority. With what logical order or priority does God formulate his decree? To answer this question, some look at the end of all things. They behold eternal salvation and punishment. Then, they reason that since God plans the end from the beginning, the priority must lie with his decision respecting salvation and damnation. Others, however, look at the unfolding of all

⁴² Rom. 11:33-36; Eph. 3:10-11

⁴³ Eph. 1:5-6, 9-11; 2 Tim. 1:9

⁴⁴ 1 Pet. 2:9

⁴⁵ Eph. 1:12

⁴⁶ *Rom. 11:33, 36:* O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out . . . For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To whom be the glory forever. Amen.

things. Then they reason that since God does in history exactly what he plans in eternity, the priority must lie with creation, since it begins the execution of God's decree. Thus, we consider first, *two major views* of its internal order, then, second, the *biblical concept* of its internal order.

I. The Two Major Views of the Internal Order of God's Decree

One major view of God's eternal plan assigns logical priority to God's decision respecting creation; the other assigns it to his decision respecting salvation and damnation. Their respective names come from the way they relate God's decision to save to his decision respecting the fall into sin. The view that assigns priority to God's decision to save is called "supralapsarian," since his decision to save has logical priority over, stands above [supra], his decision respecting the fall [lapse] of man. The view that assigns logical priority to creation is called, "infralapsarian," since his decision to save does not have logical priority over, but stands below [infra], his decision respecting the fall of man.

A. The Supralapsarian View

We take up their proposed order of decrees, stated concerns, and dangerous tendencies.

1. Proposed supralapsarian order of decrees

- (1) A decree of God's glory in the final salvation and eternal damnation of possible men
- (2) A decree to create these possible men thus elected and reprobated
- (3) A decree to permit them to fall in Adam

Or, as an alternative order:

- (1) A decree of God's glory in the final salvation and eternal damnation of possible men
- (2) A decree to permit the fall of these possible men
- (3) A decree to create them

In both cases God's decree of salvation and damnation logically precedes his decree of creation and the fall. The alternate order merely stresses that what is last in execution is first in design.

2. Stated supralapsarian concerns

First, they desire to uphold God's absolute sovereignty in salvation. They assert that sin is not the *ultimate cause* of God's decision to damn some sinners. Sin alone does not explain this decision because those God decides to save were equally sinful and hell-deserving. Indeed, Scripture affirms

God's sovereignty in his eternal decision regarding damnation.⁴⁷ Second, they desire to make no excuses for God. Our supralapsarian brothers adamantly oppose the bashful spirit that drives many to dilute God's truth. Quite properly, they reject any notion that God must justify himself in men's eyes. They assert with unmistakable clarity that God is not accountable to men, but vice versa. Again, this concern is biblical.⁴⁸ Third, they desire to honor the unity and indivisibility of God's eternal decree. It's unity resides in the fact that God's glory is the grand end of everything he decrees. Thus, they feature the truth that God uses everything, even sin, to bring glory to himself.⁴⁹

3. *Dangerous supralapsarian tendencies*

First, they tend to minimize the inherent value and glory of creation. They seldom regard creation as worthwhile, with significance in and of itself. They tend to speak and live as though creation's chief worth is that it occasions the fall. This tends to foster a negative attitude toward culture, education, politics, sports, and all else associated with creation. *Second*, they tend to minimize or deny common grace. They tend to deny any genuine kindness or goodwill in God's heart toward those who perish in hell. Looking exclusively at the end, they oft acknowledge only justice and wrath, and deny any "well-meant" offer of pardon to the reprobate. Valuing human logic too highly, they try to explain away texts like Ezekiel 33:11, rather than submit to them. Thus, sadly, this view often fosters a harsh disposition towards lost sinners. *Third*, they tend to hold the error of eternal justification, that Christians were justified in eternity, not when we believe.⁵⁰ But Christian salvation is a transition from wrath to grace. When he saved us we were condemned in Adam and dead in sins, children of wrath even as the rest. What happens in history is precisely what God decided in eternity. Thus, God decided in eternity to emancipate us from our sin. He viewed us as fallen, under wrath, when he decided to save us. This truth is hard to harmonize with their order of decrees. How did God decide to save "someone" he had not yet decided to create from "something" he had not yet decided would happen? *Fourth*, they tend to stress the unity of the decree to such an extent that they deny its diversity. Thus, they tend to minimize the disruptive nature of sin. Sin is totally evil, not inherently God-honoring. God uses it for his glory in spite of itself. They typically fail to admit the tension associated with God's decrees respecting sin and damnation. Thus,

⁴⁷ Matt. 11:25-27; 1 Thess. 5:9; 1 Pet. 2:9

⁴⁸ Rom. 9:19-20

⁴⁹ Gen. 50:20; Eph. 1:12

⁵⁰ Rom. 5:1

they tend to force an exact parallel between reprobation and election. These four errors almost always infect those who espouse this scheme. These errors result when men try to impose one-dimensional human logic on God's decree. They skate on thin ice because they exclude God's historical order of implementation from their scheme of logic.

