

# The Westminster Standards and the Gospel Offer.

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It is the purpose of this article to consider the plain teaching of the Westminster Standards (that is, the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms) with regard to the various issues involved in the modern controversy surrounding the nature of the gospel offer. Two camps presently exist within the Presbyterian and Reformed community, both of which lay claim to be upholding the teaching of the Standards, who differ in their conception of what the gospel offer entails. The first group hold that the gospel offer or external call means that all men without exception in the preaching of the gospel are to be commanded, called, exhorted and invited to come to Christ for salvation and life, with the promise that those who do come will be saved. The second group believe that, in addition to this, the external call expresses a love of God to all men, and a desire of God to save all who hear. In this article, the first position will be regarded as in accordance with the Westminster Standards, and the second will be shown to be at least absent from them, and also contrary to them.

**Firstly**, the Standards and the Love of God. It has been rightly pointed out that the Westminster divines saw the goodness of God as a basic umbrella term for such other attributes as His love, grace, and mercy.<sup>1</sup> The fourth question of the Shorter Catechism states that this goodness of God has the characteristics of being infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, and that these characteristics are typical of all God's other attributes, and therefore of His essential being. If God's goodness has these three characteristics, and goodness includes love, then God's love must have these characteristics too. But those who hold to the second interpretation of the gospel offer make the love of God to be the opposite and negation of what the Shorter Catechism states. The love of God which is supposedly expressed to all in the gospel offer is finite (being non-saving), temporal (being limited to this present world only, and being absent from God's decree and hell), and changeable (being real at one point but non-existent at another). Such a love is clearly excluded from the teaching of the Westminster Standards according to the definition held herewith in this article and represented by the first position as adumbrated above.

**Secondly**, the Standards and the Being of God. In Chapter Two, Section

<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. Silverside, *THE DOCTRINE OF CONVERSION IN THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS*, *Reformed Theological Journal* (Belfast) November 1993, pp.78,79.

one, of the Confession it is stated that God is “without .....parts”. This teaches that God is simple<sup>2</sup>, and is sometimes referred to as the unity or indivisibility of God. God is not composed of parts and He cannot be divided into parts. Two theological deductions can be made from this doctrine. It firstly means that there cannot be an intrinsic or real contradiction in the nature of God, and secondly means that there can be no intrinsic or real distinction made between the divine essence and the divine attributes. The second interpretation of the gospel offer violates both of these points, and therefore violates the teaching of the Westminster Standards.

John Murray, a theologian who advocates an extreme form of the second interpretation, admits that his view departs from Calvin’s on this issue.<sup>3</sup> Calvin taught that God is simple, and therefore that God’s will is also simple, although it might seem at times diverse to the senses because of our finitude and sinfulness. Murray says that this view of Calvin’s is wrong, holding instead that there is real contradiction involved in God, particularly concerning His will. So much is obvious and open in Murray, and is latent in the theology of all who hold the second view, even if they do not always openly state it, that God wills two basically different and contrary things. And this willing is not in two different senses merely, because God is thought to will different things with regard to the same people at the same time. That is, God is said to will the salvation of unbelievers under the sound of the gospel while willing in that same gospel that only believers should be saved. This is a denial of the simplicity of God, and therefore of the Westminster Standards.

Also, the second interpretation involves the idea already mentioned that God can express a particular attitude of His in a temporal and arbitrary fashion to all people in the gospel offer (i.e., His love), without Himself being changed. But the attribute of love is represented in the Standards and in the Scripture as being God Himself, as St. John says :

He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

*1 John 4 : 8*

...God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God,  
and God in him.

