

Reply to Mr. W. F. Spanner

I appreciate the fact that Mr. Spanner has written in response to my article. In questioning what I wrote about the offer of the Gospel, he has, I believe, gone to the heart of the matter.

Mr. Spanner begins by saying, "Pastor Hanks is right in pointing out that by nature all men are 'dead in trespasses and sins' but he fails to point out that all men have the power to make a choice and in this respect are unlike trees. There is no external compulsion for them to choose evil and their choice of evil springs solely from their sinful nature. We also have to remember that they are not without a witness (Acts 14, v. 17) nor without the light of conscience (John 1, v. 9)."

I am not sure what Mr. Spanner intends by this. We would not disagree with any of it. We would point out, however, that though all men are still able to make choices, they are not able to choose for God, Christ, truth, righteousness or holiness. Their ability to choose (their will) is also "dead in trespasses and sins." Luther pointed that out long ago in his book, **The Bondage of the Will**.

To make an offer (in the sense of *tendering for acceptance or rejection*) to such a sinner is cruel mockery on God's part. It mocks the sinner by offering him what he cannot accept, appreciate, or use. It is on the same order as offering concert tickets to a man who cannot hear, a new and expensive pair of binoculars to a man who cannot see, or a lovely meal to a man who has just had gastric surgery. The well-meant offer and the Reformed doctrine of total depravity are incompatible.

We speak of the "*well-meant* offer" because it seems that there is some ambiguity about the meaning of the word "offer." We have no objection to the idea that God *commands* all who hear the Gospel to repent and believe. Man's inability and depravity do not invalidate God's command. In fact, because man's inability is his own fault (the doctrine of original sin), it is the command that provides a basis for judgment (Rom. 5:13).¹

Nor do we object to the idea that Christ in all His glory is *displayed* in the Gospel to all who hear. That is the clear teaching of Scripture and is the reason those who perish can be judged for having crucified the Son of God afresh (Heb. 6:6) and for the sin of unbelief.

Thus, if someone only means by the free or universal offer of the Gospel that God commands all men everywhere to repent and believe, or that the sweet savour of Christ is *manifest* in the Gospel both to those who are saved and to those who perish, we have no objection. But this is not what Professor Murray meant when he spoke of the "offer."

What he and others have meant is that God shows Himself in the Gospel as *sincerely desiring* the salvation of all who hear and making a *well-meant* tender of Christ to them. That is, God really does want to give them Christ and Christ's salvation, "tenders" Christ to them, pleads with them in the Gospel to accept Christ, and is saddened or frustrated when they do not. This is the teaching we reject, something we prefer to call the *well-meant* offer.

What we reject, therefore, is not the word "offer." We reject the idea that God lovingly wishes and seeks the salvation of all who hear the Gospel - a salvation that He has not decreed or purchased for them, which they cannot even appreciate or want without the sovereign operations of the Spirit, Whom God withholds from them. That is the teaching of John Murray. We reject it something unreformed, unconfessional, and unbiblical.

¹ This is the case even in civil affairs. A man or a company that has neglected to pay its taxes and has gotten so far behind that it no longer is able to pay is not by its inability rescued from the demand of the law that payment be made. The inviolable character of the law stands in that case also as the basis for whatever penalty the courts may impose in spite of the inability to pay.

That teaching does not only make God a cruel mocker of those who perish, but makes of Him a liar, for He "sincerely" offers them something He does not have to give them, and has even decreed to withhold from them.

Mr. Spanner warns here against a misuse of the doctrine of predestination. We indeed believe that the "high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care" (WCF, III, viii), but surely that means, among other things, that it may not be made to contradict other truths of Scripture. Murray's kind of offer cannot be reconciled with the Reformed doctrine of predestination. Can he claim to be handling the doctrine of predestination with *prudence* when he makes it contradict the preaching of the Gospel? Is it *careful* to say that God in the Gospel *sincerely* desires the salvation to those whom He has already appointed to stumble?²

In a cover letter to the Editor of the *Journal* Mr. Spanner mentions Revelation 22:17 as an example of the universal invitation and the free (well-meant) offer. His understanding of this passage, I believe, gets at the heart of some the differences between us. We would insist that this passage is an invitation indeed, but not universal (though it is universally published). It is specifically addressed to those who hear, to those who are athirst, to those who will. It is difficult for us to see how Mr. Spanner can say that those who hear and thirst, that is, those who will, can be *all* men, unless he is willing to abandon the Reformed doctrine of total depravity and Luther's great doctrine of the bondage of the will. Do all men will to take of the water of life? If so, are their wills really in bondage? We believe that those who will, i.e., those who hear and thirst, are those who are already regenerated by the Spirit of God, and that without those sovereign operations of the Spirit are unwilling.

Mr. Spanner also uses God's words to Cain as an example of an offer of acceptance on God's part (Gen. 4:7). But God's word in Genesis 4:7 is by no means a well-meant offer. For me to say to my children, "If you eat well, you will be healthy," is not the same thing as "offering" them good food. For God to say to Cain, "If you do well you will be accepted," is not the same as God offering to Cain an opportunity to be accepted.

Nor do Genesis 4:7 or any other Scripture passage suggest that God was sincerely offering a chance of salvation to Cain. Certainly His statement, "If thou doest well shalt thou not be accepted," is sincere and upholds the demand of His law that all serve and obey Him. But to jump from that to the conclusion that God desired to save Cain is a large jump indeed! In fact, in one of the few other Scripture passages that refers to Cain, Jude, 11, the Word of God rather than indicating that God ever showed any favourable disposition toward Cain, counts him among those "wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever" (vs. 13).

Mr. Spanner might even be interested to know that Genesis 4:7 is a passage cited by Erasmus in his defense of free will. Erasmus, as most of our readers will know, was the Roman Catholic against whom Luther wrote **The Bondage of the Will**. Erasmus argued that the word of God to Cain implied that Cain had some ability to respond to God, i.e., Cain was able to make a choice for or against what God had said to him.

It seems, then, that Mr. Spanner in his use of this passage is caught between agreeing with Erasmus and his defense of free will or disagreeing with Professor Murray and his defense of the well-meant offer. Can an offer be well-meant if it is made to a sinner who is utterly unable to want it? To say "no" is to disagree with Murray. But to say that all who hear the Gospel have some power to choose for it and for the promises it makes is to agree with Erasmus against Luther.

We would, therefore, without hesitation disagree with Professor Murray. We find his

² To the charge of rationalism we hope to respond in a future Journal article in more detail.

defense of the well-meant offer more than "misconceived." It is unreformed and unbiblical. Nor are we the only ones who think this. In the forward to the second edition of David Engelsma's book, **Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel**, Dr. John Gerstner writes, "I had the incomparable privilege of being a student of Professors Murray and Stonehouse. With tears in my heart, I nevertheless confidently assert that they erred profoundly in *The Free Offer of the Gospel* and died before they seem to have realized their error which, because of their justifiedly high reputations for Reformed excellence generally, still does incalculable damage to the cause of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of His gospel."