Confessing the Reformed Faith: Our Identity in Unity and Diversity

by

Richard A. Muller

Richard Muller is the P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. *This address was given by Professor Muller at a meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council on November 9, 1993 and appeared originally in the March and April numbers (1994) of New Horizons, the publication of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The essay is republished here with the permission of the publishers.*

I have selected as my topic this evening, "Confessing the Reformed Faith: Our Identity in Unity and Diversity." The central issue that I will address is the issue of Reformed identity – specifically as indicated by the body of confessional documents that both unites us in faith and distinguishes us into branches and denominations. I would also argue that retention and maintenance of the integrity and stability of the Reformed faith in its confessions is one of the two greatest issues confronting our churches today. The other, I would venture, is the parallel and profoundly related issue of the retention and maintenance of our tradition of liturgy and hymnody in which the doctrinal stance of the confessions is put, as it were, into action and application in the corporate life of believers. In fact, the two issues are inseparable. I propose to address these issues with a view to: (1) our confessional diversity; (2) the nature of our unity in diversity; (3) pressures on confessional integrity in our times; and (4) ways of reaffirming and strengthening confessional integrity today.

1. Confessional Diversity

Virtually all of us here, tonight, represent, in one way or another, a branch of the Reformed faith. More than that, we represent, for the most part, two major branches of the Reformed faith – one identified by its adherence to the Westminster Standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the Westminster Larger Catechism), the other by its acceptance of the Three Forms of Unity of the Dutch Reformed churches (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort). In both confessional families, the teaching of the confessions and catechisms has been echoed in forms of worship and in traditions of hymnody reaching back into the Reformation of the sixteenth century and reflecting the life of our churches throughout the intervening years.

When in recent years, however, I have visited churches, whether of the "Reformed" or of the "Presbyterian" confessional type, I have been struck by the increasing variety of forms of worship, by the loss of traditional hymnody, and by the decreasing interest on the part of these churches in their confessional traditions. In the context of this erosion of identity, some way of refocusing our church life in the light of our confessional heritage appears to be in order.

When I was considerably younger and, more importantly, a bit less wise (some would say less cynical) about the problems of church life, administration, and direction, I was very enthusiastic

about the movement from mono-confessional to multi-confessional standards in what we were accustomed to calling the "Northern" and "Southern" Presbyterian churches. It seemed to me at the time that the augmentation of the Westminster Standards with such revered confessional writings as the Second Helvetic Confession, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Scots Confession, and the Geneva Catechism could only enrich our churchly perceptions and lead to confessional renewal – that this was a primary way of refocusing our attention on the confessions.

I well remember a wise, elderly deacon of the country church that I served saying to me, "Rick, we've, got enough trouble just learnin' the Westminster Standards." At the time, I argued the case of multi-confessional enrichment to him – today, I would stand in agreement with his worry. The adoption of multi-confessional standards has done little to enrich the life of Presbyterians in the United States. In fact, it has done little other than contribute to the dilution of Reformed confessionalism, whether through the adoption of a looser form of subscription, on the ground of diversity among the confessions now present in the *Book of Confessions,* or, as my deacon feared, through an increased ignorance about all of the confessions. A greater number of unread, unused, undeclared confessions solves no problems.

To make the point succinctly, adopting one another's confessions, with the result that each Reformed group professes its faith through the use of more confessions, neither brings about a renewal of interest in the confessions nor a richer or fuller sense of the meaning of the confessions – at least not necessarily. Nor does it bring about a genuine unity in the faith: churches that hold to the same confessions do not necessarily hold them in the same way or with the same level of interest and commitment.

In addition, from the very beginnings of our history, the Reformed faith has been expressed in and through the diversity of regional and national confessions – the Tetrapolitan Confession, the Gallican Confession, the Belgic Confession, the First Confession of Base[, the First Helvetic Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Scots Confession, the Thirty-nine Articles, and others. All of' these confessions were understood in their time as Reformed. The various confessing groups recognized each other as belonging to the same family of faith, without feeling the need to subscribe to each other's confessions or to prove at length that the teaching of any one confession was identical with that of all the others. And, more often than not, these distinct confessions were accompanied by, and reflected in, distinctive regional and national orders of worship.

