

# Is Denial of the "Well-Meant Offer" Hyper-Calvinism?

David J. Engelsma

---

The doctrinal issue involved in the question, "Is denial of the 'well-meant offer' hyper-Calvinism?" is precisely addressed, and thoroughly explained, by our Lord's teaching in the parable of the wedding of the king's son in [Matthew 22:1-14](#). God calls many men, both Jews and Gentiles, to the salvation that He has prepared in the death and resurrection of His Son. Many of those who are called by the preaching of the gospel refuse to come: "and they would not come" (v.3). Some do come to the marriage with the true faith that receives the wedding garment of the imputed righteousness of Christ. The reason for this twofold outcome of the call of God in the preaching of the gospel, Jesus gives in the concluding verse of the parable: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (v.14).

There is a call of God by the preaching of the gospel to many more persons than those who have been elected. This call, however, is sharply distinguished from the call that God gives to the elect. The parable, thus, warns against hyper-Calvinism on the one hand, which tries to restrict the call to the chosen, and against Arminianism on the other hand, which denies any distinction between the call to the elect and the call to the reprobate. The Reformed doctrine and practice of preaching, obedient to the instruction of Christ in the parable, is concerned to avoid error on either side.

## Historical Background:

The formulation of the doctrinal issue of the call of the gospel in the question, "Is denial of the 'well-meant offer' hyper-Calvinism?" demands some historical background. In the 1920s, controversy erupted in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) over the doctrine of the grace of God --the "common grace" controversy. In adopting the doctrine of common grace, the CRC committed itself to the doctrine that God is gracious in the preaching of the gospel to all who hear. It denied that God is gracious in the gospel only to the elect. The preaching of the gospel is a "general offer" of grace to all. Several CR ministers dissented from this dogma that the preaching is a gracious offer to all, holding that the grace of God in the preaching is particular -- for the elect only. The insistence by the CRC that these men subscribe to the doctrine of common grace and the subsequent discipline of them resulted in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

Because of their objection to the "well-meant offer of the gospel," the PRC are widely regarded within the Reformed and Presbyterian community as hyper-Calvinists.<sup>1</sup>

A similar controversy occurred in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in the 1940s. This controversy centered in the person and theology of the well-known philosopher and theologian,

Gordon H. Clark. Among the charges brought against Clark by the leading lights in the OPC was that of denying the free offer of the gospel. At that time, the OPC virtually adopted the view of the preaching of the gospel set forth in the report of John Murray and Ned Stonehouse presented to the Fifteenth General Assembly of the OPC in 1948. This view, like the doctrine adopted by the CRC, maintains that the gospel call is a gracious offer on the part of God to every hearer. The report states that "the full and free offer of the gospel is a grace bestowed upon all."[2](#)

## **A Major Issue:**

The stand of the CRC and of the OPC on the offer has been influential upon other Calvinist churches and thinkers.

The controversy over the nature of the call of the gospel is of more than passing, historical interest. It ought to be of concern to others besides those denominations that have been directly involved. This is evident from the issue itself: Is God gracious in the gospel to all men without exception? Every Christian and every church that professes to believe the sovereign particularity of the grace of God as this particularity is confessed in the "five points of Calvinism," or "doctrines of grace," has an interest, indeed a stake, in the controversy over the "well-meant offer." It is not a minor, peripheral issue.

If it was possible to smother the issue with a blanket of silence in the past, this is no longer possible today. The issue forces itself upon Reformed churches today inasmuch as appeal is made to the "well-meant offer" in order to challenge the traditional Reformed confession of the sovereign particularity of grace. This challenge arises from within the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It takes dead aim especially at the doctrines of limited atonement and of (double) predestination, election and reprobation.

