

Critique of  
ROBERT REYMOND, ACONSISTENT SUPRALAPSARIANISM@  
by Jack Cottrell

I realize that from Robert Reymond=s perspective I am writing as a mere kindergartner, one who Ahas not yet learned the alphabet of Christianity@ (33a), yet one who is presuming to critique a wise and learned scholar. We must remember, though, that it was a naive child who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes.

Since Reymond basically dismisses the Arminian view as sub-Christian (13, fn 18b; 14 mb), he wastes little time in addressing it. He is mainly concerned with defending the supralapsarian version of Calvinism over against infralapsarianism, and with clearing up certain inconsistencies that he sees in other versions of the former. Thus his essay addresses the question of the logical order of the various aspects of God=s eternal decree. He describes such a study as Aone of the most important . . . topics that Scripture would give any man warrant to study@ (2t). Yet he grants that A infralapsarians contend that the supralapsarian scheme is an overly pretentious speculation in its analysis of the manner in which God plans@ (32tm). If it seems so even to infralapsarians (Calvinists all), then one can imagine how it must seem much more so to us kindergartners. For example, to an Arminian, to argue whether the order of the decrees is retrograde or historical (25ff.) conjures up images of angels dancing on the head of a pin. It is meaningful only to those who accept the arbitrary concept of omnicausal sovereignty and who deny that God has given a truly free will to any of his creatures.

In this critique I will address neither the general issue of Calvinism as such nor the specific question of the nature of God=s sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> I will focus mainly on the principle that is foundational to Reymond=s view of the eternal decrees, i.e., the primacy of redemption in God=s eternal purpose. I will challenge the alleged biblical basis for this principle.

As Reymond sums it up, A God has a single eternal purpose or plan at the center of which is Jesus Christ and in him his church.@ Since Jesus is at its center, this purpose is entirely redemptive

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<sup>1</sup>On the latter see Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984), especially ch. 5; and Jack Cottrell, AThe Nature of the Divine Sovereignty,@ *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 97-119.

and is accomplished through AGod=s election, predestination, and effectual call of sinners to himself for salvation.@ The ultimate goal of this plan is to show forth the glory of God=s infinite grace and wisdom@ (7tm). ATo glorify himself,@ says Reymond, Ais central to God=s eternal plan@ (2b), and saving sinners through his grace is the most glorious thing he can do.

Election is necessary to this plan since God=s gracious salvation of *some* sinners can be most gloriously shown only in contrast with his righteous wrath upon other sinners. Thus Ato bring glory to himself as the God of grace he placed the salvation of certain particular fallen men by Christ at the forefront of everything else in the plan@ (1t). This is called Athe particularizing principle@ (23m), and this Aparticularizing purpose of God . . . is the ultimate concern of God=s >eternal purpose=@ (23b). AThe particularizing grace of God in Jesus Christ@ is Aat the beginning, center, and the end of all God=s ways and works@ (23m).

How does this affect the order of the decrees (or the aspects of the one decree)? As the one ultimate purpose of God, the decree to save some sinners to the glory of his grace must have logical priority over all others. It is the one ultimate *end*; all other decrees are simply the *means* of accomplishing it. AEvery decree is made to serve this primary principle@ (23m). To accomplish this ultimate purpose, God determined in his next two decrees to redeem elect sinners through Christ=s cross and to apply its redemptive benefits to these sinners through the Holy Spirit (27a).

But in order to accomplish all that is determined in these redemptive decrees, God must make two further decrees: he must determine that there will be a fallen race of human beings from which some may be elected for salvation,<sup>2</sup> and he must determine to create such a universe of men where this fall could take place (27b-28a).

This means that God has *decreed* the fall of Adam and the ensuing sinfulness of the entire human race, so that there would be sinners to redeem (27m). He also decreed the deliberate withholding of salvation from some sinners (preterition), and the condemnation of these non-elect sinners to hell. The preterition and reprobation are Aultimately . . . grounded wholly and solely in his sovereign will, apart from consideration of the fact of their sin@ (17b). But why has God decreed these things? They are all necessary *means* for accomplishing the one ultimate purpose of glorifying himself by saving some sinners through the grace of Jesus Christ. AGod decreed the fall and its effects to provide the condition from which Christ would redeem God=s elect@ (31b-32a), and the

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<sup>2</sup>Reymond divides this decree into three parts (27mb).

reprobation of the non-elect is for the specific purpose of making known the glory of the riches of God=s grace to the elect (23tt; 27, fn. 39).