*1 John 4 : 16*

Therefore, if this attribute is regarded as merely temporal, finite, resistible, and frustrated, and if God is His attributes (as His essence and His attributes cannot be

<sup>2</sup> “Simple” here is meant in its Theological and Philosophical sense, i.e., that God is in His Divine Nature completely perfect, and internally totally and perfectly in Unity, and not therefore subject to conflicting internal elements of personality or thought or purpose. In contrast to ‘simple’ in this sense would be ‘complex’, which would be attributable to finite creatures such as humans, who are subject to being torn within by conflicting thoughts, desires, and purposes. Obviously, such conflicts could never be present within the divine nature, otherwise God would thereby lack perfection, and thereby not be God. See further in this respect : **Richard A. Muller: Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms**( Grand Rapids, Baker Book House 1985) article **simplicitas**.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Murray: CALVIN ON SCRIPTURE AND DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY, p.69.

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divided), it rigorously follows that God Himself is temporal, finite, resistible, and frustrated. This also is a denial of the simplicity of God, and therefore also a denial of the Westminster Standards.

Again, in this same section of the Confession, it is stated that God is 'without.....passions'. This teaches that God does not possess creaturely emotions which may be subject to inflammation, such as grief, frustration, or suffering. Yet one recent advocate of the second interpretation of the gospel offer said that God desires, wishes, and longs for the salvation of all men.<sup>4</sup> But John Owen, the greatest Puritan theologian and contemporary and admirer of the work of the Westminster Assembly, stated:

That desires and wishings should properly be ascribed unto God is exceedingly opposite to His all-sufficiency and the perfection of His nature; they are no more in Him than He hath eyes, ears, and hands.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, those who hold to the second interpretation of the gospel offer are guilty of interpreting anthropomorphical (or, more strictly, anthropopathical)<sup>6</sup> verses literally, by ascribing unto God human psychological traits. And, it should be noted that, even when the Scripture clearly describes God in such terms, He is still declared to be simple and Sovereign, viz.,

But He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? and what His soul desireth, even that He doeth. *Job 23 : 13*

To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto Him? .....To whom then will ye liken Me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One.....Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? .....

*Isaiah 40 : 18- 27*     7

**Thirdly**, the Standards and Omnipotence. Although this attribute of God is not explicitly spoken of in the Standards by use of the word 'omnipotence', it is nevertheless definitely taught. In question and answer seven the Larger Catechism describes God as 'almighty'. This biblical title is somewhat ambiguous in itself with regard to precise definition, but the Confession is more explicit in chapter two

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<sup>4</sup> R.E.M.Uprichard : *Bible Study Guide*, p.10. The quote expresses well the general sentiment of this group.

<sup>5</sup> John Owen : *The Death of Death*, p.289; and *Works Vol 10* p.401.

<sup>6</sup> Anthropomorphical : means having a **form** like man (Greek: Anthropos = man, and morph means shape or form.). Anthropopathical means having emotions (pathos) like man.

<sup>7</sup> NB also the Belgic Confession, which begins with an assertion of these facts: **Article 1.** *We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.....*

section one, defining omnipotence as God 'working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will.' Here, then, is a sound definition. According to it, the truth that God is omnipotent does not mean that He can do anything, or that He has simply more power than any other being, but rather that God has the absolute power to do as He wills. This truth is plainly taught in the Scriptures also, e.g.,

But our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased.

*Psalm 115 : 3*

Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.

*Psalm 135 : 6*

Having predestined us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.

*Eph. 1 : 5*

What has this to do with the gospel offer? Those who hold the second view of the offer maintain that there is in God a certain desire or will to bring to pass in time that which He has been pleased eternally not to will to come to pass. That is, God in the gospel offer wants to save the reprobate wicked even when He has been sovereignly pleased to will that they would not be saved. The problem with this is obvious : how can God have the power to do as He wills, and yet will certain things which do not come to pass ? Three possible answers exist. First, God does not will the salvation of the reprobate at all. Second, God is not omnipotent. Third, despite all arguments concerning the Scripture doctrines of the Omnipotence, Simplicity, and Unchangeableness of God, it is asserted that because God evidently holds simultaneously two mutually incompatible attitudes to the Elect prior to their conversion, namely, the eternal decree to save, and the damning wrath unto judgement for their sins, so, likewise, He is able to hold simultaneously two mutually incompatible attitudes toward the reprobate, that is, the decree to leave them in their sins unto final damnation, and the desire to save them from their sins. It is argued that if God *sincerely* holds a damning wrath over the Elect in their pre-conversion state and this is compatible with Him simultaneously setting them as the objects of His saving love, then it would follow, as a corollary, that He can exercise *sincerely* a desire to save the reprobate co-extensively with His eternal decree to predestine them to destruction. Any abrogation of the force of the word *sincerely* in the case of the reprobate here would also necessitate logically a consonant abrogation of its force with respect to the sincerity of the wrath of God over the Elect prior to their conversion.