The Dutch Reformed theologian, M.J. Arntzen, in his book, ***De Crisis in de Gereformeerde Kerken (The Crisis in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands -- GKN)***, has called attention to the fact that the notion of the "well-meant offer" has been a powerful means to undermine predestination in the preaching and confession of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands.[3](#)

In a recent book on Scottish theology, ***Calvin and Scottish Theology***, M. Charles Bell shows that the conception of preaching as grace for all has been of decisive influence in introducing universal atonement into Scottish Presbyterianism.[4](#)

Reformed theologians in the United States, convinced that the Canons of Dordt are in error in their teachings of limited atonement and of reprobation, have argued for a change in the church's thinking from the doctrine of the "well-meant offer." Both by public writing and by official appeal to the church assemblies to change the church's creed, Reformed theologians are contending for universal atonement and for universal election as necessary implications of the "well-meant offer."[5](#)

## **The Renewed Interest in the "Free Offer":**

Whether in response to these developments or for other reasons, there has been renewed interest in the issue of the nature of the gospel-call in recent years. Calvinists are devoting conferences to the subject.<sup>6</sup> Articles on the offer appear frequently in religious periodicals. In 1978, the Australian Presbyterian, K. W. Stebbins, published the book, *Christ Freely Offered*, in which he subjected the PR doctrine of the call of the gospel to sharp criticism and vigorously defended the "well-meant offer."<sup>7</sup> Although a few Calvinists are fearful of some of the stronger expressions by the defenders of the "well-meant offer," with rare exception the consensus among Reformed and Presbyterians is that the denial of the "well-meant offer" by the PRC is hyper-Calvinism.

My concern in this article, however, is not the defense of the PRC against the charge of hyper-Calvinism. I admit that I find it irksome always to be dismissed out of hand as a hyper-Calvinist and that I feel keenly the reproach of this charge, especially because there has been a deviation from Calvinism that may with good right be condemned as hyper-Calvinism. But as a lover, not primarily of certain churches, but of the Reformed and Presbyterian faith, my concern here is with the issue itself. I will defend that view of preaching which denies the "well-meant offer" against the charge of hyper-Calvinism. My purpose is that some who suppose that denial of the "well-meant offer" is departure from genuine Calvinism may reconsider, especially those who are troubled by the apostasy of Reformed churches from the great, creedal doctrines of sovereign, particular grace. They should subject the "well-meant offer," so often uncritically accepted as a legitimate element of Reformed truth, to careful examination.

## **Why Deny the "Free Offer?"**

It is part of my purpose that men be clear as to the exact nature of the PR denial of the "well-meant offer." Ours is a denial that arises out of the Reformed faith itself, that is in perfect harmony with all aspects of the Reformed faith (including the serious, external call to all who come under the preaching!), and that is made for the sake of the maintenance of the Reformed faith. It is not a rejection of the church's duty to preach the gospel to all men indiscriminately. We believe that the many must be called.

Since the attack on the denial of the "well-meant offer" is three-pronged, accusing the denial of being unreformed as to doctrine, as to logic, and as to practice, my defense of the denial of the "well-meant offer" is threefold: doctrinal, logical, and practical.

## **Defense of the Denial of the "Well-meant Offer" Against the charge that It is Unreformed Doctrinally**

Let us begin by having clearly in mind the positions in this controversy over the preaching of the gospel. By the "well-meant offer" is meant the conception, or doctrine, of the preaching of

the blessed gospel in Calvinistic circles that holds that God sends the gospel to all who hear out of an attitude of grace to them all and with the desire to save them all. The "well-meant offer" insists, at the very least, on these two notions: God is gracious in the preaching to all hearers; and God has a will, or sincere desire, for the salvation of every man who hears the gospel. Whenever I speak of the "offer" in this article, I have reference to this conception of the preaching of the gospel.

