

DRAFT
A Molinist View of Election
Or How to Be a Consistent Infralapsarian
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Introduction:

Two essential doctrines: sovereignty and permission

The God of the Bible created the world out of nothing—*creatio ex nihilo*—and this truth entails two corollaries: *sovereignty* and *permission*. God’s sovereignty is his lordship over creation. Divine sovereignty means that God rules and, yes, controls all things.

Permission is the decision by God to allow something other than himself to exist. Mere existence seems to be what God gave to most of creation, because most of this immense universe consists simply of physical materials that obey natural laws. But he did give a level of freedom, within limits, to certain agents—namely angels and humans. God did not grant us absolute independence nor complete autonomy. Using the term “permission” highlights the point that our freedom is a derived freedom. He gave us the ability to choose and with this ability came the moral responsibility for those choices. So the concept of permission means that though God controls all things, he does not cause all things. How much freedom did he permit us? Enough freedom to rebel.

Sovereignty and permission as they relate to predestination

The difficult goal before us is to achieve a balanced understanding of both sovereignty and permission, particularly as it pertains to predestination. Those who emphasize sovereignty tend to be Calvinists; those who emphasize permission tend to be

Arminians. Extremes exist beyond both sides of the boundaries of Christian doctrine. If one wants to see divine sovereignty emphasized to the point of fatalism he needs look no further than Islam. The word *islam* means “submit,” and the goal of the devout Muslim is to submit to the irresistible will of Allah.

Opposite of Islam at the other end of the spectrum is Process theology. In Process thought, God is changing and evolving along with the world and needs the world as much as it needs him. According to the process theologian, evil happens because God is not able to stop it and the world literally is out of control. Located between the extremes of Islam and Process is the biblical truth that God sovereignly rules over creatures which he permitted to have a relative amount of freedom.

The similarities of infralapsarian Calvinism and Molinism

Within orthodox Christian beliefs, two approaches consciously attempt to do justice to the twin biblical doctrines of divine sovereignty and divine permission by simultaneously affirming both. They are infralapsarian Calvinism and Molinism. Both affirm that God’s sovereignty is meticulous and overarching. Both affirm the concept of permission and agree that God did not cause the Fall or is the cause of evil, but he only permits sin. So the real problem is, as always, the problem of evil. And as it relates to the issue of election, the question is how humans came to be viewed in the eternal mind of God as sinners in the first place. The debate concerning predestination is over the role that permission plays in God’s decrees.

Few Christians have a problem with the doctrine of election *per se*. The Scriptures teach and our experience confirms that if God had not first chosen us we

would not have chosen him (John 15:16). It is the question of the reprobate that poses a problem. Reprobation is God's decision to reject or pass over certain ones. If God rejects the reprobate because of the reprobate's sin and unbelief, then reprobation is based on God's justice and his decision poses no moral dilemma. But it would also mean that some aspects of God's decree were conditional rather than unconditional, and that in certain ways the free choices of morally responsible creatures affected the eternal decisions of God.

Some Calvinists (following their namesake, John Calvin) cannot accept that there is any conditionality in God's decrees, so they bite the bullet and dismiss permission altogether. They embrace a double predestination in which God chose some and rejected others and then subsequently decreed the Fall in order to bring it about. Those who hold this position are called *supralapsarians* because they understand the decree of election and reprobation as occurring logically prior (*supra*) to the decree to allow the Fall (*lapis*), hence the term *supralapsarianism*.

Most Calvinists blanch at this approach. Reformed theology generally teaches that God first decreed to permit the Fall, and then from fallen humanity chose certain ones to salvation for reasons known only to him. This approach is called *infralapsarianism* (*infra* meaning "after"), because it views God's electing choice as occurring logically after he decided to permit the Fall.

The crucial concept to the infralapsarian Calvinist model is the notion of permission. God did not cause the Fall; he allowed it. God does not predestine the reprobate to Hell; he permits the unbeliever to go his own way. But permission is problematic for the Calvinist—particularly to those who hold to determinism—because

permission entails conditionality, contingency, and viewing humans as in some sense the origin of their own respective choices. Calvinists such as John Feinberg define God's sovereignty in terms of causal determinism, and this leaves little room for a logically consistent understanding of permission.¹ I am arguing that what Calvinists want to achieve in infralapsarianism, Molinism actually accomplishes. Molinism combines a high view of sovereignty with a robust understanding of permission.

Molinism: affirming divine sovereignty with genuine permission

Most Southern Baptists have heard about Calvinism, but not as many are familiar with Molinism. I suspect some who embrace Calvinism do so because they recognize the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and Calvinism is the only theological system of which they are aware that attempts to do justice to God sovereignty. So it often wins by default, especially when Arminianism is understood to be the alternative.