B. The Infralapsarian View

1. Infralapsarian order of decrees

- (1) A decree to create
- (2) A decree to permit the fall.
- (3) A decree of God's glory in the final salvation of some sinners and eternal damnation of others

2. Stated infralapsarian concerns

First, they desire to honor the fact that Scripture always presents salvation as deliverance from sin and wrath.⁵¹ *Second*, they desire to honor the fact that Scripture connects salvation from sin with the indiscriminate offer of the gospel to sinners.⁵²

3. Infralapsarian dangers

The infralapsarian view has two great strengths: it neither claims to resolve the seeming contradictions associated with God's decree, nor fails to recognize the logic of its historical sequence of execution. This does not mean that it is free of all danger. *First*, it faces the danger of obscuring the unity of God's decree. We must indeed call sin evil and disruptive, but not at the expense of the indivisibility of God's decree. *Second*, it faces the danger of obscuring the primacy of salvation. This view can encourage preoccupation with this life and a practical denial of the priority of spiritual things.⁵³ Since Adam himself was a type of Christ, this creation should never be our ultimate focus or priority. *Third*, it faces the danger of downplaying God's absolute sovereignty over sin and damnation. We must never act as if God is accountable to men. Truly, God's decision of reprobation expresses his justice. Yet, its determining cause is his sovereignty, not his justice. He satisfies the demands of justice both toward the saved and the damned.

In sum, both views have valid concerns and face dangers. Accordingly, Bavinck observes:⁵⁴

⁵¹ Eph. 2:1-3

⁵² Matt. 11:28-30; 2 Thess. 2:13-15

⁵³ Matt. 6:33; Rom. 5:14; Eph. 5:22-31

⁵⁴ Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 386-387

the fact that each of the two views leans for support on a certain group of texts without doing full justice to a different group indicates the one-sided character of both theories. Though infralapsarianism deserves praise because of its modesty- it abides by the historical, causal order- and though it *seems* to be less offensive and though it shows greater consideration for the demands of practical life, it fails to give satisfaction... Reprobation can not be explained as an act of justice, for the first sinful deed was permitted by God's sovereignty. Reasoning backward, infralapsarianism finally arrives at the position of supralapsarianism.... supralapsarianism undoubtedly has in its favor the fact that it refrains from every attempt to justify God, and that both with respect to reprobation and with respect to election it rests in God's sovereign, incomprehensible, and yet wise and holy good pleasure.

II. The Biblical Concept of the Internal Order of God's Decree

We *survey* the biblical evidence and *summarize* the biblical teaching.

A. A Survey of the Biblical Evidence

We consider biblical testimony that supports the concerns of both perspectives.

1. Biblical evidence for an infralapsarian perspective

This evidence rests on the fact that what happens in history is precisely what God planned in eternity. In history Christ chooses his people out of the world.⁵⁵ In history Christ dies for the ungodly.⁵⁶ In history God loves children of wrath by nature and imparts spiritual life to dead sinners.⁵⁷ In history God justifies the ungodly by means of their faith.⁵⁸ Thus, in eternity this is exactly what God decided to do. He decided to choose his people out of the fallen world. He decided to send Christ to die for sinners. He decided to love sinners under his wrath and to make dead sinners alive in Christ. He

⁵⁵ *John 15:19*: because you are not to the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you

⁵⁶ *Rom. 5:6, 8*: While we were yet weak, in due season Christ died for the ungodly . . . But God commends his own love for us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us

⁵⁷ *Eph. 2:3-5*: and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest:- But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead, made us alive together with Christ

⁵⁸ *Rom. 4:5*: to him that works not, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness

decided to justify the ungodly by means of their faith in Christ.⁵⁹ Thus, God had already decided to create and to allow the fall when he decided to save. This demonstrates that his decisions respecting creation and the fall are logically prior to his decisions respecting salvation and damnation.