I deliberately refrain from describing the offer in terms of its implications. It has been charged against the offer by its foes that it necessarily implies universal atonement and the freedom of the natural human will. Even though I firmly believe this to be the case and even though of late certain friends of the offer have been agreeing that the offer does indeed imply universal atonement, I do not here describe or criticize the offer with respect to its implications. One reason is that some advocates of the offer, who reject these implications and deny that they are implications of the offer, complain that attacking the offer in terms of these alleged implications is unfair, is in fact attacking a straw man. Louis Berkhof made this complaint already in 1925 in his defense of the "well-meant offer" in his booklet, "The Three Points (of Common Grace) in All Respects Reformed."[8](#)

Therefore, I rigorously restrict myself to that which every advocate of the offer himself champions as sound, Reformed truth about the preaching and denial of which, according to the advocate of the offer, brands a church with the ignominious mark of hyper-Calvinism: God's gracious attitude towards all and a will of God for the salvation of all.

## **The Position of the P.R.C.:**

Just as the offer must be carefully and fairly described, so also must the denial of the offer by the PRC be honestly treated. The PRC do not deny that the gospel is to be preached to all men, or that the preaching includes a call to all hearers without exception, to repent and believe on Jesus Who is presented in the gospel, or that the promise of God, that every one who does believe shall be saved, must be declared to all. But their rejection of the offer is the denial that the preaching goes out to all who hear from a gracious attitude of God towards them all and with a will of God to save all. In short, these churches deny that the preaching of the gospel is grace to all who hear it. The basic question in the controversy is this: Is God in Jesus Christ gracious in the gospel to all who hear the preaching? The answer of the PRC is an unqualified, emphatic "no!" Neither is there a gracious operation of the Spirit of Christ upon the heart of the reprobate who hears the preaching, nor is there a gracious attitude in the Father of Jesus Christ towards the reprobate who comes under the preaching.

This opposition to the "well-meant offer" on account of the offer's doctrine of universal grace must be sharply distinguished from the denial that the gospel must be preached to all men indiscriminately and from a refusal to call all who hear the gospel to repent and believe. Certain Baptists, especially in England, have limited the preaching of the gospel and the call of the gospel, "Believe on Jesus Christ!" to the regenerated. They have argued that preaching to all indiscriminately and calling all without exception to repent and believe would contradict the basic tenets of Calvinism, namely, limited atonement and total depravity.[9](#) This is not the

position of the PRC. Nor may the position of the PRC be confused with this view. Restriction of the preaching, and particularly of the gospel-call, to those who give evidence of election by their regeneration is a real hyper-Calvinism. It is disobedience to the command that God gives the church in [Matthew 22:9](#): "Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, call to the marriage." It is exposed as erroneous by verse 14 of [Matthew 22](#), "Many are called, but few are chosen." The objection of the PRC to the offer is not at all that the offer requires that the gospel be preached to all, or that the offer insists that all be called to believe on Christ. But the objection is that the offer holds that this preaching and calling are *grace to all*.

## **What is "Gospel Preaching?"**

Denial of the offer by the PRC arises from a certain view of gospel-preaching. First, the church must preach the gospel to all people to whom God sends her, both within the congregation and on the mission field. This preaching consists of exposing the misery of all because of sin against the just and holy God; of proclaiming Jesus Christ as God's Way out of this misery; of calling all to come to Jesus; and of announcing the sure promise of God that whosoever believes shall he saved, as well as the warning that every one who rejects Jesus abides under the wrath of God. It should be noted that on the view of preaching held by the PRC, the church does not proclaim a love of God for all, a death of Christ for all, a grace of God to all, a will of God for the salvation of all, or the promise of God to all.

Second, this indiscriminate preaching of the gospel is strictly controlled by, and carries out, the sovereign, eternal predestination of God, His election and reprobation. God makes the preaching of His church His powerful, indeed effectual, instrument of salvation for every elect in the audience by the secret operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the elect. God withholds the Holy Spirit from the reprobate in the audience (and, of course, church and preacher are altogether ignorant who they may be), in order that they not be converted by the preaching. Rather, He exposes their wickedness, renders them inexcusable, and hardens them in their sin, without infringing in the slightest upon their responsibility.

