

THE “REFORMED” ROAD
AND
THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF
SUPRALAPSARIANISM
FOR
CALVINISM

How far have you gone down the “Reformed” road? How far are you willing to go? It is no secret that I believe that Calvinism (in all forms) is unbiblical. And while I admit to having read the writing of a great many different kinds of Calvinists (who hold to very different and sometimes conflicting views concerning what Calvin meant by what Calvin said) I have tried to form my opinion of Calvinism (to the best of my ability) from Calvin Himself. It may be a fault with me, but I believe he deserves at least that much respect from those who claim to represent what he taught to others.

Those who seriously and substantially disagree with Calvin (as I do) should be at least as careful to fairly and accurately represent him as those who (generally speaking) believe he got it right on the big issues. The more I read Calvin and consider what is both explicit and implicit in what he said, the more I have come to believe that there are very few real hyper-Calvinists running around. Instead I have found that there is an over-abundance of hypo-Calvinists, especially among those who dominate “Reformed” websites. Almost all of the widely recognized leaders among those who consider themselves Calvinists are hypo-Calvinists.

While labels like these are subject to differing definitions (and used as pejoratives by opposing Calvinist camps) I will define a hypo-Calvinist as someone who does not go (logically and theologically speaking) all the way (theologically and logically) with Calvin. Surely, such people who claim to be Calvinists do exist in large numbers. In contrast, a hyper-Calvinist is, by definition, one who goes beyond where Calvin will take you if you travel with him all the way down the Reformed road. While I am not saying that there are no individuals claiming to be “Reformed” that go beyond Calvin, I must confess I have never met one. That may

just indicate that I do not get out enough or that there are not that many of them around.

It would be very difficult for me (with a straight face) to deny that most Calvinists are hypo-Calvinists. That is because the vast majority of those who call themselves Calvinists or even “mainstream Calvinists” do in fact stop short (often far short) of what Calvin explicitly taught and clearly implied in what he taught. This is especially evident to me when I quote Calvin (as I often do) and my Calvinists friends say something like, “Calvin never said that or that is not what Calvin meant by what he said”. This is despite the fact that Calvin was very careful and clear in telling others what he had in his mind when taught this or that doctrine.

What is called “mainstream Calvinism” or “popular Calvinism” and sometimes even “orthodox” or “historic” Calvinism is really “Calvinism-Lite”. I am not talking about confused Arminians (who for whatever difficult to imagine reason) think they are Calvinists. I am referring to five point Calvinists. I am not even referring to those who hold to one or more of the five points of Calvinism but illogically deny one or more points of the so-called doctrines of Grace. Rather, I am speaking about the Calvinism of John MacArthur Jr., R.C. Sproul Sr., J.I. Packer, John Piper and even Lorraine Boettner. Admittedly some popular Calvinists are “softer” than others. Some Calvinists seemed to be trying to hide their Calvinism or those features of Calvinism that seem harsh and really hard to accept. Some Calvinists (such as James White) seem to be in transition from a softer version to a harder version of Calvinism.

Nevertheless, much of what passes for mainstream Calvinism or the Calvinism of Calvin would undoubtedly be considered “wimpy” by Calvin himself. The Calvinism that is more consistent with Calvin (or the Calvinism taught and implied in what Calvin taught) is frequently mislabeled hyper-Calvinism. What hypo-Calvinists refer to as “extreme Calvinism” would more accurately be described as “consistent Calvinism. Most of what passes for “Compatibilism” would not be compatible with Calvin, though many try and make it seem as though it is.

It is widely accepted (by infralapsarian Calvinists who know the difference between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism) that Calvin was a Supralapsarian. So why do the Infralapsarians refer to themselves as “orthodox” Calvinists? Why do they label the Supralapsarian Calvinists as “extreme Calvinists”, “unorthodox Calvinists”, or even “sub-Calvinists”?

While I find the more muscular version of Calvinism more unscriptural than what I see in the more anemic version, I am convinced that the Calvinism of Vincent Cheung is much closer to the Calvinism of Calvin than the watered down version of Francis Chan. So why are infralapsarians in the majority and Supralapsarians in the minority in the greater “Reformed” community of believers? There are probably several answers to that question that go beyond the scope of this brief article. While R.C. Sproul Jr. may have moved away from infralapsarianism (see *Almighty Over All*) and toward or into supralapsarianism, Vincent Cheung is probably the Supralapsarian to be reckoned with today. He is certainly among the most consistent of Calvinists I have read. He is not only willing to go all the way down the “Reformed” road but insists that all Calvinists should be doing so.