Arminianism solves the problem of reprobation by presenting God's decision concerning individuals as something entirely passive. God decrees to elect the Church as a corporate body, and those individuals who chose Christ are then viewed as the elect while those who reject him are reprobate. In this respect, Arminians view God's decree as the mere ratification of human choices. But the Bible presents God's electing decision as something much more active and decisive.

So what is Molinism? Named after its first proponent, Luis Molina (1535-1600), a 16th century Jesuit priest, Molinism holds to a strong notion of God's control and an equally firm affirmation of human freedom. In other words, Molinism simultaneously holds to a Calvinistic view of a comprehensive divine sovereignty and to a version of

¹ John Feinberg, *No One Else Like Him* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 637.

libertarian freewill generally associated with Arminianism. As Doug Geivett argues, the fact that Molinism is the one proposal that tries to hold simultaneously to both is a point in its favor, since both “are *prima facie* true.”²

Molinism teaches that on the issue in question God exercises his sovereignty primarily through his omniscience, and that he infallibly knows what free creatures would do in any given situation. In this way God sovereignly controls all things while humans are also genuinely free. Molinism formulates a radical compatibilism, and for this reason it is often attacked from both sides of the aisle. Calvinists such as Bruce Ware and Richard Muller consider it to be a type of Arminianism while Roger Olsen and Robert Picirilli, (both card-carrying Arminians) reject Molinism for being too Calvinistic.³ However, Molinism is attractive to many leading Christian philosophers of our day, such as Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Flint, and William Lane Craig, and one of the main reasons is because it demonstrates that it is logically possible to affirm divine sovereignty and human freedom in a consistent manner.⁴ Even open theist William Hasker, who is no friend to Molinism admits,

If you are committed to a “strong” view of providence, according to which, down to the smallest detail, “things are as they are because God knowingly decided to create such a world,” and yet you also wish to maintain a libertarian conception of free will—if this is what you want, then Molinism is the only game in town.⁵

² R. Douglas Geivett, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God: A Response to William Hasker,” *Philosophia Christi* 4 (2002), 380.

³ See Bruce Ware, *God’s Greater Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 25; Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 411-36; Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 194-99; and Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 62-63.

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: the Molinist Account*, (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998); and William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

⁵ Quoted in Flint, *Divine Providence*, 75.

Well, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what I want, because I believe it to be faithful to the biblical witness. And I suggest that Molinism is the only game in town for anyone who wishes to affirm a consistent formulation of the infralapsarian notion of permission.

Calvin's Supralapsarianism: The Concept of Permission Rejected

Calvin approached the issue of predestination with the premise that “the will of God is the chief and principal cause of all things,”⁶ an assumption that left little or no room for permission. Some try to argue that it was Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, who transformed Calvin's teaching on election into supralapsarianism. But Calvin's work on the subject, a book entitled *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* reveals that Calvin held to double predestination just as firmly as his protégée.⁷

In supralapsarianism, God's decision to elect and to reprobate is primary. Key to understanding supralapsarianism is to note the distinction it makes between reprobation and damnation.⁸ Reprobation is God's rejection of an individual; damnation is God's judgment upon that person for his sins. In this paradigm God does not reject the reprobate because he is a sinner; it is the other way around. The reprobate becomes a sinner because God rejected him. God reprobated certain ones and then decreed the Fall in order to actualize his disfavor towards them. Calvin makes this clear when he declares

⁶ John Calvin *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, J.K.S. Reid, trans. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, [1552]1961), 177.

⁷ In addition, J. V. Fesko sets the teachings of Calvin and Beza on reprobation side by side and demonstrates the two men were in agreement on this point. See J.V. Fesko, *Diversity within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic, 2001), 138-50.

⁸ John Calvin *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 121. See also Cornelius Van Til, 414, 415.

that “the highest cause” of reprobation is not sin, but “the bare and simple pleasure of God.”⁹

If God’s decree of double predestination is primary, then its components of election and reprobation have equal ultimacy, a point affirmed repeatedly by modern supralapsarians such as Cornelius Van Til, Herman Hoeksema, and more recently Robert Reymond.¹⁰ God’s relationship to both classes of individuals is symmetric. He rejected the reprobate *in the same way* he chose the elect.¹¹

As Bruce Ware, an infralapsarian Calvinist, points out, grace plays no part in the supralapsarian understanding of the initial double decree.¹² This is because when God decided whom he would choose and whom he would reject, humans were not yet viewed in his mind as sinners in need of grace or deserving of judgment. Grace did not logically enter the picture until after God determined to rescue his chosen from the Fall. This is why some supralapsarians such as David Engelsma do not hesitate to speak of God’s attitude towards the non-elect as one of eternal hatred.¹³ In supralapsarianism, sovereign grace gives way to mere sovereignty.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Romans 9 (citation not complete); also *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 120-21.