To some Calvinists such a view of God and his decrees may sound like pious and glorious mysteries; but to most non-Calvinists it is the height of irrationality and moral contradiction, and approaches blasphemy. To say that God deliberately brings about a sinful human race so that he may elect some to salvation, and then deliberately sends the non-elect to hell so that his saving grace may appear all the more glorious, is the very *opposite* of grace. As Dave Hunt asks over and over in his book,<sup>3</sup> *What love is this? What grace is this? What God is this?* Surely not the God who is *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Pet. 3:9, NIV). Surely not the God *who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim. 2:4, NIV).

The other implication of the primacy of the particularizing principle is that creation itself--the final decree in Reymond=s scheme--is just a means to bring about the redemption of the elect to the glory of God=s grace. This *posits for the world a redemption reason for its creation* (28a). I.e., *creation=s purpose is subservient to God=s redemptive purpose* (23b). The end of creation is to provide *the arena and all the necessary conditions for God=s redemptive activity to manifest itself* (21mb).

All of these concepts together--the primacy of God=s elective redemptive purpose, plus the necessity of sin and reprobation and of creation itself as means to accomplish this purpose, are reflected in this statement, *that the state of the elect as children of God in Christ by divine grace is ultimately a higher, more glorious, and more praiseworthy end than the state of all men as children of God in unfallen Adam by divine creation* (32a, italics in original).

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<sup>3</sup>Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvinism=s Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, OR: Loyal Publishing, 2002).

This may well be the most remarkable statement in Reymond=s essay--remarkable for the stark clarity by which it states the ultimate implication of the Calvinist system, remarkable in the absoluteness of its antithesis to the biblical world view, remarkable in its audacity. To anyone who does not begin his study of the Bible with the arbitrary premise of omnicausal divine sovereignty, the obvious relation between creation and redemption is the very opposite of this, i.e., *redemption* is the *means* by which God will accomplish the original purpose of *creation*. This original purpose is to glorify himself by sharing his goodness with free-will creatures made in his own image.<sup>4</sup> This purpose could theoretically have been achieved totally apart from sin and redemption--which God would have preferred; but his free-will creatures chose to actualize the possibility of sin. This does not mean that God=s original purpose was abandoned and a new one instituted (contra Reymond, 24b); it means rather than he will now accomplish the original purpose through the redemptive work of Christ and not just through creation alone. Creation thus has the primacy since redemption serves the purposes of creation, not vice versa.<sup>5</sup>

There is absolutely no reason why this scenario should be considered less glorious for God than the plan envisioned by supralapsarianism. In fact one might judge that God=s being able to accomplish his purpose through Jesus Christ *in spite of* sin, is more glorious than the accomplishment of his purpose *through* sin.

We turn now to the alleged biblical basis for Reymond=s supralapsarian view. Two texts seem to be primary: Ephesians 3:9-11 and Romans 9. First of all, in Ephesians 3 the key question is, what part of the preceding context is modified by the *hina* clause in v. 10? Verse 9 refers to the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things. Verse 10 begins with *hina*, *so that* or *in* order that, i.e., *so that* the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Verse 11 explains that this was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Reymond argues that *hina* goes with the closest antecedent, the reference to creation. From this he derives his basic principle, that God created all things so that the manifold wisdom of salvation (v. 11) might be made known through Christ=s church (6m, 21m). He argues (24b) that

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<sup>4</sup>See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Creator* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983), 120-128.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 171-191.

*hina* cannot refer back to anything else for two reasons. First, if that were so, then the clause *Who created all things* would have no purpose in the passage. Second, if that were so, then, in effect, this passage would no longer support his view of the primacy of redemption (i.e., he simply begs the question here).

It should be noted that the syntax of the passage is not a straightforward statement that *God created all things in order that etc.* The word *theos* (*God*) is not the subject of any main verb; it is the object of the preposition *en* in the participial clause *Having been hidden in God.* After Paul says *hidden in God,* he then adds another participial clause modifying *God*, i.e., *the one who created all things.* Then follows the *hina* clause. To what, then, is this last clause attached?

I would argue strongly that *hina* does *not* refer to the creation clause, but to something prior to that. This does not leave the creation clause with *no intelligible purpose*; it functions quite clearly as a parenthetical expression of praise to God, like a doxology or benediction. Other examples of this are Galatians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 6:13, which praise God for his life-giving power; and Psalm 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; Jeremiah 33:2; Jonah 1:9; Acts 4:24; 14:15; and Revelation 10:6, all of which identify God as the Creator as an expression of reverent praise. This is exactly what Paul is doing in Ephesians 3:9. The reference to creation is parenthetical; it is not part of the ongoing flow of Paul's thought.