2. *Biblical evidence for a supralapsarian perspective*

In history God brings the wicked into the world with the intent to bring evil upon them.⁶⁰ In history God uses evil as his means to achieve his purpose to preserve human life.⁶¹ In history he uses wicked people to judge other sinners.⁶² In history he uses the sins of wicked men to save his people from their sins through the death of Christ.⁶³ In history God hardens some sinners and shows mercy to others as it pleases him.⁶⁴ Thus, in eternity God decided to use sin to accomplish his purposes of grace and salvation. Thus, in eternity he decided to show mercy to sinners according to his sovereign good pleasure.⁶⁵ Therefore, the *ultimate cause* of salvation and damnation is God's sovereignty, not his justice. This evidence clearly supports the major supralapsarian concerns. Adam's creation provides even more compelling testimony. In history, God creates Adam as a type of Christ, so that Adam's headship typifies Christ's even before the fall.⁶⁶ Thus, in eternity, when God decided to create Adam, he decided to create him as a picture of Christ. Thus, God viewed the coming of Christ as absolutely certain when he decided to create Adam. Thus, God's decision to send Christ to save sinners is logically prior to his decision to create Adam. It is hard to harmonize this fact of revelation with infralapsarian logic. Shall infralapsarians resort to a "potentially send-able Christ" after whom Adam was created? I hope not. Rather, I hope we all abandon any effort to strap God's eternal decree with a one-dimensional scheme of human logic.

⁵⁹ *2 Tim. 1:9*: who saved us and called us . . . according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal.

⁶⁰ *Prov. 16:4*: Jehovah has made everything for its own end; even the wicked for the day of evil

⁶¹ *Gen. 50:20*: you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive

⁶² *Isa. 10:5-7*: Ho Assyrian, the rod of mine anger . . . I will send him against a profane nation . . . Howbeit he means not so, neither does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy

⁶³ *Acts 4:27-28*: against your holy Servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever your hand and your counsel foreordained to come to pass

⁶⁴ *Rom. 9:18*: he has mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardens

⁶⁵ *Rom. 9:11-12*: the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand

⁶⁶ *Rom. 5:14*: Adam's transgression, who is a type of him that was to come

B. A Summary of the Biblical Teaching

Bavinck correctly asserts that each view is inadequate alone. Each view has noble concerns and compelling evidence. Both grasp and articulate an aspect of the truth to which they tenaciously cling. Supralapsarians will never relinquish the truth that God viewed salvation in Christ as certain when he decided to create. As long as Romans 5:14 remains in Scripture, no argument will drive them from it. Infralapsarians will never relinquish the truth that God viewed condemnation in Adam as certain when he determined to save his people in Christ. As long as Ephesians 2:3 remains in the Bible, no argument will drive them from it. Yet each view galvanizes its own insight and rejects the other's. When we accept as valid the insights of both, we reach the biblical mystery of the internal order in God's decree. Every aspect of God's decree is coordinate, coincident, reciprocal, and correlative. No aspect has exclusive logical priority. Each presupposes the other. His decision to create presupposes his decision to save; and vice versa.⁶⁷ Salvation in Christ is God's ultimate; yet, creation has value in its own right. Salvation cancels, not creation's significance, but sin's influence. What God designs in eternity, he does in history. The historical sequence of execution—creation, fall, salvation—deserves the preeminence. We must emphasize this more friendly face of God's decree, but never deny its more solemn face. I hope this preserves you from the pitfalls of each view when it stands alone. Some may wonder what to call my position. You can call me an *infra-supralapsarian*.

Unit 3. The Practical Application of God's Decree

I summarized practical applications of God's decretive will in Topic 14. I listed warnings, comforts, and duties. I entreat you to return there and consider them again. I now apply only the internal order of God's decree. We should never overestimate human logic or impose one logical scheme on God's decree. We must not assign exclusive logical priority either to creation or salvation, for that will adversely influence our sense of priorities. At times we face difficult decisions, such as the relative priority of work or evangelism, or of our role in church or civil affairs, or of our loyalty to church members or family members. Sometimes men, influenced by a supralapsarian view, neglect their families thinking that "doing the Lord's work" of preaching is all that matters. Others, influenced by an infralapsarian view, pay little attention to spiritual things, thinking that the "creation mandate" to pursue an education, career, family, sports, music, social issues, and political concerns is all that matters. Let us avoid such

⁶⁷ Rom. 5:14; Eph. 2:3-5

extremes. Let us embrace in faith all he reveals about his incomprehensible decree.