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 413; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1966), 161; and Robert Reymond, “A Consistent Supralapsarian Perspective on Election,” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, Chad Brand, ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 153.

¹¹ “For first there is certainly a mutual relation between the elect and the reprobate, so that the election spoken of here cannot stand, unless we confess that God separated out from others certain men as seemed good to Him.” John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 68-72.

¹² Bruce Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, Chad Brand, ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 56.

¹³ “[R]eprobation is the exact, explicit denial that God loves all men, desires to save all men, and conditionally offers them salvation. Reprobation asserts that God eternally hates some men; has immutably decreed their damnation; and has determined to withhold from them Christ, grace, faith, and salvation.”

As we said, Calvin had no room for permission. Calvin lampoons the very notion when he states,

[I]t is easy to conclude how foolish and frail is the support of divine justice by the suggestion that evils come to be not by His will, but merely by His permission. Of course, so far as they are evils...I admit they are not pleasing to God. But it is quite a frivolous refuge to say that God otiosely permits them, when Scripture shows Him not only willing but the author of them.¹⁴

Infralapsarianism: the Attempt to Blend Calvinism and Permission

Even though Calvin and Beza both advocated supralapsarianism, no major Reformed confession or creed followed their lead. The reason is obvious: supralapsarianism places the origin of sin at God's feet, and as the Canons of Dort declare, the notion that God the author of sin in any way "at all" is "a blasphemous thought."¹⁵ The Westminster Confession makes a similar declaration.¹⁶

In Calvin's day, a physician in Geneva by the name of Bolsec objected to Calvin's teachings on predestination on the grounds they impugned the character of God. Bolsec was arrested, convicted and eventually banished from Geneva, and Calvin sought support from Reformers in other Swiss cities for his supralapsarian position. He seems to have been genuinely surprised when the Reformers such as Heinrich Bullinger disagreed with him and argued instead for infralapsarianism.¹⁷ And in the subsequent debates

David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1994), 58.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 176.

¹⁵ Canons of Dort, Art. 15.

¹⁶ Westminster Confession, 3.1

¹⁷ J.V. Fesko, *Diversity with the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic, 2001), 135-38.

between the infra- and the supra- parties, the creeds and the confessions reveal that the Reformed churches universally chose Bullinger over Calvin.

Infralapsarianism refuses to draw out the logical implications of double predestination. The infralapsarian system argues that in some aspects God's sovereign decree is conditional. In addition, this model also argues that in the process of bringing the decree to fruition, some aspects of God's relationship to events—particularly to evil and sinful events—are permissive.

Bruce Ware, arguing for infralapsarianism, declares that,

It seems to me, that the strain in Calvinism that has been reluctant to embrace the 'permissive will of God' simply rejects one of the very conceptual tools necessary to account for God's moral innocence in regard to evil. Surely more is needed than just this manner of divine activity. But I don't see how we can proceed if God's sovereign dealings in matters of good and evil are, in fact, symmetrical.¹⁸

In other words, in order to protect God from the accusation of being the author of evil, we must embrace the notion of permission.

Louis Berkhof concurs with Ware. He points out that when the Bible presents God's rejecting a man such as King Saul or a people such as unbelieving Israel, his rejection of them was predicated on their prior rejection of him.¹⁹ Therefore, election is unconditional but reprobation is conditional. God actively ordains the salvation of the elect, but he only permits the damnation of the reprobate.

Infralapsarianism perceives God to have an asymmetrical relationship with election and reprobation.²⁰ God first allows all of humanity to fall. Then, viewing all of

¹⁸ Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 26.

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, 105-17.

²⁰ Bruce Ware, *Five Perspectives on Election*, 54, 55.

humanity as justly condemned in their sins, God ordains unconditionally a certain number—these are the elect. God permits humanity to fall; he does not cause them to fall. Infralapsarianism incorporates the historical into the eternal decree. Cornelius Van Til states, “From eternity God rejected men because of the sin that they would do as historical beings.”²¹ So what was decreed in eternity was conditioned by what would occur in time.

Problems with the infralapsarian position

Infralapsarianism hinges on the concept of permission, but it is very difficult to reconcile permission with the traditional Reformed view of sovereignty. Calvin declares that “The will of God is the chief and principal cause of all things.”²² If all events are causally determined, it is difficult to see room for permission. Some infralapsarian Reformers speak of an “efficacious permission” or a “determinative permission.” For example, Jerome Zanchius, one of the first advocates of infralapsarianism, declared that “God permissively hardens the reprobate with an efficacious permission.”²³ It is difficult to see how the term “efficacious permission” is not an oxymoron.