The closest that the Reformed churches have ever come to a single book of confessions, shared by all was in 1580, when the Genevan theologians produced the Harmony of the Reformed Confessions, a document based on the Second Helvetic Confession and including quotations from all of the major Reformed confessions of the age. The document was admired and praised, but never acknowledged as the normative confession of any of the branches of the Reformed church. Similarly, the Canons of Dort were pressed for a time as a standard beyond the Netherlands, and they did gain some authority during the seventeenth century in Switzerland, but they have never become a universal standard. The regional and national confessions together with their distinct orders of worship have, in fact, prevailed down to the present day.

2. Unity in Diversity

Granting this diversity, we might well ask what unites us. From the perspective of orthodox, confessional Lutheranism, any claim we might make to a unity of the faith is immediately called

into question by the diversity of our confessional standards. Lutheran confessional theologians have pointed to the diversity of our confessions and spoken of the internal contradictions of Calvinism in contrast to the theological harmony of Lutheranism, indeed, the unity of churchly confession, as expressed in the Book of Concord. And a contemporary historian of the sixteenth century has argued, on the basis of differing emphases in the doctrine of the covenant of grace in Calvin and Bullinger, that there are in fact two rather divergent Reformed traditions.[1]

The Lutheran criticism can, of course, be relatively easily countered. Reformed theologians of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were able to note that the Lutherans' mono-confessional standard, the Book of Concord, was not really as indicative of a unified confession as it claimed to be. It not only had arisen out of terrible controversy, and attempted (with relative success, we might add) to find a middle course between doctrinal extremes, but also was not entirely unified in its own documents.

Thus, after the Lutheran concord, several great questions remained unanswered for Lutherans and, indeed, remain unanswered to this day: Is a "true Lutheranism," distinct from the presumed problems caused for Lutheranism by the teaching of Philip Melanchthon, an attainable doctrinal position? Or does the role of Melanchthon in producing the confessional standards (he was the author of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession) cause a rift within the confessional documents themselves, given Luther's authorship of the Larger and Smaller Catechisms? Does the late sixteenth-century scholastic style of the Formula of Concord preclude a genuine unity between it and the earlier documents in the Book of Concord? Then again, there are those many Lutheran confessions of the sixteenth century that were not included in the Book of Concord and which also point toward a diversity in Lutheranism. It is also the case that even after the signing of the Formula of Concord, differences in the understanding of grace and election continued to trouble Lutheranism.

The claim of a mono-confessional unity in Lutheranism, over against the Reformed diversity, is not quite accurate. On the Reformed side, moreover, we are certainly able to recognize a common ground and fundamental agreement in doctrine arising from the general acceptance or several major Reformed symbols. A mono-confessional standard does not in itself guarantee unity—and, even so, a multi-confessional family does not in itself indicate disunity.

But what of the claim that there are two Reformed traditions? It is certainly true that Calvin's covenantal teaching tends to emphasize the sovereign activity of God in establishing the covenant of grace and that Bullinger's covenantal teaching tends to emphasize human responsibility in covenant. Nonetheless, it is also surely the case that Calvin never sought to remove human responsibility before God, and that Bullinger never claimed that genuine response to the covenant could occur apart from God's grace. Both Calvin and Bullinger stressed the necessity and priority of grace in the work of salvation—and both recognized the difficulty of maintaining that fine balance, typical of Reformed theology, between an emphasis on divine sovereignty and an insistence on human responsibility before God. The difference in stress between the teachings of these two pillars of the Reformed tradition does not indicate two divergent ways of being Reformed, but rather a certain breadth of doctrinal statement and emphasis in the Reformed tradition itself.