Accordingly, in the third place, denial of the offer makes a crucially important distinction between the call that comes in the preaching to God's elect and the call that comes to the non-elect, or reprobate. The calls are not the same. God does not call all men alike. God calls the elect, through the preaching, with the life-giving, converting, and irresistibly drawing Spirit in their hearts, whereas He calls the reprobate only with the external Word. He calls the elect out of grace, the grace with which He chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world, whereas He calls the reprobate in divine righteousness, requiring of them their duty, namely, repentance and faith. He calls the elect with the will to save them, whereas His will with the call of the reprobate is both their exposure as depraved rebels and the illustration of the sheer graciousness of His choice and saving calling of the elect.

## **Preaching is grace only to the elect**

The preaching of the gospel is grace only to the elect. This doctrine is repudiated by Reformed and Presbyterian churches as hyper-Calvinism. It is not genuinely Reformed Christianity, but an aberration, if not a heresy. It goes beyond true Calvinism. It forces Calvinism to such an extreme that the result is a distortion, a caricature, of Calvinism. This position has overdone the sovereignty of God. It has overemphasized divine predestination; and it has done so in the crucial matter of the preaching of the gospel.

Denial of the offer is unreformed doctrinally.

Against this charge, our defense is, first, that the view of preaching that denies the offer is the Reformed tradition. This was the view of preaching of John Calvin. In his commentaries, in the *Institutes*, and in the powerful treatises that he wrote near the end of his life on providence and predestination, Calvin taught that the preaching of the gospel is controlled by the decree of predestination. Calvin also taught that the effectual, saving call of the elect is to be sharply distinguished from the outward preaching that comes to the reprobate, unaccompanied by the internal work of the Spirit. Typical is what the Reformer wrote in the *Institutes*, 3.24, treating of the confirmation of election by the calling of God. His opening words are, "But that the subject may be more fully illustrated, we must treat both of the calling of the elect, and of the blinding and hardening of the ungodly." He continues: "...the preaching of the gospel springs from the fountain of election." In section 18, with reference to Jesus' words in [Matthew 22:14](#), Calvin states, "... there are two species of calling-- for there is a universal call, by which God through the external preaching of the word, invites all men alike, even those for whom He designs the call to be a savor of death, and the ground of a severer condemnation. Besides this there is a special call which... God bestows on believers only. Having asked the question, "Why, then, while bestowing grace on the one, does He (God) pass by the other?" Calvin explains: "because (the one) was ordained to eternal life," whereas the other was a "vessel of wrath unto dishonor."

The view of preaching that denies the "well-meant offer" is the classic Reformed position as described in Heinrich Heppe's authoritative volume on the Reformed tradition, *Reformed Dogmatics*, [10](#) In Chapter XX, Heppe gives the orthodox, Reformed teaching on "Calling." The saving "calling," writes Heppe, "is imparted only to the elect" (p.512). Heppe stresses the sharp distinction that Reformed theology has made between the call of the elect ("the internal call") and the call of the reprobate ("the external call"): "So there must be a distinction between the external call and the internal call" (p.513). Reflecting Reformed thought, Heppe then denies that God calls the non-elect with the purpose of saving them: "Moreover outward Church calling is not imparted to the non-elect in such wise that God wished to present them with faith.... Otherwise the possibility would arise of a counsel of God being perhaps rendered futile by man..."(p.513).