To embrace genuinely the concept of permission would require the infralapsarian to abandon some of the key tenets of Reformed theology. Berkhof recognizes this when he warns, “Infralapsarianism really wants to explain reprobation as an act of God’s justice. It is inclined to deny either explicitly or implicitly that it is an act of the mere

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 408.

²² John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 177.

²³ Paul Jewett, 83-97.

good pleasure of God. This really makes the decree of reprobation a conditional decree and leads into the Arminian fold.”²⁴ So infralapsarians have a choice. If the decree to reprobation is conditional, then it is not according to God’s mere good pleasure. If it is unconditional, then it is not according to God’s permission. Infralapsarianism wants to teach that God’s damns the reprobate in response to their sins. But this would abandon the classic Reformed view of God’s sovereignty, which is why Calvin rejected the concept of permission out of hand.

Second, as many Calvinists concede, the infralapsarian system is rationally inconsistent. Paul Jewett states that a rational fallacy lies at the heart of the infralapsarian position²⁵ He likens the infralapsarian position to a pendulum that swings back and forth from the mere foreknowledge position of the Arminians to the pure foreordination position of the supralapsarians.

And so in the end, it seems, there is no consistent position between a mere foreknowledge of the fall, which is Arminianism, and a foreordination of the fall, which (by implication at least) is supralapsarian. For this reason the pendulum of the infralapsarian argument swings now to one side, now to the other.²⁶

Third, the concept of permission as presented in the infralapsarian system doesn’t solve anything if reprobation is still the result of “God’s good pleasure.” The Canons of the Synod of Dort states, “...not all, but some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of His sovereign good pleasure, has decreed to leave in the common misery...”²⁷ Notice that, even in the infralapsarian system

²⁴ Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology*, a new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 123.

²⁵ Jewett, Paul K. *Election and Predestination*, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1985, p. 83-97.

²⁶ Paul K. Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 96.

²⁷ Canons of Dort, Article 15.

presented by the Synod of Dort, reprobation is not the result of sin, but the good pleasure of God.

Supralapsarians like David Engelsma criticize infralapsarianism for its incoherence when he says,

If reprobation is the decree not to give a man faith, it is patently false to say that unbelief is the cause of reprobation. That would be the same as to say that my decision not to give a beggar a quarter is due to the beggar's not having a quarter. That reprobation is an unconditional decree is also plain from the fact that if unbelief were the cause of reprobation, all men would have been reprobated, and would not have been elected, for all men are equally unbelieving and disobedient.²⁸

In other words, Engelsma is pointing out that if sin is the basis for reprobation, then no one would be elect because all are sinners.

In the final analysis, infralapsarianism teaches that reprobation is as much a part of God's decrees as is election. Infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism are simply nuances of the same approach, as long as both begin with God's eternal decrees and reject the notion that God would (or even could) grant any type of libertarian choice to responsible creatures.

Conclusions among Calvinists concerning infralapsarianism

Many supra-Calvinists dismiss the infra- as incipient Arminianism (one cannot help but smile when he reads Robert Reymond accuse John Gerstner of being an Arminian),²⁹ and a number of infralapsarians, such as Louis Berkhof, concede their

²⁸ David Engelsma, 57-58.

²⁹ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 158; Robert Reymond, *Perspectives on Election*, 170-71; Van Til, 415-16;

point.³⁰ Some Calvinists despair of the enterprise completely. G. C. Berkouwer calls the exploration of the decrees a case of “theological trespassing.” John Feinberg concludes that “the whole discussion is misguided,” and that “this question should not have been asked....” John Frame advocates agnosticism.³¹ The verdicts of Paul Jewett and Thomas Schreiner are in unison. Jewett states, “In any case, when all is said and done, the problem of reprobation remains unresolved and, it would appear, unresolvable,” while Schreiner concludes, “The scandal of the Calvinist system is that ultimately the logical problems posed cannot be fully resolved.”³²

At this point many infralapsarian Calvinists appeal to mystery, but what we are dealing with is not a mystery, but a contradiction. There is a difference between an epistemic paradox and a logical paradox.³³ An epistemic paradox results from insufficient information, but a logical paradox indicates an error either in one’s starting assumptions or his reasoning processes. The decretal Calvinist cannot accept his own conclusions. This means there is something wrong somewhere.

This situation is not like contemplating the Trinity or the Incarnation, where one encounters transcendent truths in which he can go no further. The dilemma for the Calvinist is that he cannot take his starting assumptions to their logical conclusions. John Gerstner warns his fellow Calvinists that in its formulation of the relationship of God’s

³⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 118, 121, 122, 123, 124.