Reformed unity, then, is neither the unity of a single confession nor even the unity of a book of confessions, such as Lutheranism boasts. Nor is it a unity of utter agreement between its various confessional documents. Rather, Reformed unity is a unity of faith represented as a spectrum of

opinion – a unity within boundaries. By way of example, in the fundamentally infra-lapsarian pattern of the Reformed confessional doctrine of election, we nonetheless can move from the infra-lapsarian and *single* predestinarianism of the Second Helvetic Confession, to the infra-lapsarian but *double* predestinarianism of the Canons of Dort, to the mingling of infra- with supra-lapsarian (with, I think, an infra-lapsarian conclusion) in the Westminster Confession, without feeling the need to argue either that one or another of these confessions falls outside of the bounds of the Reformed faith or that the high supra-lapsarian position, which is definitively found in none of the documents, violates our confessional teaching.[1]

Even so, there are only two Reformed confessional documents that teach the two-covenant schema of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace—the Irish Articles and the Westminster Confession—and the schema is, admittedly, a minor theme in the Irish Articles. Nonetheless, the two-covenant schema is a significant, even central, doctrinal motif in much Dutch Reformed theology, where it has never been a confessional theme. In the English Reformed tradition, the schema became a matter of confessional teaching—in the Dutch Reformed tradition, it did not. We might even hazard the guess that the difference is rooted purely in the historical development of Reformed theology and in the fact that the Dutch Reformed confessional development came to a close at the Synod of Dort, before the great flowering of Reformed covenant theology, while the Puritan Revolution brought about a confessional situation in England after that flowering had taken place. In any case, this confessional diversity does not mark a point of dissention in doctrine between branches of the Reformed faith. Terminology and interpretation of the prelapsarian covenant varies in the orthodox Reformed systems sometimes the concept is absent, sometimes it is present as a "covenant of nature," and other times as a "covenant of works." More importantly, the outworkings of the doctrine of the covenant of grace are clearly present in the baptismal teaching and practice of all the Reformed churches.

In the midst of our confessional diversity, there is a genuine unity. It is not a unity framed by confessional doctrines that are absolutely uniform, throughout the Reformed churches. We not only can experience differences in emphasis among our churches, we also ought to be able to recognize that the unity of all the Reformed churches functions very much like the confessional unity of believers under any one of the documents. In other words, once a churchly confession is accepted as a doctrinal norm, it provides boundaries for theological and religious expression, but it also offers considerable latitude for the development of varied theological and religious expression within those boundaries.

Thus, two fully orthodox but nevertheless different systems of theology, like Herman Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics* and Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, both stand within the confessional boundaries identified by the Three Forms of Unity. Similarly, given the breadth of Reformed teaching on the doctrine of predestination—from the Second Helvetic Confession to the Westminster Confession—we can acknowledge such diverse statements of the doctrine as those of Berkhof, Hoeksema, Hodge, or, among the older dogmaticians, Ames, Perkins, and Turretin, as all expressing Reformed teaching. Nonetheless, we raise an eyebrow (or perhaps two) at the hypothetical universalism of Moises Amyraut, and we feel quite justified in the sentiment that Arminianism is excluded not only by the Canons of Dort, but also by a correct understanding of any and all of the confessions in the Reformed family.

[1] See Appendix added at the end of this article by Wm Gross – Colorado Springs CO 6/17/2007

Each confession singly permits a variety of teaching within its boundaries – typically a variety caused by theological explanations and elaborations that enter into greater detail than the confession. The family of confessions permits this kind of variety as well, but it also permits within the larger Reformed faith—a variety within the spectrum of belief caused by differences among the confessions themselves. Our unity, then, is a unity that exists along a spectrum of doctrinal statements and, at the same time, remains within the boundaries established in one way by our particular confessional standards and in yet another by the larger family of Reformed confessions. And it is a unity that has belonged to the Reformed churches from the very beginning of their history without either a mono-confessional or a multi-confessional standard held in common by all of the churches.