Yes, there is a theologically “Reformed” road and if you travel it all the way, you will be parked much closer to Vincent Cheung than Francis Chan. While I seriously doubt that anything I could say about Vincent Cheung would be considered a compliment (by him) I do appreciate his willingness (or insistence) on laying everything out on the table for thoughtful people to see. I even suspect that if Cheung (and those who generally agree with him) ever win the day and become the dominant Calvinist camp, the debate between Calvinists and non-Calvinists would become much more Bible centered. As it is, some Calvinists have so qualified their views (which often conceals as much as it reveals about what a particular Calvinist believes) that the focus is not as much on “is Calvinism true or not true according to Scripture” but what does a particular Calvinist mean when he says he believes this or that point.

Today we can even find some Calvinist trying to make it seem as though you can bridge the gap between limited atonement and unlimited atonement but something they call “unlimited limited atonement”. Please! If you allow them to explain what they mean by an “unlimited limited atonement” it is the same as what most Calvinists would just call limited atonement and for good reason. While in my own attempts to represent and understand Calvin and Calvinism, the more I quote and rely upon Calvin (at length and in context) the more I hear “That is not Calvinism. That is hyper-Calvinism.”

Speaking only of the soteriological issues at stake, as a true outsider to Reformed theology, I would personally like to see R.C. Sproul Sr. (a champion of infralapsarianism) and Vincent Cheung (a champion of supralapsarianism) engage in a few very public debates for at least the greater Reformed public. If this were to happen, I am convinced that many Calvinists would become the more “Informed-Reformed”. While I have a great deal of respect for the ability of R. C. Sproul Sr., I

would put my money on Vincent Cheung (if I were a betting man) on who would win and who would lose if the issue was on who really represents the Calvinism of Calvin.

To Cheung, the infralapsarian betrays spiritual, theological, and logical immaturity at best. As a version of Reformed theology, infralapsarians are (in the mind of Cheung) even guilty of various kinds of blasphemy because of their association with this view. Cheung explains that:

“... God created the elect and the reprobates because he willed to manifest himself and to be glorified through them. Although the reprobates do not consciously glorify God, he glorifies himself through them by what he causes them to do and what he does with them. He is glorified by the elect in their salvation and by the reprobates in their damnation.

“The nature of purpose and design necessitates a supralapsarian scheme of the eternal decrees, in which the decree of election and reprobation appears before the decree for the fall of humanity, and in which the decree for the fall of humanity appears before the decree for the creation of humanity...the supralapsarian would say that God decrees the fall of humanity so that he would accomplish the decree of reprobation.

“Supralapsarianism is the biblical and rational order... Thus infralapsarianism is blasphemous by implication, since it insults God’s intelligence and denies his rationality.

“Infralapsarians retort that supralapsarianism undermines God’s justice, but to assert this they smuggle in a private and unbiblical standard of justice, one that rejects God’s absolute sovereignty and violates strict logical inference, and then evaluate the eternal decrees by it. Their attempt to defend God’s subservience to a human standard of justice turns out to be a subversion against his sovereign and divine justice, and a denial of even a simple ability for logical planning and arrangement in the mind of God. Hence their objection commits another act of blasphemy.

“Louis Berkhof [an infralapsarian], in explaining some of the objections against supralapsarianism, writes, “Notwithstanding its seeming pretensions, it does not give a solution of the problem of sin. It would do this, if it dared to say that God decreed to bring sin into the world by His own direct efficiency.” But I dare say this. In fact, I dare not deny it, because if I do, I would be saying that some other power has the ability to generate and control sin by its own “direct efficiency.”

Handing over divine power to humans and demons, this is the blasphemy of dualism.

“Berkhof continues, “Some Supralapsarians, it is true, do represent the decree as the efficient cause of sin, but yet do not want this to be interpreted in such a way that God becomes the author of sin.” But I do affirm that God is the sovereign and righteous author of sin, for the same reason that I just stated. To deny that God is the author of sin necessarily implies some form of dualism, and this amounts to a rejection of biblical theism. The result, again, is blasphemy.