Does the *hina* clause follow directly upon *hidden in God,* then? Yes, but it actually completes the thought begun in verse 8, where Paul states the reason why he was called to be an apostle: *to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and [v. 9] to bring to light . . . the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God.* Here is where the *hina* clause kicks in: Paul was commissioned to preach to the Gentiles *so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church.*

This explanation is in perfect accord with Paul's main point in Ephesians, which is *that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel* (v. 6). *This* is the mystery hidden in God in past ages, but now made known through the church (v. 10). *This* is the *Aeternal purpose* which he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (v. 11), namely, to unite Jews and Gentiles together in one body, the church. (Compare Romans 16:25-27.) This is the theme Paul has been developing through chapters 1 and 2 of this letter, as *assumed up* in 1:11, where the main point is the joining together of Jewish believers (the *We/us* in vv. 3-12) and Gentile believers (the *You* in v. 13) under Christ as the

one head of the one church. Ephesians 2:11-3:13 is one long paragraph in which Paul is bubbling over with joy and exuberance at the very thought of this union of Jews and Gentiles in the church, and especially at the thought that *he* was a major instrument of God in bringing it about.<sup>6</sup>

The point is that Ephesians 3:9-11 is not referring to the single, eternal, over-arching purpose of God involving everything in creation, providence, and redemption. The Aeternal purpose@ in verse 11 is the *specific* purpose of uniting Jews and Gentiles together in one church. To broaden it further is to ignore the context.

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<sup>6</sup>See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler*, 306-308.

The other key passage from which Reymond derives his particularizing principle is Romans 9. Like most Calvinists, he finds the doctrine of unconditional election throughout this chapter because he interprets it as referring to election to *salvation*. In my own essay in this volume I have briefly explained why I believe the subject is election to *service*, and why this text thus cannot be used to justify Augustinianism.<sup>7</sup> E.g., Reymond appeals to 9:11-13 as a basis for his view of God's purpose in election (6b-7a). This does not refer, however, to an eternal divine decision to unconditionally save some sinners while sending the rest to hell. It refers to God's unconditional choice of the nation of Israel, beginning with the unconditional choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to carry out the purpose stated in Genesis 12:3.

Reymond misuses 9:14-18 in the same way, saying that it shows God's absolute, sovereign right to do with men as he pleases in order to accomplish his own holy ends (20tm). This is true, but the subject matter is not election to salvation but election to service. Paul's point is that God *does* have the right to use whomever he chooses (such as Israel or Pharaoh) to work out his historical plan of salvation without being obligated to save those so chosen.

Reymond applies Paul's potter/clay analogy in 9:19-24 in the same way (20b-21a), but he misses the point here also. I believe Calvinists are right about one thing in this text, i.e., that *Ahonor* and *Adishonor* refer to eternal destinies, heaven and hell. But they are wrong to identify the lump of clay as the human race as a whole, whether fallen or unfallen. The lump of clay is Israel, and the distinction within the nation is the same as in 9:6. Calvinists are wrong also in assuming that the distinguishing of the two parts within the lump is unconditional. The whole point of 9:30-10:21 is to show that, by God's sovereign plan, individuals (especially within Israel) determine their own eternal destinies according to whether or not they put their trust in God's saving promises.

The main point of 9:22-23 is as follows. Because most Israelites were *A vessels of wrath* who had prepared themselves (*katartizo*, middle voice) for destruction by their idolatry and unbelief, God wanted (*thelo*) to show his wrath and power against Israel by abandoning the whole lot, long before the Messiah came. Nevertheless, with great patience he put up with them over the centuries, because he had chosen this nation for a glorious purpose, i.e., to bring the Savior into the world

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<sup>7</sup>See Jack Cottrell, *The College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 2:23-303.

(Gen. 12:3; Rom. 9:5). So he put up with them in order to (*hina*) Amake known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy,@ namely, the church as composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles (9:24; see the discussion above of Eph. 3:9-11).

Thus this text has nothing to do with an alleged reprobation of non-elect sinners for the deliberate purpose of making the grace bestowed upon the elect appear even more glorious. Calvinism in general, especially in its supralapsarian form, finds no basis for its system here nor in Romans 9 as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

Space considerations do not allow discussion of the reality of free will, whether Ephesians 2:8 teaches that faith is a gift, universal vs. limited atonement, or the meaning of foreknowledge. In any case, using the analogy of clothing, these are in a sense accessories, like hats and gloves. I have focused here on the main items, like the suit or robe that covers the torso. And like the child in the story, I find that the emperor has no clothes.

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<sup>8</sup>As a final note on Romans, Paul is not saying in 1:20 that God reveals himself via creation *so that* the non-elect will have no excuse, i.e., for this *purpose*. He is saying that the revelation of God in nature has the *result* that even pagans have no excuse for their sin.