This was a prominent view of preaching in the Dutch Reformed tradition that came down from the Secession (*Afscheiding*) of 1834 in the Netherlands. Professor C. Veenhof has pointed this out in his book, *Prediking en uitverkiezing (Preaching and Election)*. Veenhof acknowledges that a very prominent theology in this tradition, if not the dominant theology, was that which denied the "well-meant offer" and held preaching and sacraments to be grace only for the elect. This was the view held by the best theologian of the Secession, Simon VanVelzen. What makes

this admission all the more significant is that Veenhof himself, a theologian of the "Liberated" Churches, does not favor such a doctrine of preaching. He explains its presence in the churches of the Secession as the carry-over of "scholasticism" into these churches.[11](#)

However one may explain it, the fact is that the denial of the offer has an honorable pedigree. With good right, it may claim to represent the Reformed tradition. Those who dismiss it out of hand as a novelty only show their own ignorance of the Reformed tradition.

## **The Creeds--and the "Free Offer"**

Far more important for our defense is the appeal to the creeds. The Reformed faith is a confessional religion. The creeds are authoritative.

It is absolutely not to be found in "The Three Forms of Unity" that God sends out the gospel in grace for every human without exception and with the sincere desire to save every child of Adam. But the doctrine that lies on the very face of the Canons of Dordt in particular (and the Canons, we remember, are only an explanation of the doctrine contained in the Catechism and in the Confession) is that God's will unto salvation, and His grace, are for the elect alone (Head I) and that this gracious will is realized by the effectual call of the gospel (Heads III/IV. 10). The entire, massive weight of the Canons comes down on the side of the denial of the offer and against the "well-meant offer" in its essential elements: a grace of God in Jesus towards every human; a will of God to save every human by Jesus; preaching as an offer made in love and with the desire to save to every sinner without exception.

The only possible appeals to the Canons by the defenders of the offer are to the use of the term, "offer," in III/IV, 9 ("Christ offered therein," i.e., in the gospel) and to the statement in the preceding Article that all who are called by the gospel are "unfeignedly," i.e., seriously, called. The use of the term, "offer," proves nothing for the "well-meant offer," since the Latin word, *offero*, which the fathers of Dordt used, simply meant "set forth" or "present." No one denies that Jesus is *presented* in the gospel to all who hear the preaching. What must be proved is the new meaning that has been poured into "offer" by advocates of the "well-meant offer," namely, that it expresses love for all and the will to save all. The appeal to the mere use of the word, "offer," in the Canons for this is little short of desperate.

## **The Serious Call of the Gospel**

That God is serious in the external call to all who hear, reprobate as well as elect, does not mean, or even imply, that He wishes all to be saved, but rather means that He commands all to believe on Christ, and that this command is in dead earnest. Coming to God by believing in Jesus is the solemn obligation of every man who hears the gospel. This pleases God. All those called to the marriage in [Matthew 22](#) ought to have come. Those who refuse, bring down on themselves the wrath of God for their refusal. Unbelief displeases God. God can be serious in commanding someone to do his duty. even though God has willed that he not obey the command and even though God uses the command itself to harden him in his disobedience. Think only of Jehovah's dealings with Pharaoh in [Exodus 4-14](#), as explained by Paul in [Romans](#)

## [9:17-23.](#)

The Westminster Confession of Faith is in full agreement with the Canons of Dort in limiting the gracious call to the elect. Chapter III teaches that God's eternal and free will is that the elect, and the elect only, be effectually called to Christ. Chapter V teaches that God "withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened," from the reprobate wicked so that "they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others." Thus, God accomplishes His purpose to "blind and harden" these persons. Chapter X strictly limits God's desire for the salvation of men to "those whom God bath predestinated unto life." To them alone is God gracious "by His Word and Spirit." The "others not elected" are only "called by the ministry of the Word," and "cannot be saved."