³¹ John Feinberg, *No One Else Like Him*, 533

³² Paul Jewett, 97; Thomas Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, Vol 2*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 381.

³³ David Ciocchi, “Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:3 (1994), 397.

decree to sin, Reformed theology “hovers over the abyss of blasphemy.”³⁴ To their credit, Calvinists by and large do not take the plunge (though there are a few unfortunate exceptions). All these problems indicate that it is questionable whether or not one should use the doctrine of election as a control belief when considering issues such as the extent of the Atonement.

Molinism: Simultaneously affirming both sovereignty and permission

The two affirmations of Molinism: meticulous sovereignty and libertarian free will

Let’s go back to our two control beliefs. It may not make the Arminian happy but let’s affirm that God sovereignly controls all things.³⁵ And the Calvinist may be displeased, but let’s understand permission the way Webster’s Dictionary defines it: permission is the giving of an opportunity or a possibility to another. This is the way permission is normally understood. Permission entails that God has granted at least some type of libertarian choice to the moral causal agents he created.³⁶

So Molinism simultaneously affirms meticulous divine sovereignty and genuine human freedom. But how does it do this? In short, Molinism argues that God is able to exercise his sovereignty primarily by his omniscience. In this way, God controls all

³⁴ John Gerstner, “Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Edwards on the Bondage of the Will,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, Vol 2*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 279-94.

³⁵ Flint, *Providence: The Molinist Account*, 12-21; Olson states that Molinism’s affirmation of God’s control of all things is the reason most Arminians reject it. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 194-99.

³⁶ Most Molinists hold to what can be called “soft libertarianism.” Soft libertarianism holds to agent causation and argues that the ultimate responsibility for a person’s decisions rests on that individual, which indicates in a very profound way that he is in some way the origin of his choices. Two excellent defenses of libertarianism are Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1998) and Timothy O’Connor, *Persons and Causes: the Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2000). It may come as a surprise to some Calvinists that libertarians by and large do not view free will as “the absolute ability to choose the contrary” or as “the freedom of indifference.”

things, but is not the determinative cause of all things. How is this possible? The distinctive feature to Molinism is its contention that God's knowledge of all things can be understood in three logical layers, or moments. Molinism is particularly noted for its view that God can infallibly assure the choices of free creatures by utilizing what it calls God's *middle knowledge*.

The three moments in Molinism

Decretal theology (i.e. supra- and infralapsarianism) attempts to discern the logical order of God's decrees. Molinism, on the other hand, posits that there is only one decree (a point that has Scriptural support and that many Reformed scholars recognize),³⁷ but attempts to discern the logical order of God's knowledge. Rather than attempting to explore the "layers" of God's decree, Molinism explores the "layers" of God's omniscience. Decretal Calvinism perceives logical moments in God's *will*; Molinism perceives logical moments in God's *knowledge*.³⁸

Discerning moments in God's knowledge is not unique to Molinism. Reformed theologians generally agree with Molinists that God's knowledge can be understood in terms of moments, or aspects. For example Louis Berkhof recognizes two moments of divine omniscience: God's *natural knowledge* and his *free knowledge*.³⁹ By his very nature, God knows all things, which is why this aspect of his knowledge is labeled as natural knowledge. This natural knowledge contains all truths that are necessarily true in

³⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 102; and John Feinberg, *No One Else Like Him*, 533-36.

³⁸ These moments are logical moments, not chronological moments. Nothing temporal is implied with the use of the term "moment."

³⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 102; and Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 157.

the actual world (for example, “a triangle is a three-sided object” or “God cannot die.”) and all necessary truths in all possible worlds (for example, “what the world would be like if you or I had never been born”). So God’s natural knowledge contains all necessary truths.

It is when we consider God’s knowledge of possible, or hypothetical, truths that things get a little complicated. A possible state of affairs, i.e., something that is hypothetically true is called a *counterfactual*. They are states of affairs that do not obtain. A counterfactual is a statement contrary to fact which still yet has truth content.⁴⁰ The Bible recognizes counterfactuals and the Biblical writers use them often. For example, Paul tells us that “if Christ has not been raised...[then we] are still in our sins” (1 Cor 15: 17). That is a counterfactual state of affairs that gloriously does not obtain.

An illustration of counterfactuals that is fairly easy to understand is the premise of the Christmas movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In it, Jimmy Stewart’s character, George Bailey, is shown what the world would have been like had he never been born. Molinists label these complex scenarios made up of counterfactuals as *possible worlds*. Just contemplating the notion that God knows, not only all actual truths, but also all possible truths, staggers our finite minds. But accomplishing this presents no burden to our omniscient God.

