

The Free Offer Of The Gospel: Is It Biblical And Reformed?

There has been considerable discussion in recent times on the subject of the free offer of the Gospel. By the term "free offer" we do not, of course, mean the appeal system whereby coming to Christ is equated with some outward act (coming to the front of the meeting, putting one's hand up, signing a decision card) which can be done without a sovereign work of the Spirit of God renewing the heart and will. This would be Arminianism. Nor do we preach telling the unconverted, "Christ died for you", since this would be in conflict with the clear Biblical teaching that Christ died for the elect, and we do not know which unconverted sinners are God's elect. We do, however, mean that in the Gospel God sends to sinners an overture of mercy expressive of his kindness to them.

The hyper-Calvinist, of course, denies man's responsibility to repent and believe. He usually shares with the Arminian the assumption that God cannot command men to do what their sin has rendered them unable to do, that is repent and believe the Gospel. The former denies that God does so command, the latter denies man's natural inability to respond. The Biblical Calvinist insists that man's obligation to submit to God's authority is not diminished by his dependence on God's sovereign grace and power for enabling.

However, another position has appeared which is somewhere between hyper-Calvinism and orthodox Calvinism. The late Herman Hoeksema, an able theologian, and his denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches of America, have taken the view that whilst God commands all men to repent and believe (and they are responsible to do so) yet there is no offer or overture of mercy expressive of God's lovingkindness or favour to those who hear (elect and non-elect). This is in line with their denial that God ever shows favour of any kind to the non-elect.

Are Westminster Confession presbyterians on the right track then, in insisting that the preaching of the Gospel entails a gracious overture of mercy addressed to all who hear? Let us look at this question:

1. The Gospel Contains a Command from God

"God commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17/30). Men are commanded to look to Christ for salvation (Isaiah 45/22). The Apostle Paul speaks of "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16/26, cf Rom. 1/5). The reprobate are described as disobedient (1 Peter 2/7-8 and 4/17). Unbelief is sin (John 16/9, Heb. 3/12 and 17-18). This does not imply natural ability, but it does imply responsibility.

2. God Does Show Lovingkindness to the Non-elect in This Life

God does restrain sin, bestow material things and a variety of skills upon the non-elect in this present life. Not only so, but they are genuine expressions of God's lovingkindness to them. He is "kind unto the unthankful and to the evil" (Luke 6/35). God "blessed" reprobate Ishmael (Gen 17/20) and is "longsuffering" to the vessels of wrath (Rom. 9/22) who despise his goodness and forbearance (Rom. 2/4). Indeed, it is their unthankfulness for genuine favours that renders them so guilty (Rom. 1/21). "The Lord is good to all" we read in Psalm 145/9. That our Puritan

forbears understood this of men is indicated by the fact that they were content to have it rendered "good unto all men is the Lord" in the second version of the psalm in the Scottish psalter which had been so carefully scrutinized. It is in the sense that God shows love or favour to the non-elect as well as to the elect in this world that we use the term "common grace," though we are not particularly concerned to defend the term, only the concept. This non-saving kindness of God to the non-elect in this world is an expression of his sovereignty. Some object that the idea of God showing undeserved favour to a sinner only for a time is inconceivable. This is due to a misapplication of the doctrine of God's unchangeableness. The denial of common grace supposedly in defence of God's sovereignty actually becomes a denial of that sovereignty. God can show mercy as and when and how he pleases.

3. Our Duty to Love is Patterned after God's Love

In Matt. 5/44-48 (cf Luke 6/32-36) our love to our neighbour, even our enemies, is that which conforms us to our Heavenly Father. The family likeness is shown in our doing as he does. We do not know whether our neighbour or enemy is one of the elect or not, but still we are to love them. And this love is to be based on what we do know of our Father in Heaven, not what we do not know (i.e. whom he has chosen to salvation). We are to be merciful because our Father is merciful (Luke 6/36).

Further, the command to love our neighbour (elect or reprobate) is part of that law which is the outshining of God's holy character. Does God command us to love those whom he does not? Is the scope of our love to be greater than his?

In the next world, we will not show love to the lost, because God does not. Conformity to God is the key.

4. Christ fulfilled the Moral Law Entirely

The command to love our neighbour was perfectly fulfilled by Christ. He was "made under the law, and did perfectly fulfil it" (Westminster Confession VIII/IV). In order for this to be true, he must have shown love to both elect and reprobate neighbours, as God requires us to do. Moreover, to say that Christ only loved his neighbour in his human nature is heretically to divide the person of Christ, who "was, and continueth ever to be, God and man, in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever" (Shorter Catechism Ans. 21). His tears shed over Jerusalem (Luke 19/41-42) were human tears to be sure, but they were the tears of a Divine Person in his human nature just as his sufferings were the sufferings of a Divine Person in his human nature and therefore both infinite in value and substitutionary for men.