In response to these three possible answers, it has to be asserted that any attempt to resolve the matter along the lines of the second answer, i.e., that God is not omnipotent, is a flat denial of the Reformed Faith and the Scriptural position of the

Reformed Standards. No Reformed theologians of any repute have ever adopted this position, whatever their views on common grace and the gospel offer (leaving aside certain apostates and turncoats). It is, however, with the third answer that many modern Reformed theologians align themselves, and it is to this we now apply.

If, as these theologians assert, God's wrath over the preconversion elect is a sincere threat of ultimate damnation, then two things logically follow. First, there is then an evident will or purpose in God, i.e., to damn, which, in the case of the elect, is never fulfilled, because of course, God saves His elect from that damnation. Secondly, this indicates that there exists in God two parallel and incompatible purposes with respect to the elect, one, an eternal purpose unto the just damnation of the elect for their sins, and the other an equally eternal purpose to redeem them. This, it is then alleged, establishes that in God two mutually and simultaneously incompatible decrees and attitudes can co-exist, and that unfulfilled purpose or intent is also to be found within the Divine person. If this is so with respect to the elect, then it is perfectly compatible with there being a similar phenomenon with regard to the reprobate, or non-elect. That is, that God can and does hold with regard to them two mutually simultaneous and incompatible purposes, i.e., the decree to leave them in their sins unto damnation, and the sincere desire to save them from this consequence, this latter purpose being, in the case of the non-elect, a sincere desire or purpose which remains unfulfilled, or frustrated, even as the sincere purpose to damn the pre-conversion elect was also unfulfilled.

All this, it is claimed, indicates a salient proof of their notion of the 'free offer' of the gospel as being a sincere expression of God's desire to save the non-elect. Leaving aside the deleterious consequences of this kind of reasoning on the Biblical doctrine of God in His Unity, Simplicity, and Omnipotence, it is eye-opening to make a close inspection of the logic contained in this line of argument. At the outset, it is necessary to point out that it is based on an entirely false and unbiblical view of the matters in hand. A false scenario has been drawn by proponents of this view, and their deductions follow, *ipso facto* and inexorably. But following as they do from a false scenario, *ipso facto* and inexorably their deductions are wrong. One ought to consider here, the following criticism of their arguments, given by Hugh Williams, thus :

They leave out of their picture the most important feature of the Biblical revelation and Christian Theology, that is, the work of our Lord Jesus Christ in His Three-fold Office whereby He effectuates the Redemption of God's elect through His Atonement. It has to be said that, on occasion, some Reformed theologians in discussing the decretive purposes of God, lose connection with the work of our Saviour, and tend to hold the doctrines of the decrees and of God's nature and purposes in abstract from Christ. The result can be such as exemplified in the false scenario put

forth here. The fact is, that biblically speaking, God's wrath against the pre-conversion elect is absolutely and indubitably as sincere and as damning as the wrath He holds over the non-elect. There is NO difference whatsoever. To the elect as well as to the non-elect comes the Scriptural warning "...flee from the wrath to come..." ( Matt. 3:7), and St. Paul can write to the Thessalonians about "...even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." ( I Thess. 1:10 ). But it is utterly false, and contrary to Scripture, to assert that this just, sincere, and damning wrath of God is unfulfilled and/or frustrated with regard to the elect, and that concerning them an important aspect of God's purposes is left unfulfilled. Scripture indubitably teaches that God's wrath over the elect HAS BEEN FULFILLED, that His righteous anger over them has been satisfied, and not in any way frustrated. His wrath on the elect was poured out on Christ, who in His estate of humiliation fully bore and suffered the just anger and retribution due to the elect for their sins. And thus the Scriptures teach:

*Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes we are healed.*

*I Peter 2 : 24*

But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, *Christ died for us.*

*Rom. 5: 8*

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, *the just for the unjust*, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

*I Peter 3 : 18*

*Who was delivered for our offences*, and was raised again for our justification.

*Rom. 4 : 25*

One could multiply such Scriptures almost endlessly, e.g., I Thess. 5: 9 and 10; Col. 1 : 14-22, Matt. 26 :28; Titus 2 : 14; I Cor. 15 :3; Heb. 9 : 12 - 26; Heb. 10 : 1 - 20; I John 3 : 16; John 10 : 11; John 15 :13; is but to select at random a very few of the total. It might be summed up in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism in response to Question 27 : Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, **THE WRATH OF GOD**, and the cursed death of the cross, in being buried, and in continuing under the power of death for a time.

Thus, it is indubitably manifest that God's purpose of wrath over the pre-conversion elect, far from being unfulfilled, has been fulfilled, and that in a manner that could not be more excellent. At the same time as He procured this satisfaction for His justice and wrath, God's eternal decree to

save the elect is effectuated, whereby they undergo an ontological transition out from the estate of sin and misery and into an estate of salvation, being metamorphosed into new creatures in Christ in the process, and this by the sovereign application of the Holy Spirit's energies. Thus St. Paul is inspired to speak of how "the righteousness of God without the law is manifested..." and how God, through the work of Christ declares "...at this time His righteousness: that HE MIGHT BE JUST, AND THE JUSTIFIER OF HIM WHICH BELIEVETH ON JESUS." (Rom. 3 : vv. 20 through 26.)

Hence there is also, no question of God holding, with regard to the elect, two mutually simultaneous contradictory attitudes or purposes. His purpose to damn is appropriate to the pre-conversion elect, but His purpose to elect unto life is appropriate to Christ, and all those IN CHRIST, for the Scriptures do not say "according as He hath chosen us before the foundation of the world", but rather, "according as He hath chosen us IN HIM before the foundation of the world...." (Eph. 1 : 4). Outside of Christ there is no election, only damnation.

The corollary of this is that the assertion that there exists in God a temporally expressed desire to save the non-elect immediately collapses, as it would require the positing of an unfulfilled purpose or desire in the Divine personality, now no longer backed by a similar parallel phenomenon registered vis a vis the elect. With it collapses the notion of God holding two mutually simultaneous contradictory purposes with regard to the non-elect, i.e., the decree to damn, and the purpose or desire to save, for this too, is now seen to have no parallel backing from God's dealings with His elect. And with this too, the whole charade of 'common grace' disintegrates, collapsing like the pack of cards in 'Alice in Wonderland', depending, as it does, like the 'Free Offer' fantasy, on the blasphemous notion of there being 'double-track' psychology in a God who suffers perpetually the pangs of frustration from unfulfilled but 'sincere' purposes and desires.

One might desire to do X, and simultaneously to desire to do NOT X. But one cannot SINCERELY desire to do X, and simultaneously SINCERELY desire to do NOT X. And to ascribe such logical acrobatics to the Almighty is sheer blasphemy, and effectively reduces Him to the level of being a crook, a downright fraud.<sup>8</sup>

One is left therefore, with the conclusion that only those who choose the first option, i.e., that God does not will the salvation of the reprobate at all, are in

<sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence from editor of British Reformed Journal.

keeping with the teaching of the Westminster Standards.