As stated earlier, Berkhof recognizes a second moment in God’s knowledge—his free knowledge. He defines God’s free knowledge as the knowledge of everything about this particular world. Out of all the possible worlds he could have created, God freely

⁴⁰ Or, more precisely, a counterfactual is a proposition rather than a statement.

chose this one. This world is the product of God's free choice, which is why his knowledge of it is called his free knowledge.

So Reformed theologians (such as Berkhof) acknowledge there are at least two moments to God's knowledge: his natural knowledge and his free knowledge. And Molinists would also agree with Berkhof's assertion that, "[t]he decree of God bears the closest relation to the divine knowledge,"⁴¹ i.e., God brings about his sovereign will primarily by utilizing his omniscience. But what about all the possible choices of genuinely free creatures? Where are these counterfactuals located in the realm of God's knowledge? Here is where the Molinist's concept of middle knowledge enters the picture.

As Thomas Flint explains it, God's knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom cannot be part of his natural knowledge, because God's natural knowledge is made of what is necessarily true. Nor can these counterfactuals belong to God's free knowledge, since they are only hypothetical and not actual. Molinists argue that God possesses a third type of knowledge, located "between" God's natural knowledge and his free knowledge (hence the label *middle knowledge*).⁴² The divine natural knowledge is populated with truths that are true due to God's nature, and God's free knowledge is populated with that which is true due to God's will, but middle knowledge is of truths in which the decisions of free creatures are the truth-makers.⁴³ This is what a robust concept of permission entails.

⁴¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 102.

⁴² Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence*, 42-43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 46-50.

Armed with these three conceptual tools, Molinism argues that God accomplishes his sovereign will via his omniscience. First, God knows everything that *could* happen. This first moment is his *natural knowledge*, where God knows everything due to his omniscient nature. Second, from the set of infinite possibilities God also knows which scenarios *would* result in persons freely responding in the way he desires. This crucial moment of knowledge is between the first and third moment, hence the term *middle knowledge*. From the repertoire of available options provided by his middle knowledge, God freely and sovereignly chooses which one he will bring to pass. This results in God's third moment of knowledge, which is his foreknowledge of what certainly *will* occur.⁴⁴ The third moment is God's *free knowledge* because it is determined by his free and sovereign choice.

By utilizing these three phases of knowledge, God predestines all events, yet not in such a way that violates genuine human freedom and choice. God meticulously “sets the table” so that humans freely choose what he had predetermined. An example of this could be Simon Peter's denial of the Lord. The Lord predicted Peter would deny him and by use of middle knowledge ordained the scenario that infallibly guaranteed Peter would do so. However, God did not make or cause Peter to do as he did.

The Advantages of the Molinist Approach

The Molinist approach has a number of advantages over both Calvinism and Arminianism, which I want to list briefly. First, *Molinism affirms the genuine desire on*

⁴⁴ The verbs *could*, *would*, and *will* highlight the distinctions in the moments of God's knowledge. From knowledge of what *could* happen (1st moment), God knows which ones *would* bring about his desired result (2nd moment), and he chooses one possibility which means he knows it *will* come about (3rd moment).

the part of God for all to be saved in a way that is problematic for Calvinism. God has a universal salvific will even though not all, maybe not even most, will repent and believe the Gospel. Historically, Calvinists have struggled with this question; with most either denying that God's desires all to be saved, or else claiming God has a secret will which trumps his revealed will.

Molinism fits well with the biblical teaching that God universally loves the world (John 3:16) and yet Christ has a particular love for the Church (Eph. 5:25). William Lane Craig suggests that God "chose a world having an optimal balance between the number of the saved and the number of the damned."⁴⁵ In other words, God has created a world with a maximal ratio of the number of saved to those lost. The Bible teaches that God genuinely desires all to be saved, and even though many perish, still his will is done. Molinism better addresses this apparent paradox.

An illustration may be helpful here. Before the Normandy invasion, General Dwight Eisenhower was told by many of his advisors that casualties might exceed 70%. The actual human toll was terrible but thankfully not that high. Eisenhower gave the order for the invasion to proceed, but he would have been quick to tell you he genuinely desired that none of his men should perish. Molinism understands God's will for all to be saved to operate in a similar fashion, though we recognize all analogies breakdown eventually.

