

The Free Offer Controversy

In the March/April issue of the periodical, *Reformation Today*, there is an article by Tom Wells with the same title as this. In his article Mr. Wells defends the notion of a free, well-meant Gospel offer over against the views of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The article was printed in *RT* as part of general attack on the views of the BRF, who hold substantially the same position as the PRC regarding the Gospel.

Though the article is supposed to be a defense of the so-called "free offer of the Gospel," it actually "damns with faint praise" (Alexander Pope) the position it is supposed to be defending. It all but admits (1) that the free-offer position is open to the charge of being Arminian and not Calvinist, (2) that there is a problem with the free-offer in relation to the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election, and (3) that there is little Scriptural ground for the idea that the Gospel is a well-meaning and sincere offer of salvation to those who hear.

Consider the following. Mr. Wells admits that the doctrine of a well-meant offer finds ready acceptance outside the Reformed camp. "Other Christians (those who are not Reformed or Calvinists)," he says, "Would wholeheartedly embrace the free-offer doctrine without further discussions."

This alone should make a Reformed believer suspicious. Any teaching on grace and the Gospel that is readily acceptable to those who are outside the Reformed camp is wide open to the charge of not being Reformed. Grace and the Gospel are two of the main areas of difference and disagreement between Calvinists and Arminians, between the Reformed faith and free-willism. Is it, therefore, even possible to be teaching things about grace and the Gospel that are "wholeheartedly embraced . . . without further discussions" by Arminianism and free-willism without being suspected of falling away from a strict Calvinism?

We would remind our readers at this point that we have no objection to the word "offer" as such. It can be and is used in a Biblical sense. Our objection is to those who use the word to teach that God expresses in the Gospel a desire for the salvation of all men without exception and tries to give that salvation to them.

Mr. Wells goes on to admit a difficulty between free-offer teaching and the Reformed doctrine of election:

The difficulty over the free offer may be put like this: since God has chosen to save some and pass others by, how can it be said that *he offers salvation to those he has decided not to save? Doesn't this make God of two minds, wanting all to be saved on one hand, and desiring only his elect to be saved on the other?* Anyone who cannot see that there is some difficulty here must have done very little thinking about theology. Indeed, for some, this is the rock upon which the whole idea of election, as understood by Calvinists, founders.

We are thankful that Mr. Wells at least sees the difficulty, though he makes no effort to resolve it. Most defenders of the free-offer would answer, "Yes" to the questions posed by Mr. Wells. When confronted with the difficulty, which he clearly sees, they quickly take refuge behind what they call "mystery." Their mystery, however, is a blatant contradiction, that God wills and does not will the salvation of the lost, that He hates and loves the reprobate and loves and hates the elect as well.

This is Barthianism, not Calvinism. It was Karl Barth who first taught unequivocally that God both loves and hates all men. That was not difficulty for him because he was a kind of mystic for whom faith was a blind leap in the dark, able to hold without difficulty all sorts of irreconcilable contradictions.

These men, like Barth, have abdicated as theologians and become mystics with all their talk of "mystery." Their mystery is nothing but a contradiction of the sort Barth gloried in.

Mr. Wells tells us at this point that the question must be settled by Scripture. That is well and good. We, too, believe, that the whole free-offer controversy will only be settled by careful attention to Scripture. It will not be settled by appealing to the writings of men, particularly those of John Calvin, for whom the whole matter was not even an issue.

It is a bit ironic, then, that Mr. Wells admits that "relatively few texts speak to the subject directly." He himself deals only with the Ezekiel passages (18:23, 32, 33:11) and two from Deuteronomy (5:29, 32:28-29). One is tempted to ask if these are the only passages that "speak to the subject directly." If so, the passages are not "relatively few" but "almost none."

Nor have we found any of the defenders of the free-offer who have been willing to reckon with this fact. We have pointed out before that there are NO passages of Scripture that use the word "grace" in reference to the non-elect (the offer of salvation to all is supposed to be grace to all).

The same is true of God's love. One must "scrape and scratch" to find passages that even suggest a love of God for all in the Gospel (the free-offer is also supposed to be a revelation of God's love).

Yet there are very many passages that speak of a particular and exclusive love of God, and give no indication that there is any other kind - many more that teach that the grace that brings salvation is for the elect only. We ask the readers who doubt the truth of what we say to look up in a good concordance the many references to God's grace and love in the Old and New Testaments. They will see that grace and love are for the elect and for no others.

Nor is the word "offer" or any similar term used in Scripture to describe the preaching of the Gospel. This, in itself, proves nothing. We recognize that. We too, use in theology many terms that are not taken from Scripture. But in this case the Gospel is consistently described as something very different from an offer (command, call, exposition, proclamation, declaration, answer, ministry, teaching, testimony, witness, power, ambassador). The terms used in Scripture to describe the Gospel do not even suggest the idea of an offer.

What is more, the "relatively few" passages that the proponents of common grace, universal love, and the free-offer bring forward are those that have always been used by the enemies of predestination and sovereign grace. This, too, should give us pause.

Ezekiel 18:23, 32 and 33:11 are notorious in this respect. Calvin deals at length with Ezekiel 33:11 in His *Institutes* (III, xxiv, 15). He refutes there the teaching of those who deny that "election is confirmed by the divine call" (i.e., that the Gospel reveals the same will of God as does election).