**Fourthly**, it is necessary to consider the Standards and the relationship between time and eternity. Question and answer thirteen of the Larger Catechism contains some very important teaching as far as the nature of the gospel offer is concerned. It teaches that the cause of election is the particular love and grace of God to His people in Christ from eternity. Also, it tells of two vital truths concerning this love and grace. Firstly, it tells us that this particular love and grace is 'manifested in due time'. The particular love and grace which was bestowed upon the elect in eternity is the same that they know and experience in time. There is therefore no discontinuity or discrepancy between time and eternity as far as the expression of the attributes of God are concerned, which love and grace are. They are not particular in eternity, but then universal in time. It is contrary to the Westminster Standards to hold that God loves only the elect in eternity, but everyone in time.

This instructive question and answer also informs us that this particular love and grace toward the elect is not only manifested in time, but also expressed in 'the means thereof' that God has chosen to save them from their sins. From the proof texts, it is evident that the Westminster divines had primarily the preaching of the gospel in mind here, as it is obviously the chief 'means of grace' that God uses to save sinners. But it is just that: a **means** of grace, and **not** grace itself! God does not express therefore a general love and grace to all in the preaching of the gospel offer, but rather uses the offer as a means or instrument to bestow those blessings upon those who obey it. And since it is only God's elect who do obey it, it is only God's elect who have the blessings of the love and grace of God bestowed on them in the preaching of the gospel offer, and no one else.

**Fifthly**, the Standards and revelation. In connection with the above consideration of the relationship between time and eternity, it is also useful to point out what the Confession has to say about revelation. It teaches that in the Holy Scriptures, and that also therefore in the preaching of those Scriptures, God has been pleased above all else to 'reveal Himself' (chapter one, section one). And so in the gospel offer God must not ever be thought of as showing us another different self than what He really is. If the eternal God loves only His people, and if this eternal God has revealed Himself in the gospel, He can only be revealed as the same eternal God who loves only His people. The content and direction of God's decretive will and revealed will do not conflict, although they differ in scope. For the revealed will to declare a being who loves all men and wants all men to be saved would be to reveal another being than the one who decreed in eternity, and would be contradictory to the position of the Westminster Standards.

**Sixthly**, the Standards and providence. In dealing with the relation between the providence of God and the reprobate wicked, the Confession proclaims two truths (chapter five, section six). First, that God, rather than wanting in time to



save the reprobate, is pleased to 'blind and harden' them, and that this is achieved by a deliberate policy on God's part in which He 'withholdeth His grace' from them in time. Second, as well as this general policy, God has a special policy about bringing about this hardening process 'under those means which God useth for the softening of others'. So, in the gospel offer, God not only withholds His grace from the reprobate wicked, but also uses it to harden them. Therefore the purpose that God has in providentially allowing the reprobate wicked to sit under the preaching of the gospel offer is the very opposite of expressing a love for them and a desire to see them saved. This interpretation is further backed up by the choice of proof texts the Westminster divines used at this point. See particularly Isaiah 6 : 10 and II Corinthians 2 : 16.<sup>9</sup>

**Seventhly,** the Standards and the phrase 'free offer'. The Standards nowhere describe the gospel itself as an offer, free or otherwise, but do state that by way of the gospel God 'freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ', as indicated in Chapter seven section three. What does this mean? The second group in the Reformed camp take it to mean that the preaching of the gospel implies a gracious overture of mercy expressed in a general favour and kindness of God to all who hear.

That this all can be taken out of one word seems, to say the least, somewhat ambitious, all the more so in the light of three facts. First, to the Westminster divines, steeped as they were in the Latin classics, the word 'offer', derived as it is from the Latin '*offere*,' could only have meant to them 'present' or 'exhibit'.<sup>10</sup> Second, the proof texts used by the divines at this point stress that 'offer' simply means 'preach' or 'proclaim'. What else? Third, the confession itself, after having just spoken of God 'freely offering', goes on to overtly and explicitly define exactly what it means by this, by proceeding to speak of a general obligation and call to faith, along with a particular promise of salvation to the elect. Therefore, for the Westminster divines, the 'free-offer' of the gospel was simply the truth that, in the preaching of the gospel, all are commanded and called to believe (which is the duty of all to obey), and those who believe are promised life and salvation in and by Jesus Christ. And this is exactly what the first group spoken of in the opening paragraph hold to be the case.