“But Berkhof persists: “It is pointed out that the supralapsarian scheme is illogical in that it makes the decree of election and preterition refer to non-entities, that is, to men who do not exist, except as bare possibilities, even in the mind of God; who do not yet exist in the divine decree and are therefore not contemplated as created, but only as creatable.” This is a perplexingly stupid objection. Infralapsarianism confuses the order of purpose and design with the order of execution. It complains that in supralapsarianism, God decrees the identities of the reprobates without a view to their sinfulness. However, the Bible explicitly asserts this view, that reprobation is unconditional, and that God created some people for salvation and all others for damnation “out of the same lump” (Romans 9:21). The reprobates did not create themselves; God created them, and created them as reprobates.

“Infralapsarians hides behind their human standard of justice, that God must designate as reprobates only those who are already guilty, but is it better for God to decree that all of humanity should fall into sin without any reason for it and without any thought of redemption? On the other hand, although supralapsarians would say that God could indeed decree the fall of humanity just because he wishes it, in their scheme, God decrees the fall of humanity so that there would be sinners for him to save and to damn.

“The major objection against the supralapsarian scheme amounts to an opposition to the idea that God could designate the identities of the reprobates before he decrees their fall into sin. In supralapsarianism, God first decrees that there would be reprobates, and then he decrees the fall so that these reprobates could materialize. Again, the objection is against unconditional reprobation. To put it another way, the objection is against God’s absolute sovereignty, or the fact that God is God.

“Then, the objection against unconditional reprobation is that it is unjust – that is, not according to any standard stated in Scripture, but according to man’s sinful

intuition. He is uncomfortable with the idea! In any case, by the time God executes punishment upon the reprobates, they have already fallen into sin, so that God does not in fact punish anyone who is sinless and innocent, that is, except when he caused the suffering of Christ. Even then, the punishment inflicted was just in God's mind because Christ was bearing the guilt of the chosen ones (Isaiah 53:10).

“Again, the objection against supralapsarianism really amounts to a denial that God is God, and that he is not a man or a mere creature. Some people say they believe in God, but they do not in fact believe. This is a major culprit behind false theological systems such as Liberalism, Arminianism, and inconsistent Calvinism. There is in fact no biblical or rational objection against supralapsarianism. People simply do not wish to allow God total sovereignty over his own creation. Once we abandon false and man-centered assumptions, the offense of absolute divine sovereignty vanishes. Whether we will abandon these assumptions is another question. The work of the Spirit in sanctification is needed for us to relinquish all sense of human autonomy and man-centered thinking, including the relative and illusory type of “freedom” that appears so frequently in the popular form of Calvinism.

“As with many such controversies, the real question in this disagreement between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism is whether we are willing to “let” God be God on his own terms. A consistent supralapsarianism is the only position that honors God, Scripture, and logic. And it is the only God-centered position. One of the things that we learn from the doctrine is that God actively decreed and caused the fall of humanity as one of the steps by which he would fulfill his eternal plan. Sin was not an accident...

Keep in mind that this is not a rebuke of those guilty of the “errors” of a non-Calvinist such as myself-who sees even “Calvinism-Lite” as repugnant and a serious departure from Scripture. Vincent Cheung is calling R.C. Sproul Sr., John Piper, J.I. Packer and all other hypo-Calvinists and advocates of “Calvinism-Lite” blasphemers by embracing infralapsarians. Even if he does not mean to call them blasphemers (though I think he does) he is certainly calling some of what they believe (relative to infralapsarianism) as blasphemous.

If you are like me, you will find serious fault with Cheung's understanding of Scripture, God, the implication of what it means when the sovereignty of God is biblically affirmed (and much more). But for anyone who has taken the time to read The Institutes (especially book 3) it is difficult (I would say impossible) to reasonably dismiss Cheung's grasp of the fundamental distinctive of what Calvin

believed and taught. Once you accept that the premise of Calvin is biblical, the logic of Cheung will take you down the rest of the “Reformed” road. As it is, to carry on an intelligent and meaningful conversation with Calvinist friends, I constantly have to discover what kind of Calvinist they are or consider themselves to be.

I have to find out how far down the “Reformed” road my Calvinists friends have travelled or have yet to travel. Most are unwilling to even concede (or consider) that they have stopped very short of where Calvin is trying to take them. I would not need to do this if every Calvinist understood (and agreed with) Calvin as well as Cheung does. Calvin was a supralapsarian and agree with him or not, he was clear on this matter. Cheung, as a supralapsarian represents the Calvinism of Calvin. If you consider yourself a consistent Calvinist you should embrace supralapsarianism? I will conclude this short article with the question I began with:

“How far have you gone down the “Reformed” road or how far are you willing to go?”