3. Pressures on Confessional Integrity in Our Times

Granting the confessional unity of the Reformed churches within the boundaries set by their several sets of confessional standards, the second issue to be addressed is that of confessional integrity within the diversity. The issue here is not simply one of allegiance to the doctrines contained in our confessional documents—the issue is also one of the fundamental acknowledgment of the importance of having and holding our confessions as such and, as a group or confessional family, recognizing the importance and the distinctiveness of our Reformed faith. Perhaps I should say from the outset of this part of my presentation that I am not about to offer a ready-made solution—what I want to do is to frame or, more precisely, to re-frame a particular problem and, by drawing attention to it from a slightly different vantage point, to encourage others to develop solutions with a particular view of the problem in mind.

It is all too easy to identify the loss of interest in, and the loss of desire to maintain, traditional points of doctrine, such as salvation by grace alone through faith as grounded in God's election, or Christ's purchase of salvation in an act that was both a substitution for us in the place of punishment and a satisfaction for us to the divine demand of payment for the offense of sin, or of the spiritual presence of Christ to believers in and through their faithful participation in the Lord's Supper, as the result of a national and international slide down the slippery slope into liberalism. After all, liberal Christianity typically inserts a positive view of human nature and its abilities into its doctrine of salvation and grace; it expresses difficulty with the seeming inhumanity and arbitrariness of divine decrees; it can scorn penal substitutionary atonement either as an unforgivable legalism or as a patriarchal teaching about an abusive father, and it finds little use for the mystery of the Lord's Supper and quite easily and comfortably reduces the Supper from the status of sacrament or means of grace to that of ordinance. There is, however, another source of confessional erosion that produces similar and, at times, identical results—and to which we are much more susceptible.

I am speaking here of the non-credal, non-confessional, and sometimes even anti-confessional and anti-traditional biblicism of conservative American religion. One recent evangelical systematic theology makes the point that confessional theology is a form of "indoctrination" that ought to be avoided – and, over the years, I have heard similar comments from students who were associated with the non-credal churches: *Confessions are unnecessary at best when. one has the Bible. At worst, they prevent their adherents from encountering the meaning of Scripture.* I have usually asked such students whether they believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, specifically, the doctrine of one divine essence in three persons. When they nearly invariably respond positively, I point out to them that they are not really non-credal or non-confessional,

but are in fact adherents to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed from the Second Ecumenical Council (A.D. 381).

I ask next whether, from their non-credal perspective, they view it as permissible to hold a doctrine of the Trinity according to which only the Father is truly God, and the Son, as "the firstborn of all creation" who himself confesses, "The Father is greater than I," might be viewed as an exalted creature of God. Of course, they deny such a possibility – but they have very great difficulty arguing against it in brief, without recourse to the Nicene formula: Arianism, after all, did have its scriptural proof texts. The point is, then, quite simply made that we need creeds and confessions so that we, as individuals, can approach Scripture in the context of the community of belief. It is not that creeds and confessions stand above Scripture as norms. Not at all. They stand below, but also with Scripture as churchly statements concerning the meaning of Scripture. And therefore, they also stand above the potentially idiosyncratic individual and prevent him from becoming his own norm of doctrine even as they provide entry for him into a churchly perspective.

The non-credal, anti-confessional tendency thus understands the sola Scriptura of the Reformation in a manner that the Reformers themselves never did and surely would have repudiated. On this particular count, had they the opportunity, the Reformers would most probably associate much conservative American religion with the biblicism of Servetus and the Socinians or with various Anabaptist groups. Of course, someone will object, conservative American religion, much of which identifies itself as fundamentalist or evangelical, is not anti-trinitarian. That it true – but much of it is doctrinally dispensational, premillennial, anti-sacramental, opposed to the baptism of infants, anti- or non-covenantal, and stylistically anti-liturgical and revivalistic. It is distinctly non-Reformed – or, more broadly, not rooted in the Reformation – granting that our confessional Lutheran brethren are presently experiencing the same kind of erosion of confessional and liturgical sensibilities.

4. Reaffirming and Strengthening Confessional Integrity

As said previously, I have no specific solution to this problem of Reformed Christianity in America, but I do have a series of suggestions or, more precisely, a series of points to ponder at the pastoral, the educational (whether in the local church or in. our seminaries), and the denominational levels. We must find ways to express our unity with one another as Reformed Christians – and this can clearly and constructively begin with a consistent reference to our confessional and liturgical heritage. Differences in confessional allegiance within the Reformed family ought not to be the basis for doubts concerning either our unity or our need for ongoing dialogue and discourse with one another in a world that increasingly appears to doubt the significance of confessions and of liturgy.