5. God's Love is Expressed in the Gospel

a. It is more than a declaration of God's love for the elect. Some say that God's love is set forth in the Gospel, meaning only that his love as shown to the elect is preached as the meaning of the Cross is declared. This is true, as far as it goes. Yet there is more to be said:

b. God expresses his lovingkindness to all who hear the Gospel. This is shown:-

(i) In the Content of the Gospel

It includes an expression of delight in the welfare of those who hear even though he has not decreed that all who hear will believe.

We can compare this with the fact that God commands all men to repent and therefore be holy and delights in that holiness contemplated, but does not decree that all should actually be holy. Likewise, God invites all men to true and eternal happiness and, as an expression of his sovereign love and kindness, takes pleasure in the happiness in view without having decreed to make them all believe and attain that happiness.

In short, just as God in his holiness genuinely commands all men to be holy without making them holy, so he in his love genuinely invites all men to be happy without making them eternally happy. (Deut. 5/29, 32/29, Psalm 81/13, Isaiah 48/18.) God can express a delight in that which he has not decreed shall come to pass. Often the denial of the free offer stems from a noble, but misdirected, desire not to represent God as thwarted, frustrated or helpless. This explains why the denial of the free offer in history has often been linked with Antinomianism. If an unfulfilled overture is inconsistent with God's sovereignty, why not also an unfulfilled command? The truth is, of course, that neither imply that God is not in control.

"Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked should turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel" (Ezekiel 33/11). The context makes it plain that those whose death God takes no pleasure in includes those who do not turn and who die as well as those who do turn and live (see vs. 8-9).

Calvin writing on the similar passage in Ezekiel 18/23 (he died before he finished his commentary on Ezekiel) states, "We hold, then, that God wills not the death of a sinner, since he calls all equally to repentance, and promises himself prepared to receive them if they only seriously repent. If anyone should object, then there is no election of God, by which he has predestinated a fixed number to salvation, the answer is at hand: the prophet does not here speak of God's secret command, but only recalls miserable men from despair, that they may apprehend the hope of pardon, and repent and embrace the offered salvation".

So the overture of the Gospel expresses God's lovingkindness to those to whom it is addressed. And it is addressed to sinners in general, even those still looking for satisfaction outside of Christ, who are spending "money for that which is not bread and their labour for that which satisfieth not" (Isaiah 55/2) and who cannot therefore be confined to the elect.

(ii) In the Godly Compassion of the Preacher

The kind of godly compassion the Apostle Paul expresses in Romans 9/1-3 and 10/1 is the fruit of the Spirit's work in the soul. The Holy Spirit does not create in the people of God compassion that is contrary to his own as to its objects. When the compassionate Christian is a preacher, he expresses that God-given compassion to guilty hell-deserving sinners in his preaching as a reflection of the compassion of the Lord in whose name and on whose behalf he speaks. "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in

Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5/20).

6. The Westminster Standards

The term "offer" or "free offer" is used in the Westminster Standards (Westminster Confession of Faith VII/III; Larger Catechism Ans. 32, 63, 68; Shorter Catechism Ans. 31 and 86).

The Larger Catechism puts it beyond doubt that the term is used in reference to non-elect persons; "...who, for their wilful neglect and contempt of grace offered to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ" (Larger Catechism Ans. 68).

Attempts have been made of late to rob the term "free offer" of much of its real meaning, as if it meant no more than "present" or "exhibit" (see H. Hanko, Protestant Reformed Journal Nov. 1986, pp. 16f). The intended meaning is far more than this. Anyone wishing to catch the true meaning of these terms and the general outlook of the Puritan period should read the "Sum of Saving Knowledge" drawn up by David Dickson and James Durham and often printed along with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, no doubt due to its claim to be "A Brief Sum of Christian Doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures, and holden forth in the foresaid Confession of Faith and Catechisms". The section on "Warrants to Believe" and its handling of Isaiah 55/1-5 and 2 Cor. 5/19-21 are especially noteworthy and the many references to God's promises, offers of grace, sweet invitations, loving requests etc.

7. Submission to Scripture

Do you have difficulty reconciling the genuine overtures of the Gospel with the truth of God's sovereign election and predestination? To allow any such difficulty to cause you to reject the plain Biblical testimony to the reality of these gracious overtures is to bow down to the false humanistic god of the finality of human reason and is the very antithesis of true Biblical Calvinism. Whilst all of God's Word is reasonable, our powers of reason are those of a finite and fallen creature. We must lean upon the words that have proceeded out of the mouth of God. It is fallen man's pride in his own reason causing him to heed again the words of the serpent, "Hath God said?" (Gen. 3/1).

Let us glorify God and say, "I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right" (Psalm 119/128).

Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church
www.loughbrickland.org