**Finally,** the Standards and the self-sufficiency and ever-blessedness of God.

<sup>9</sup> The reader ought to take time to inspect these proof texts carefully. They will indeed, lead him to echo St. Paul's words: "...and who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor. 2 : 16) *Ed.*

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation of 'offer' is queried by some, but a close examination of the Complete Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary indicates that in the English language the word 'offer' certainly carried the force of 'present' during the period from 825 AD onwards in unbroken sequence right up through to the 19th Century. Whilst it is also true to say that a more 'commercial' nuance was also evident in public usage, yet the nuance of 'present' was especially current in the world of religious language and the church during this period, and with the force of the argument from the grounds of the Latin tongue being in high profile ecclesiastically and *academically* the weight of evidence favours the view expressed here. *Ed.*

The Larger Catechism says that God is 'in and of Himself infinite in ....blessedness' and 'all-sufficient' (answer 7). The Confession (Chapter 2, section 2) proclaims that God 'hath all ....blessedness in and of Himself, and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creature which He has made.' Together, these doctrines teach that God is in Himself an infinitely and perfectly happy being, and that this happiness is not derived from another source, but is intrinsic in Himself. Therefore, since no creature can add to the blessedness of God, so no creature can take away from it. But those who affirm the second view of the gospel offer are guilty of trying to do just this when they declare that God has unfulfilled desires, and earnestly seeks for goals which He does not obtain. On this issue of God, in the gospel offer, being said to desire what He does not desire, the Reformed theologian, John H. Gerstner, correctly observes:

(If this were true) not only would He otherwise be bereft of some blessedness which would reduce Him to finitude, but He would be possessed of some frustration which would not only bereave Him of some blessedness, but would manifestly destroy all blessedness. This would clearly be the case because His blessedness would be mixed with infinite regret. Our God would be the ever-miserable, ever-blessed God. His torment in the eternal destruction of sinners would be as exquisite as it is everlasting.<sup>11</sup>

Thankfully, such a terrible and blasphemous conclusion is impossible, being unscriptural, and is utterly rejected by the teaching of the Westminster Standards.

In the opening paragraph the question proposed for consideration was this: whether the Westminster Standards taught that in the preaching of the gospel offer God expresses a love to all who hear by which He intends and desires the salvation of reprobates (the non-elect). The remainder of this article has demonstrated that, if the Westminster divines did hold to such an opinion, they did not incorporate it into the Standards.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it has been shown that the Standards openly and strongly reject many of the implications deduced from holding such a view of the offer. Positively, the evidence mustered during the course of this article makes for an acceptance of the first position only as being definitely and clearly confessional, while the second view is at least extra-confessional in its content, if not openly anti-confessional in its connotations.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John H. Gerstner: **Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth**, (Brentwood, Tennessee, Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), page 129. Dr. Gerstner goes on at this point to say: "His (God's) torment in the eternal damnation of sinners would be as exquisite as it is everlasting. He would actually suffer infinitely more than the wicked. Indeed, He would Himself be wicked because He would have sinfully desired what His omniscience would have told Him He could never have."

<sup>12</sup> This point is further ramified when one remembers how during the Westminster Assembly's long deliberations, they had such a view as that held by the second group mentioned in this article laid before them, in that Amyraldian influences were strongly at work trying to influence them. It is clear that the Assembly firmly rejected the incorporation of any such ideas into the Standards. Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall has some astute observations about this, which can be seen reprinted on page 40 of Issue No. 9 of the British Reformed Journal. *Ed.*