

SOME FURTHER OBJECTIONS TO THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

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Introduction and Clarification

Most Reformed theologians today believe that on God's part the gospel is a free or well-meaning offer of salvation. They mean that God expresses in the gospel a sincere desire that all who hear it be saved. We strenuously object to this teaching.

We do not, however, object to the word "offer." Let us be clear about this. Scripture does not use the word "offer" to describe the gospel, but the Reformed creeds do. We have no objection to the creeds.

Rightly understood, the word "offer" is not only acceptable but emphasizes an important truth about gospel preaching. The root meaning of the word is "to present" or "to show." The word is not used with that meaning anymore, at least not in everyday speech. But it is with that older meaning that the Reformed creeds use the word. Thus used the word simply emphasizes the important truth that the preaching of the gospel must display Christ and make Him known to all who hear.

There are few today, however, who speak of the gospel as an offer and mean only that Christ is "presented" in the gospel. Most mean that in the gospel God sincerely desires the salvation of all who hear and shows His sincerity by making Christ available to them. To this teaching we object.

The Free Offer and Arminianism

There are two very different theologies, however, which teach the free offer of the gospel in this wrong sense. In each case our objection is different.

On the one hand there are those who are not Reformed or Calvinist. For them the idea that the gospel is anything but an offer is incredible. If we can compare their system of doctrine to a picture puzzle, the free offer of the gospel is just another piece in the puzzle. Into their picture it fits nicely between the teaching that Christ died for everyone and the teaching that man's freewill choice determines if he will be saved in Christ.

In this system, sometimes called Arminianism, it is the free offer of the gospel that gives men the opportunity to make a choice. When salvation is offered to them in the gospel, they are able either accept or reject the salvation Christ purchased for them and for everyone by His death on the cross. Indeed, the gospel can only be an offer if salvation depends on man's will and choice.

This alone ought to give Reformed men and women pause. A teaching that fits so well into the Arminian picture of salvation ought to be suspect.

In Arminianism, though, our objections are not only to the free offer teaching but to the whole system. We would not discard just one piece of the puzzle, but the whole picture. We do not want a system that makes man's will, not God's will, God's cross, or God's grace, the decisive factor in salvation and that does not give glory to God.

The Free Offer and Reformed Theology

There are others, however, who are Calvinists and Reformed. They believe in

election, in particular redemption (that Christ died only for some particular persons). They believe, too, that salvation, including faith, is a gift of God. Nevertheless, they also believe that the gospel is a well-meant offer of salvation to all sinners who hear the gospel preached. In their case we object to their efforts to make the free-offer teaching a part of Reformed theology and Calvinism. Some of these objections follow.

If we also compare Calvinism and Reformed theology to a picture-puzzle, then the free-offer is like a piece that doesn't fit - a piece from the wrong puzzle. No matter how you turn it and try to force it will not fit. The thing to do then is to throw away the bad piece and to find the piece that does fit. In the hope that this will be done we wish to show in this article how and why the free offer of the gospel does not fit into Reformed theology.

The Free Offer and the Nature of God

One place where free offer teaching does not fit into Reformed theology is in the whole area of theology proper, i.e., the doctrine of God. Implicitly or explicitly it denies some fundamental truths regarding the nature of God Himself. To put the matter bluntly, free-offer teaching leads to a different conception of God than does the theology of those who reject the offer. This alone, if true, ought to be enough to condemn free offer teaching in the mind and heart of every Reformed person.

The free offer denies, first, a basic truth about revelation - the truth that all God's revelation is self-revelation, God making *Himself* known to us. No matter what the content of that revelation, no matter how it is given, it all in the end reveals Who and What God is.

All God says and does, therefore, is a revealing of what He is in Himself. That means, in turn, that God's revelation cannot contradict what He is in Himself. What He says cannot be different from what He is. What He does cannot contradict what He is. For example, if God is a just God, then no one of His works and words by which He reveals Himself *can* be unjust. We may not be able to understand or demonstrate why they are just, but because they are part of His revelation of Himself they cannot be.

The logic of it is that if any of God's works or ways are unjust, then He is also unjust *in Himself*, an unjust God. And, if He is an unjust God, He is not God at all. So with all His attributes.

The defenders of the free-offer deny this, often explicitly. They say in defense of the free-offer that God *can* be something different in His dealings with men than He is in Himself. Free offer teaching says that He can desire their salvation, offer them salvation, love them and be gracious to them in the gospel, and yet be in Himself from eternity of a different mind, will and heart concerning them. His revelation of Himself in the gospel can and does contradict what He is in Himself.

If that is true, then revelation is not really revelation, an uncovering and showing of Who and What God is in Himself. In fact, revelation would then tell the very opposite of the truth about the nature and will of God - it would be a lie. Put a bit more kindly, free offer teaching says that God does not tell those who perish the whole truth - especially not the whole truth *about Himself*. He speaks to them of love and grace and mercy. He even does loving, gracious and merciful things for them, but in His own heart, mind and will there is no grace or love or mercy for them. He not only did not choose them, He did not even intend to have His Son die for them, or to give His Spirit to them. What He says and shows in the gospel is not the truth about Who and What He is from eternity and in Himself.

Those who believe in the offer are not afraid of saying this. They plainly speak of two wills in God, a revealed will to save all who hear the gospel (expressed in the free offer of the gospel) and a secret will not to save them (determined in eternal election). They are willing to say that God both hates and loves those who perish. That, however, only raises further problems with other of God's attributes.