We must be convinced enough of the continuing significance of our confessional heritage (including its relation to liturgy and hymnody) to resist the desire to create church growth by losing our identity. One of the most appalling "strategies" of contemporary evangelization is the assumption that we must find the least distinctive, least offensive, lowest common denominator in order to attract the most people. Christian symbols, distinctive services, traditional hymnody, and disturbing language about the human predicament can all be set aside in order to appear open – this in a religion where the authoritative canon of Scripture tells us that the cross, the central redemptive event in the plan of God, is a scandal and an offense! Our confessions and their

active expression in worship present the fundamental teachings of our faith: the issue is not popularity but, one might say, "truth in advertising."

We must, in addition, become more conscious of the crucial linkage between our confessional and our liturgical heritage. The forms of worship and the hymnody of the Reformed churches have consistently reflected and supported the teaching of our confessions – and, indeed, have historically been one of the primary avenues of instruction in our confessional teaching alongside of preaching and catechesis. Thus, the orders of baptism in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches echo the confessions in their own declarations that our children "belong, with us who believe, to the membership of the Church through the covenant made in Christ,"[2] or that "God graciously includes our children in his covenant, and all his promises are for them as well as us.... We are therefore always to teach our little ones that they have been set apart by baptism as God's children." [3]

Similarly, the words of virtually all Reformed services of the Lord's Supper, "Lift up your hearts," and the response, "We lift them up unto the Lord," although one of the very ancient parts of the service, stand in a special relationship to the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper. The spiritual uplifting of the heart in and through the words of the liturgy echo and instruct in the faith of the confessions, where we read that we truly partake of Christ's body and blood "not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith" inasmuch as "Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven."[4] The confessional and liturgical point, to paraphrase one of my favorite Protestant orthodox theologians, Amandus Polanus, is that we do not claim to drag the risen and glorious body of our Lord down to this wretched and miserable earth, but that, by the power of the Spirit, our hearts are joined to him in heavenly places. The connection between liturgy and confession is clear. Loss of the Reformed order of worship can lead directly to a loss of relevance of the confessions to the life of the believing community.

I would make a similar case for the confessional character of Reformed hymnody and the danger of its loss or replacement with popular hymns not rooted in the faith of the Reformation. Perhaps I have become a bit over-sensitive when I begin to cringe during a service of worship at the sound of the contemporary evangelical hymn, "Father, I Adore You," sung to the neglect of such traditional Reformed hymns as "God of the Prophets," "Now Thank We All Our God," or "All People That on Earth Do Dwell." And perhaps I am a bit too analytical when I examine "Father, I Adore You" and note that the only subject of its several clauses is the human "I"—all of the movement in the hymn begins in the human self, and all that we are directly taught by its words is something about ourselves. This identification of all religion as subjective experience is the point at which the conservative, evangelical community joins hands with Schleiermacher and tacitly confesses that he is the church father of the modern era. By way of contrast, our Reformed hymnody seldom loses itself in subjectivity. The human subject is assuredly present, not as a naked "I," but as a member of the corporate community of faith: "Now thank *we all* our God, with heart and hands and voices." But, then, immediately, the hymn speaks to us *objectively* of the providential and redemptive ground of our thanks: "who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices."

Yet another instance is what appears to me to be the incredible liturgical insensitivity of including "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees" in our service of the Lord's Supper, given that kneeling at the Supper was set aside by the Reformers at the very beginnings of our faith because of its association with the adoration of the host in the Roman Catholic Mass. At the very least, standing (or sitting) while singing about kneeling is incongruous—at most, it points to

a variety of eucharistic piety that Calvin and his contemporaries took pains to avoid. Examples could easily be multiplied.