To try to explain the Calvinist view of God's salvific will, John Piper and Bruce Ware also use illustrations of leaders—George Washington and Winston Churchill,

⁴⁵ William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name:' A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6:2 (April, 1989), 185.

respectively—who are forced to make similarly difficult decisions.⁴⁶ But their illustrations work against their position, because a key component of the Calvinist doctrine of election is that the reprobate is passed over because of “God’s good pleasure.” Molinism better fits the biblical description of the two wills of God (or the two aspects of God’s will)—his antecedent and consequent wills. The Molinist can affirm without qualification that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

Second, *Molinism provides a better model for understanding how it is simultaneously true that God’s decree of election is unconditional while his rejection of the unbeliever is conditional.* God’s omniscient foreknowledge is the Achilles heel for most Arminian presentations of election. If God has exhaustive knowledge of all future events, then conditional election does not really remove the unconditional nature of God’s decisions. If God knows that a certain man will freely accept the gospel while that man’s brother freely will not, and yet God decides to create both of them anyway, then this is a mysterious, sovereign, and unconditional determination on the part of God.

Some Arminians recognize this dilemma and opt for open theism instead. In open theism, God does not know how an individual will respond to the Gospel. So he creates a person and hopes for the best. The open theist sees God as an actuary working the odds and understands God’s sovereignty as an exercise in risk management.

Molinism provides a much better answer. Why does the reprobate *exist*? Answer: because of God’s sovereign will. But *why* is he reprobated? Answer: because

⁴⁶ John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 122-24; and Bruce Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” *Perspectives on Election*, 33-34.

of his own unbelief. When God made the sovereign choice to bring into existence this particular world, he rendered certain—but did not cause—the destruction of certain ones who would reject God’s overtures of grace. According to Molinism, our free choice determines how we would respond in any given setting, but God decides the setting in which we actually find ourselves. As Craig states, “It is up to God whether we find ourselves in a world in which we are predestined, but it is up to us whether we are predestined in the world in which we find ourselves.”⁴⁷

In other words, the Molinist paradigm explains how it is possible for there to be a decree of election without a corresponding decree of reprobation, which is in fact the biblical witness. One of the strongest motivations for the infralapsarian position is the conviction that God did not ordain the reprobate to hell *in the same way* he ordained the elect to salvation. The Molinist model presents an asymmetric relationship between God and the two classes of people, the elect and the reprobate, in manner that infralapsarianism cannot. This is a great advantage to Molinism.

The third point is the converse to the previous one: *in the Molinist system, unlike Arminianism, God is author of salvation who actively elects certain ones.* In Arminianism, God employs only a passive foreknowledge (or, in open theism, God elects no individuals at all). Molinists contend that God uses his exhaustive foreknowledge in an active, sovereign way. God determines the world in which we live. Whether or not I exist at all, or I have the opportunity to respond to the Gospel, or I am placed in a setting where I would be graciously enabled to believe—these are all sovereign decisions made by him. The Molinist affirms that the elect are saved by God’s good pleasure. The

⁴⁷ See William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6:2 (April, 1989) 172–88.

distinctive difference between Calvinism and Molinism is that Calvinism sees God accomplishing his will through his omnipotent power while Molinism understands God utilizing his omniscient knowledge.

The fourth point expands the third point: *Molinism has a more robust and scriptural understanding of the role God's foreknowledge plays in election than does either Calvinism or Arminianism.* The Bible repeatedly states that “those God foreknew he also predestined” (Rom. 8:29) and that the saints are “elect according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Peter 1:2). Calvinists generally claim that in these instances God's foreknowledge should be understood as his “forelove.” This seems to be a classic case of special pleading. Arminians contend that what is foreknown by God is merely the believer's faith. Molinism rejects both explanations.

In the Calvinist understanding of foreknowledge and predetermination, the future is the product of the will of God. The Calvinist view clearly presents God as sovereign, but he also appears to be the cause of sin. In the Arminian formulation, God looks forward into a future made by the decisions of free creatures, and then makes his plans accordingly. The Arminian model emphasizes that God is a loving Father, but unfortunately his will has nothing to do with much that happens.

By contrast, Molinism contends that God actively utilizes his foreknowledge. Among the many possibilities populated by the choices of free creatures, God freely and sovereignly decided which world to bring into existence. This view fits well with the biblical simultaneous affirmation of both foreknowledge and predetermination (Acts 2:23). Some Calvinists such as J. I. Packer and D. A. Carson affirm both, but they call their view the antinomy or paradox position because they know it cannot be reconciled

with either the supra- or infralapsarian models.⁴⁸ Molinism is the one position that can radically affirm both with logical consistency.

In his book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*, supralapsarian Calvinist David Engelsma denies that the Gospel is offered to everyone who hears it. He contends that no one who adheres to five-point Calvinism and to reprobation according to God's inscrutable decree can consistently hold to a "well-meant offer." He claims that his position is not hyper-Calvinism, but consistent Calvinism. I believe Engelsma is in fact a hyper-Calvinist, but his argument highlights the problem Reformed theology has with affirming that the Gospel is presented to every hearer in good faith. By contrast, Molinism has no difficulty in holding that the offer of the Gospel is sincere and well meant. This is another decided advantage to the Molinist view.