For one thing it denies God's Oneness. His Oneness means that He is in Himself and in His revelation One and Indivisible. This is denied by those who hold to the free offer. They say without hesitation that God is of two minds, two wills, two hearts concerning those who perish. He loves them and He does not love them. He wills their salvation (in the Gospel) and does not will it (in election). Nor are His revelation and His eternal mind and will one and the same. IN his revelation He is one thing - in Himself another. No defender of the free-offer has ever shown how such teaching can be reconciled with the fundamental teaching of Scripture, the great "Shema" of Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is ONE Lord. Indeed, it cannot be reconciled with God's Oneness. It is a piece that does not fit Reformed THEOLOGY.

Another aspect of God's Oneness is His simplicity or perfection. This means that there is no disharmony, no contradiction, no imperfection, in God. In that sense also He is one and undivided in His nature and revelation, His words and works, and in all His attributes. The "theology" of the free-offer cannot be reconciled with God's simplicity. It flatly contradicts this important attribute by teaching that there are contradiction and imperfection in God. Think for example of the two-wills teaching which is at the heart of offer theology. Not only do the two wills contradict each other, but the one at least is imperfect in that it remains unfulfilled and unrealized with respect to those who perish.

Nor are these the only attributes of God that are contradicted by free offer teaching. Such teaching also denies God's unchangeableness. He changes His mind and will and His Word about those who perish, showing a *sincere* desire for their salvation in the Gospel and then in the end damning them. He promises them eternal life in the Gospel and then does not give it - does not even give the necessary means in the death of Christ and the work of the Spirit.

Free offer teaching denies His eternity, too. It teaches that there is a love, a grace, a will of God, which lasts only as long as the gospel is preached. His eternal will, so they say, is only revealed in predestination. The free offer even contradicts His sovereignty in that it teaches that there are in the Gospel a resistible grace and a love that do not save.

The truth is that the free offer of the Gospel fits none of God's attributes. Is a grace that offers salvation but does not give the means of salvation an *infinite* grace? Is it *truth* for God to tell men that He loves them, while He does nothing either in the cross or by the Spirit to save them? Is it *wisdom* to offer salvation to those who are excluded from it by election? Is it really even *love* to say to them that He desires their salvation while having secretly planned otherwise?

What then? The free offer does not fit next to revelation. It does not fit the attributes of God. It will not fit into the doctrine of God. It fits nowhere. Nor can any defender of the offer make it fit without bending or ruining the other pieces of the picture.

The Free Offer and the Five Points of Calvinism

There is, however, another, smaller part of the picture called the Five Points of Calvinism. Every Calvinist knows and loves the Five Points. Does the offer teaching fit there? Again the answer is "No!" Consider the following.

Free Offer teaching is nonsense in relation to the first of the Five Points, the doctrine of Total Depravity. Total Depravity means very simply, that fallen man is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). To offer something sincerely to a dead man, wanting and intending him to have what is offered, is both useless and foolish.

Free offer teaching makes nonsense of unconditional election and reprobation, since an offer is by its very nature conditional. It is conditional in that its acceptance depends on the will of the person to whom the offer is made. You cannot offer something to a tree, which has no will. You cannot offer something to a baby, who is not able to use its will to

make conscious choices. You cannot offer something to a person who is asleep, whose will is not active. Yet free offer teaching says that God sincerely offers something to those whose wills are inactive for good and cannot (if you believe in the bondage of the will) chose to accept it. Nor can a sincere offer and all that it implies about man's will be reconciled with the truth that salvation does not depend on man's will but on God's eternal will and good pleasure.

Free offer teaching does not reconcile with Limited Atonement either. Almost inevitably it leads to a denial of Limited Atonement. An offer of salvation in Christ is both insincere and empty if Christ did not die for those to whom the offer is made. Even men who actually believe in Limited Atonement are forced to make statements that deny Limited Atonement in their defense of the offer. Murray and Stonehouse are good example. In the very last paragraph of their booklet, "The Free Offer of the Gospel," they say, "It is Christ in all the glory of his person and finished work whom God offers in the gospel." How can He be so offered if He is not available?

So too, the offer flatly denies Irresistible Grace. The offer is supposed to be a kind of grace, yet that grace shown in the offer is not only resistible but always resisted in the case of those who perish. Where, then, is the great Calvinist doctrine of Irresistible Grace?

Nor can a gospel which is an only an offer provide anything of what is necessary for perseverance. The gospel is the means of perseverance to the end, but not if it is only an offer. What can an offer do to keep us "through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time?"

Here, too, the pieces of the picture must be bent, forced, or cut to a different shape to allow the teaching of the free offer to fit among them. The free offer adds nothing to Reformed theology. It is a piece from a different picture. Let it, then, be put where it fits.

The Call of the Gospel

But what is the piece we are looking for? What is the gospel if not a well-meant offer?

The answer is plain. It is a command or call, which is sovereign, powerfully irresistible, which awakens dead sinners, thus accomplishing what God has eternally and unchangeably willed, and finishing exactly what Christ did on the cross. It is also a means of hardening according to which the sovereign will and good pleasure of God are sovereignly accomplished also with respect to those who perish.

This is a truth largely forgotten today. Even those who are not involved in the free offer controversy have for the most part forgotten this great truth. Not knowing that the preaching of the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16), the means by which faith comes (Rom. 10:17), the way in which we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:27, 28), they neglect preaching. Both preachers (who ought to know better) and the members of their congregations (who probably do not) are guilty. Not knowing that the gospel is the effectual Word by which God calls His people out of darkness into light, the clear proclamation of the truth of Scripture is replaced by appeals, emotional displays and a hawking of Jesus Christ that makes Him little more than something to be sold in the marketplace.

May God grant, therefore, not only a correct understanding of what preaching is, but a revival of true preaching in the church and in evangelism - preaching that is indeed the power of God unto salvation to all those whom He has chosen and for whom Christ died.