In his *The Cause of God and Truth*, John Gill says that "this passage of Scripture is frequently used by the patrons of free-will and the opposers of God's grace" (I, xxi). Concerning Deuteronomy 32:29 he adds: "These words were made use of to contradict the doctrines of absolute election, particular redemption, and unfrustratable grace in conversion" (I, x).

John Owen also puts these texts in the mouths of the Socinians (Arians or Unitarians), Arminians, and Amyraldians. He says, for example, concerning Ezekiel 18:23, 32 that "our adversaries are frequently knitting knots from this place to inveigle and hamper the simple." And again: "I have often admired how so many strange conclusions for a general purpose of showing

mercy to all, universal vocation (another name for the free-offer) and redemption, have been wrested from it" (*Works*, vol. X, pp. 386-388).

What Owen says in explaining these verses is a classic of faithful exposition:

First, then, let us consider to whom and of whom these words are spoken. Is it to and of all men, or only of the house of Israel? Doubtless these last; they only are intended, they only are spoken to: "hear now, O house of Israel," verse 25. Now will it follow that because God saith he delights not in the death of the house of Israel, to whom he revealed his mind, and required their repentance and conversion, that therefore he saith so of all, even those to whom he never revealed his will by such ways as to them, nor called them to repentance, Ps. 147, 19, 20?

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Secondly, "God willeth not the death of the sinner," is either, "God purposeth and determineth he shall not die," or "God commandeth that he shall do those things wherein he may live." If the first, why are they not all saved? why do sinners die? for there is an immutability in the counsel (will) of God, Heb. 6:17; "his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure," Isa. 46:10. If the latter way, by commanding, then the sense is, that the Lord commandeth that those whom he calleth should do their duty, that they may not die (although he knows that this they cannot do without his assistance).

These words were written over against the Arminians and Amyraldians. He gives a similar exposition of Ezekiel 18:31, 32 against the Socinians (*Works*, vol. 12, p. 559):

It is true that God *inviteth many* to repentance, and *earnestly* inviteth them, by the means of the word which he affords them, to turn from their evil ways, of whom all the individuals are not converted, as he dealt with the house of Israel (not all the world, but) those who had his word and ordinances, Ezek. 18:31, 32, affirming that it was not for his pleasure but for their sins that they die; but that this manifests a universal love in God in the way spoken of, or any thing more than the connection of repentance and acceptation with God, with his legal approbation of turning from sin, there is no matter of proof to evince.

There is a deeper problem here, however. We believe that free-offer theology has a very un-Biblical view of the preaching of the Gospel - that it cannot even be reconciled with the Biblical view of preaching.

The Biblical teaching concerning the preaching of the Gospel is that it is the "*power* of God unto salvation," the great means God has appointed for granting the grace of repentance, faith, and sanctification to the elect (Rom. 1:16, 10:17, I Cor. 1:18-24, II Cor. 2:15, 16). This does not make the preaching of the Gospel unnecessary as far as the reprobate are concerned, for it is also a "*power*" in their case - the power of God to harden and condemn them (cf. Is. 6:9-12, Acts 28:25-27, II Cor. 2:15, 16).

The very idea that the Gospel is an "offer" contradicts this, for an offer is, in the nature of the thing, not a "power." It is impossible for the defenders of the free-offer to maintain that the Gospel is "the power of God" especially in the case of the reprobate to whom the Gospel is preached. A free, well-meant offer of grace and salvation cannot be reconciled with such passages as II Corinthians 2:15, 16.

It is at this point, therefore, that offer teaching diverges widely from the Reformed view of preaching and approaches the view of preaching held by free-willism and Arminianism, i.e., that the Gospel is only an empty appeal to the unsaved to exercise their free-will in accepting or rejecting Christ in the Gospel. We would add, too, that the "grace" which is revealed in this offer is much more like the "grace" of the Arminians, frustratable and resistible.

Let it be clear, though, that in rejecting the free-offer view of preaching, we do not deny that

the Gospel is the "sweet savor of Christ" (II Cor. 2:15, 16), made known to all who hear the Gospel. Christ is always sweet and altogether lovely, also in the preaching. That some of the reprobate reject Him in the preaching, is for that reason, their greater condemnation. Nevertheless, that sweet savour (smell) of Christ has in it no hope for those whom God has not chosen. For them that sweet smell is and will always be "the savour of death unto death."

They are like captives in a triumphal procession (the figure Paul is using in II Cor. 2:14 - note the word "triumph") on their way to slavery, the arena, or execution, to whom the sweet smell of the sacrifices, the flowers, the incense, all offered in commemoration of victory are but the smell of doom. When the Gospel is preached to them and the sweet smell of Christ is in their nostrils through the Gospel they are already doomed (a captivity led captive) by predestination and by the work of Christ on the cross. They are no different in that respect from the demons who are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day" (Jude, 6).

Mr. Wells suggests that our view of the Gospel is a new development in Reformed theology and an illegitimate development at that. We plead Calvin, Gill, Owen, and others, but especially the Scriptures, that we are only "standing in the (old) ways" and "asking for the old paths." May God in His mercy grant it.