

Calvin and the Free Offer

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In the recent August-September issue of 'The Banner of Truth' magazine, John Brentnall has written an article called 'Calvin and the Free Offer.' The purpose of this article is explained by an introductory preface which has been written, I suppose, by the editor. In it we are told that the 'debate as to whether Calvinists believe in the Free Offer of Christ' needs to be opened again, since, apparently, the Protestant Reformed Churches in the U.S.A. and 'their followers' (?) in the British Reformed Fellowship deny that God 'makes an indiscriminate offer of Christ to sinners.' In denying this, they are said to be taking a view opposed to the Westminster Standards. Unfortunately, instead of bringing more theological clarity and spiritual enlightenment to the minds of God's people concerning this vital issue, the article, when weighed in the balances of Scripture, reason and history, is found altogether wanting.

Mr. Brentnall begins his essay in an excellent fashion when he states the need to define our terms before the subject can be properly examined. However, hope of a fair and clear hearing are somewhat dashed by what follows. The word 'Calvinism' is defined in three different ways, none of which is chosen to represent the author's essential meaning throughout the course of his essay, and the definitions are forgotten about for the rest of the article. Why does Mr. Brentnall do this? Who has ever quibbled in the Protestant Reformed Churches or the British Reformed Fellowship as to what the word 'Calvinism' means?

What Mr. Brentnall ought to have done is carefully, and in as much detail as possible, define what he means by the word 'offer.' This he never does in a proper sense, and the rest of the article acutely suffers from the lack of it. He does, when considering the term 'free offer,' quote from several Reformed writers who also use the term (e.g., Luther, Erskine, McCheyne, and Manton), but this hardly tells us what it means. He is correct in reasoning that since these men used the phrase 'free offer,' that therefore they held to an undefined and nondescript doctrine called 'the free offer of the gospel.' This point is obviously true, but trivial and contentless, as it still begs the question as to what they meant by the phrase themselves, and so also what he means by it. Hence, when Mr. Brentnall explains what he means by 'offer,' he merely uses the word 'offer' over again, thereby achieving nothing.

The unhappy consequence of this fundamental flaw is that, for the remainder of the article, Mr. Brentnall exhibits ably that not only does he not agree with the P.R.C.'s, or the B.R.F., but that this lack of agreement is based ultimately on a

lack of understanding of the central issues involved.

In any case, let us now be crystal clear in opposition to this confusion. Neither the P.R.C.'s, or the B.R.F., in any way deny that God universally and indiscriminately commands, calls, exhorts, and invites all men without exception to come to Christ for salvation, freely promising that there is eternal life for those who do. What we most fervently disagree with, and what Mr. Brentnall never really deals with, is the unbiblical, unconfessional and unreasonable notion that God may be properly said to desire or intend the salvation of all men in the preaching of the gospel, especially when what is meant by this desire is not merely the revealed will of God in the gospel's moral imperative, but a literal frustrated desire and emotion in God in tension with and contrary to this eternal will and purpose to save only the elect.

To repeat, the issue is not whether the term 'free offer' was ever used, or even widely used by the Reformers, Puritans, and Covenanters and their spiritual heirs. The issue is not even whether we today ought to use such a term with its Arminian and Amyraldian connotations. The issue is: what does it mean? And so it is that, when Mr. Brentnall extensively quotes from Calvin during the main bulk of his article to 'prove' Calvin held to the free offer just because Calvin uses the phrase, he completely fails to bring about the effect required, and really misses the whole point.

Before I conclude with a consideration of what Calvin believed about the free offer, some other points about Mr. Brentnall's article beg to be made. Frequently, Mr. Brentnall mentions the 'Marrow' men, Thomas Boston and Ebenezer Erskine, during the course of his article with apparent approval. Of course, he is at perfect liberty to do such a thing. What he is not at liberty to do, however, is to let his readers forget that the book in question, Edward Fisher's 'The Marrow of Modern Divinity,' was condemned and ultimately banned by the Church of Scotland General Assembly in 1720 because of its unbiblical and anticonfessional content. Also, he is not at liberty to pretend that the position taken in the book was in any way a majority position historically in the Scottish Kirk.

In connection with Scottish theology, another point must be made. Mr. Brentnall mentions William Cunningham, the first Professor of Historical Theology of the Free Church of Scotland. He also, with apparent approval, mentions Cunningham's *magnum opus*, **Historical Theology**. But has he read it? If so, has he read it carefully? Yes indeed, Cunningham does use the word 'offer' with great liberty. He also, in clear and categorical terms, is at one with the P.R.C's and B.R. F. in his condemnation of the modern interpretation of what the phrase means.

Calvinists, while they admit that pardon and salvation are offered indiscriminately to all to whom the gospel is preached, and that all who can be reached should be invited and urged to come to Christ and embrace Him, deny that this flows from, or indicates, any design or purpose on God's part to save all men.¹

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In a strange twist to the plot, Mr. Brentnall inadvertently sides with the B.R.F., and in doing so shows again his lack of knowledge of as to what our position is, when, at one point, he attacks the notion of condition in connection with the external call and promise of the gospel. Does he not know that the P.R.C.'s have been attacking the concept of condition since their formation in 1924? If not, he ought to find out the true position of an opponent before he demolishes a straw man of his own making. If so, will he not stand with us in his opposition to such views instead of shooting at his own allies?