Fifth, *Molinism provides a better model for understanding the biblical tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility*. With both the Calvinist and Arminian scenarios at times one gets the distinct impression that there are whole classes of passages being shoehorned in order to fit the respective theological systems, or that some passages are not interpreted so much as they are explained away. When the Molinist assembles his theological paradigm there are fewer biblical spare parts left over.

Sixth, *Molinism places mystery where it should be located, i.e. in God's infinite attributes rather than in his character*. Critics of Molinism, particularly open theists, contend that the Molinist fails to give an adequate explanation of how it is that God infallibly knows what choices free creatures are going to make. This is generally known

⁴⁸ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1961); and D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

as “the grounding objection,” because it questions whether Molinism provides any grounds or basis for God’s middle knowledge.

Molinists generally reply by arguing that God innately knows all things by virtue of his omniscience, and that it is simply in the nature of God to have infallible knowledge of all things. The Molinist advocate affirms, but may not be able to explain to everyone’s satisfaction, that God has exhaustive foreknowledge of what creatures with libertarian freedom will do.

If Molinists have to appeal to mystery at this point, it is doing so at a better and more reasonable point. I’d rather have the Molinist difficulty of not being able to explain how God’s omniscience operates, instead of the Calvinist difficulty of making God appear to be the author of sin. In other words, Molinism’s difficulties are with God’s infinite attributes rather than his holy and righteous nature. Implicit in the grounding objection is the denial that God has the ability to create creatures with libertarian freedom (of the morally significant kind). This places a surprising constraint on the scope of God’s sovereignty. The Molinist embraces a richer conception of God’s sovereignty, since God exercises meticulous providence despite the existence of free creatures!⁴⁹

One of the things we understand the least about God is how his infinite attributes operate—his omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. So why place the mystery of reprobation in God’s character? Molinists do not claim to know God’s purposes exhaustively, but one of the things most clearly revealed about God is his holiness, righteousness and goodness. Would we not rather place the mystery within the

⁴⁹ I want to thank Doug Geivett for his insights and help with this paragraph.

transcendent, infinite, inexhaustible omniscience of God rather than the revealed character and purposes of God?

Seventh, *Molinism has a valid concept of permission that does not have to resort to special pleading*. In infralapsarian Calvinism, what exactly does “permission” mean? Answer: not much. Many within Reformed theology acknowledge that the language of permission is used merely to make Calvinism seem to be less harsh. John Frame states, “Evidently, the Reformed use *permit* mainly as a more delicate term than cause....”⁵⁰ Berkhof concurs, saying that infralapsarians speak of a permissive decree because it sounds “more...tender.”⁵¹ This opens Reformed theology to the accusation of using the term in a misleading manner, because, as Frame points out, in the final analysis Calvinism sees permission as just another “form of ordination, a form of causation.”⁵² In Molinism, permit means permit.

One of the interesting developments in recent days is the appearance of “middle knowledge Calvinism.” Bruce Ware, John Frame, and Terrance Tiessen are among the Reformed theologians who are trying to incorporate the insights of Molinism into infralapsarian Calvinism. They do so for the express purpose of utilizing the concept of permission in a quasi-Molinist manner because they recognize the problems with the Calvinist formulation of the decrees. However, the concept of middle knowledge is superfluous in any system that holds to causal determinism.

Sometimes Molinism is described as inconsistent Calvinism, but one could argue that it is the other way around. Perhaps infralapsarian Calvinism is inconsistent

⁵⁰ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 178.

⁵¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 124.

⁵² John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 178.

Molinism. So I say to my infralapsarian brethren, that in regard to the concept of permission, Molinists have simply taken the steps you want to take, or at least you want to appear to have taken. If you wish to be consistent, you have a choice: either supralapsarianism or Molinism.

Conclusion:

I am thankful for the contributions that Calvinists are making to Southern Baptist life. They are right to call Southern Baptists away from pragmatic methodologies and reaffirm that salvation is a sovereign work of God. However, the decretal approach to election taken by Calvinism seems to create more problems than it solves.

Molinism does not provide an explanation as to why God created a world in which it was possible for sin to enter, but it is not necessary to do so. Molinism is a defense, not a theodicy. A theodicy is an attempt to explain *why* God ordained the world he did. A defense is much more modest. A defense simply attempts to demonstrate that it is *logically consistent* to believe that a good and sovereign God can purpose to create a world like ours. Molinism accomplishes this.

If one is going to do justice to the doctrine of God, he must affirm both God's sovereignty and his permission. Molinism presents a forceful affirmation of both.