We must, I would suggest, be ready to test new orders of worship and new hymnody not only through popular practice but according to confessional standards. It is, I admit, a rather difficult task in some of our churches, where freedom in hymnody and order of worship has replaced the liturgical straitjacket that was the norm several decades ago. Like confessional diversity, liturgical diversity has been characteristic of the Reformed churches since the beginning and has never been a threat to our unity or to our integrity. There is no need to deny new orders of worship, or the adaptation of old orders to new circumstances, or the use of new hymns. But there is a need to test carefully the new orders and any new hymns before we admit them to our regular worship. The point here is much the same as the point I made concerning church growth: we are called upon by our confessions to maintain our identity for the sake of our Reformed understanding of the very nature and meaning of the gospel.

We must do all that we can to assure the contemporary use of our confessions and catechisms in the life of the church. They must not be relegated to the status of dead standards that are brought to bear *only* when problems arise and are then put back on a shelf in a closed book when the crisis has passed. It is well for us to remember that the confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, first and foremost, declarations of faith. They were not (and, therefore, ought not to become) rules for belief imposed on the church from without: they are normative *declarations spoken from within* by the church itself, for the sake of pronouncing the church's biblical faith. We do justice to their contents only when we declare them—only when we confess them—as the expression of our corporate faith and corporate identity. More confessions and varied patterns of subscription are not the solution to our problem. Only the regular use of our confessions as standards for the expression of biblical truth can render them effective and, indeed, contemporary in their significance. Only by declaring the confessions, by using them in the contexts of preaching, of teaching, and of corporate worship, can they fulfill their intended role as positive guides, arising out of the faith of the church in its meditation on Scripture, to the ongoing work of the Reformed churches.

In closing, I would simply commend to you our great heritage and commend to you as well the work of holding fast to what is most valuable in our tradition for the sake of our present and future work in the service of the gospel. Our unity will appear clearly in the declaration of our faith through our distinctive confessions and through the reflection of our confessional heritage in our forms of worship. Our Reformed *identity* depends on our willingness to declare our confessions and in so doing to confess the faith.

Endnotes

[1] J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, Ohio, 1980).

[2] *The Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia, 1946, 121).

[3] *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 961.

[4]. Belgic Confession, 35.

Supra-lapsarianism & Infra-lapsarianism (Sub-lapsarianism)

Supra-lapsarianism

The doctrine that God decreed both election and reprobation before the fall. Supra-lapsarianism differs from infra-lapsarianism on the relation of God's decree to human sin. The differences go back to the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius. Before the Reformation, the main difference was whether Adam's fall was included in God's eternal decree; supra-lapsarians held that it was, but infra-lapsarians acknowledged only God's foreknowledge of sin. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were agreed that Adam's fall was somehow included in God's decree; it came to be referred to as a "permissive decree," and all insisted that God was in no way the author of sin. As a result of the Reformers' agreement, after the Reformation the distinction between *infra* and *supra*-lapsarianism shifted to differences on the logical order of God's decrees.

Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, was the first to develop supra-lapsarianism in this new sense. By the time of the Synod of Dort in 1618 - 19, a heated intra-confessional controversy developed between *infra* and *supra*-lapsarians; both positions were represented at the synod. Francis Gomarus, the chief opponent of James Arminius, was a supra-lapsarian.

The question of the logical, not the temporal, order of the eternal decrees reflected differences on God's ultimate goal in predestination and on the specific objects of predestination. Supra-lapsarians considered God's ultimate goal to be his own glory in election and reprobation, while infra-lapsarians considered predestination subordinate to other goals. The object of predestination, according to supra-lapsarians, was uncreated and unfallen humanity, while infra-lapsarians viewed the object as created and fallen humanity.

The term "supra-lapsarianism" comes from the Latin words supra and lapsus; the decree of predestination was considered to be "above" (supra) or logically "before" the decree concerning the fall (lapsus), while the infra-lapsarians viewed it as "below" (infra) or logically "after" the decree concerning the fall. The contrast of the two views is evident from the following summaries.