During the course of the article Mr. Brentnall quotes the Westminster standards with considerable enthusiasm. Indeed, as can be seen from the Editor's preface, the position of the P.R.C.'s and the B.R.F. are seen in terms of a relationship of antithesis. For those interested in this issue, my essay entitled 'The Westminster Standards and the Gospel Offer,' printed in the last issue of the **British Reformed Journal** should be consulted as an introduction. Despite a seemingly strong commitment to the Westminster standards, Mr. Brentnall shows his lack of acquaintance with both its spirit and content, when at one point he makes the following statement:

Certain Calvinists, who want all the questions answered to the satisfaction of their logic-tidy minds, are simply not prepared to stop reasoning where God is silent, and submit their restless intellects to the revealed will of God.

Firstly, one should note the language of propaganda here. Is there anyone in the P.R.C.'s or the B.R.F. who wishes to dabble in the secret and unrevealed things of God? Has there ever been? Is not this fiction? Secondly, one should also note the unconfessional attack on reasoning and logic. Logic may be defined as the science of necessary inference.² The Westminster Confession, in its first chapter, states that all things for our faith and life are either expressly set down in Scripture, or may be *deduced by good and necessary consequence* from Scripture. This is nothing else but logic. Also, when the Confession, in Chapter 29, attacks the foul blasphemy of transubstantiation, it calls the mass repugnant not only to Scripture, but even to common sense *and reason*. In 'The Form of Presbyterian Church Government,' which is usually contained at the back of most copies of the standards, the study of logic is seen to be integral to the training and examination of candidates for the ministry. Mr. Brentnall is, of course, at liberty to reject logic and embrace absurdity if he so wishes. But in doing so he will be estranging himself even further from Calvin, who said, 'I abhor paradox.'³

That last quote brings us, in conclusion, to Calvin himself. No one, at least in the P.R.C.'s or the B.R.F., would or could accuse Calvin of not holding to the free offer of the gospel, or the indiscriminate preaching of God's revealed will freely to all. For Calvin, the external or universal call is that 'general call, by which God

invites all equally to Himself through the outward preaching of the word - even those to whom He holds it out as a savour of death . . . and as the occasion for severer condemnation.⁴ But again, what does this mean, and how does it relate to the current controversy over the nature of the free offer? One Calvin scholar puts it this way: 'When Calvin speaks of the universal call of the gospel, he does not mean to say that God 'earnestly desires' that all who hear the invitation will be saved. This would be little more than incipient Arminianism. God only desires the salvation of the elect; they are the ones to whom the call becomes effectual. The same God who wills to save the elect also wills not to save the reprobate.'⁵

Is not the relation between the secret and revealed will of God an unknowable mystery, an indissoluble paradox, a seeming contradiction? Calvin writes :

It is true, indeed, that in the law and the gospel are comprehended mysteries which far transcend the measure of our sense: but since God, to enable his people to *understand these mysteries* which he has deigned to reveal in his word, enlightens their minds with a spirit of understanding, they are no longer a deep, but a path in which they can walk safely . . . *a school of clear and certain truth.*⁶

Once the Scripture has revealed these matters can we have a clear and distinct knowledge of them?

Let us now see if there is any inconsistency between these two things - viz., that God, by an eternal decree, fixed the number of those whom he is pleased to embrace in love, and on whom he is pleased to display his wrath, and that he offers salvation indiscriminately to all. *I hold that they are perfectly consistent*, for all that is meant by the promise is, just that his mercy is offered to all who desire and implore it, and this none do, save those whom he has enlightened. Moreover, he enlightens those whom he has predestined to salvation. Thus the truth of the promises remain firm and unshaken, so that *it cannot be said there is any disagreement* between the eternal election of God and the testimony of grace which he offers to believers.⁷

Is there not a double will in God, then, in any sense, to both desire to save and yet pass over the non-elect?

However, the will of God is not at variance with itself. It undergoes not change. He makes no pretence of not willing what he wills. . . . In himself his will is one and undivided.⁸

The will of God is, I confess, immutable, and his truth is always consistent with itself.⁹

Nothing is less accordant with the nature of God than that he should have a double will. . . . He does not in himself will opposites.¹⁰

Does God then not love the non-elect?

The reprobate are hateful to God, and that with a perfect justice, since those destitute of his Spirit cannot produce anything that does not

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deserve cursing.¹¹

Why then does God let the reprobate wicked hear the gospel at all, if He neither loves them nor desires their salvation?

He directs his voice to them, but it is that they may turn a deaf ear; he kindles a light, but it is that they may become more blind; he produces a doctrine, but it is that they might be more stupid; he employs a remedy, but it is that they might not be cured.¹²

Cannot natural man ever desire the grace that God offers to them in the Gospel?

The grace of God is insipid to men, until the Holy Spirit gives them a taste for it.¹³

Such is the teaching of John Calvin with regard to the free offer. Such also is the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed creeds. And such, finally, is the stated and official positions of the P.R.C.'s and the B.R.F. Mr. Brentnall, what is yours?

Footnotes

- 1 **Historical Theology**, vol. II, p. 396.
- 2 G.H. Clark, **Logic**, p. 1.
- 3 T.F. Torrance, ed., **John Calvin's Tracts and Treatises**, p. 149.
- 4 **Institutes**, III:24:8.
- 5 W. Gary Crampton, **What Calvin Says**, p. 73.
- 6 **Institutes**, I:17:2.
- 7 **Institutes**, III:24:17.
- 8 **Institutes**, I:18:3.
- 9 **Institutes**, III:2:12.
- 10 **Institutes**, III:24:17.
- 11 **Institutes**, III:24:17.
- 12 **Institutes**, III:24:13.
- 13 **Institutes**, III:24:14.