The logical order of the decrees in the supra-lapsarian scheme is:

(1) God's decree to glorify himself through the election of some and the reprobation of others;

(2) as a means to that goal, the decree to create those elected and reprobated;

(3) the decree to permit the fall; and

(4) the decree to provide salvation for the elect through Jesus Christ.

The logical order of the decrees according to infra-lapsarians is:

(1) God's decree to glorify himself through the creation of the human race;

(2) the decree to permit the fall;

(3) the decree to elect some of the fallen race to salvation and to pass by the others and condemn them for their sin; and

(4) the decree to provide salvation for the elect through Jesus Christ.

Infra-lapsarians were in the majority at the Synod of Dort. The Arminians tried to depict all the Calvinists as representatives of the "repulsive" supra-lapsarian doctrine. Four attempts were made at Dort to condemn the supra-lapsarian view, but the efforts were unsuccessful. Although the Canons of Dort do not deal with the order of the divine decrees, they are infra-lapsarian in the sense that the elect are "chosen from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction" (I,7; cf.I,1). The reprobate "are passed-by in the eternal decree" and God "decreed to leave (them) in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves" and "to condemn and punish them forever...for all their sins" (I,15).

Defenders of supra-lapsarianism continued after Dort. The chairman of the Westminster Assembly, William Twisse, was a supra-lapsarian but the Westminster standards do not favor either position. Although supra-lapsarianism never received confessional endorsement within the Reformed churches, it has been tolerated within the confessional boundaries. In 1905 the Reformed churches of the Netherlands and the Christian Reformed Church in 1908 adopted the Conclusions of Utrecht, which stated that "our Confessional Standards admittedly follow the infra-lapsarian presentation in respect to the doctrine of election, but that it is evident...that this in no wise intended to exclude or condemn the supra-lapsarian presentation." Recent defenders of the supra-lapsarian position have been Gerhardus Vos, Herman Hoeksema, and G H Kersten.

F H Klooster
(*Elwell Evangelical Dictionary*)

Infra-lapsarianism, (Sub-lapsarianism)

(Lat. for "after the fall," sometimes designated "sub-lapsarianism"). A part of the doctrine of predestination, specifically that which relates to the decrees of election and reprobation. The issues involved are God's eternal decrees and man's will, how can the one be affirmed without denying the other. If one argues for God's predetermination of mankind's fate, this tends to deny mankind's free will and threatens to make God responsible for sin.

On the other hand, if one argues for the freedom of mankind's will, thus making man responsible for sin, this can threaten the sovereignty and power of God since his decrees then are contingent upon mankind's decisions. The argument / dilemma is not new. Pelagius and Augustine argued over the issue with the Synod of Orange, 529, which sided with Augustine. In the Middle Ages, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham questioned Augustine's position. Luther and Erasmus argued the issue in Freedom of the Will and Bondage of the Will. Melanchthon got involved and was accused by Flacius of synergism, and by the end of the sixteenth century the position of Arminius stirred the controversy among the Reformed, who attempted to resolve the issue at the Synod of Dort.

What is the order of the eternal decrees of God? Infra-lapsarians argue for this order:

(1) God decreed the creation of mankind, a good, blessed creation, not marred or flawed.

(2) God decreed mankind would be allowed to fall through its own self-determination.

(3) God decreed to save some of the fallen.

(4) God decreed to leave the rest to their just fate of condemnation.

(5) God provides the Redeemer for the saved.

(6) God sends the Holy Spirit to effect redemption among the saved.

The key to the order of the decrees is that God decreed election to salvation after the fall, not before; hence the name of the view "infra-lapsarianism." The supra-lapsarian view would offer an order in which the decree for election and reprobation occurs before the creation. Those on both sides of the issue cite weighty arguments for their positions, quote Scripture as a foundation, and comb through Augustine, Calvin, and others for support. Generally most Reformed assemblies have refused to make either *infra* or *supra*-lapsarianism normative, although the tendency has been to favor the former without condemning those who hold to the latter.

R V Schnucker
(*Elwell Evangelical Dictionary*)

Source: http://www.albatrus.org/english/theology/soteriology/supralapsarianism_infralapsarianism.htm