In the light of this overwhelming testimony of Westminster to the particularity of the will of God unto salvation and to the particularity of God's grace, precisely in the matter of the preaching of the gospel, for defenders of the "well-meant offer" to appeal to the mere mention of the word, "offer," in Chapter VII, in support of their notion of a universal will of God unto salvation and of universal grace in the preaching, borders on the ludicrous. There is indeed an exhibiting and presenting of Jesus to sinners as the source of life and salvation under the covenant of grace. The blessings of salvation in Christ are proclaimed as free gifts to every one who receives them by believing. This is the meaning of the phrase, "He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ..."; and this is Reformed orthodoxy. That it is a mistake to discover in the phrase the teaching that God desires the salvation of all and extends to all His grace is evident from the words that immediately follow: "...and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe." As God freely offers life and salvation under the covenant of grace, His purpose, will, and desire is to give life and salvation to the elect only. In the gospel, His promise is to the elect only. And by the gospel, which freely offers life to sinners. He gives (not only "presents," but also "conveys") grace to the elect, to make them believe.

It is a curious thing that professing Calvinists, zealous for the "well-meant offer" hold up the phrase in the Westminster Confession, VII, III, "freely" as though it were the very essence of Westminster's doctrine of the calling, indeed the only thing that Westminster has to say on the calling. while ignoring not only all that Westminster teaches elsewhere on the effectual call but also that which Westminster says about the particular promise in this very article.

## **Scripture's Testimony**

If the Reformed tradition is weighty and the Reformed creeds are authoritative, Scripture is decisive in our defense of the denial of the offer. The Bible makes preaching dependent upon predestination; distinguishes between the call of the elect and the call of the others; and describes the preaching of the gospel as the effectual means of grace to the elect alone. This is the doctrine of the Chief Prophet and Great Evangelist Himself in [Matthew 22:1-14](#), which concludes with the words, "For many are called, but few are chosen." There is a difference between the call of the many and the call of the few, a difference that explains why the many do not come to Christ, whereas the few do come. This difference is due to God's election of the few

in distinction from the many who do not come.

God indeed calls the many. By His preachers, He says, "All of My salvation is prepared now in the death and resurrection of My Son, Jesus: "Come, by believing on Him." But He does not call them according to election. Therefore, He does not call them out of grace. He does not call them with the will to save them, He does not call them in such a way that He draws them by the Holy Spirit.

The few, on the other hand, He does call out of love, with the will that they be saved, and by teaching them in their hearts concerning their own need and concerning the riches of the marriage-banquet. The reason for this effectual, saving call is election: The few were eternally chosen.

### **The "Free Offer" is the Arminian view....**

It is an aspect of our defense of the denial of the "well-meant offer" that we take the offensive: We charge, in dead earnest, that the offer is the Arminian view of gospel-preaching.

The Arminians of the 17th century set forth their conception of preaching in their "Opinions," delivered to the Synod of Dordt in 1618.[12](#) They said this about the preaching of the gospel:

- 1) In the preaching, God confers, or is ready to confer, grace to every man.
- 2) God is serious in calling every person who hears the gospel because He calls "with a sincere and completely unhyprocritical intention and will to save."
- 3) God does not "call the reprobate to these ends: that He should the more harden them, or take away excuse... or display their inability." These are not the purposes of God in calling the "reprobate" since for the Arminians God calls all alike to "these ends," namely, "that they should be converted, should believe, and should be saved."
- 4) In summary, God calls all alike out of grace and with the sincere desire, or will, to save.

This doctrine of preaching was fundamental to the entire Arminian theology. To give the devil his due, the Arminians themselves forthrightly pointed this out in Article 9 of their confession "concerning the grace of God and the conversion of man":

There is not in God a secret will which so contradicts the will of the same revealed in the Word that according to it (that is, the secret will) He does not will the conversion and salvation of the greatest part of those whom He seriously calls and invites by the Word of the Gospel and by His revealed will: and we do not here, as some say, acknowledge in God a holy simulation. or a double person.[13](#)

On the Arminian view of preaching, there cannot be a decree of predestination in God excluding any from salvation. And if there is no decree of predestination, as confessed by Reformed orthodoxy, neither is there any of the other of "the five points of Calvinism."

The PRC see the "well-meant offer" of professing Calvinists as identical with the Arminian doctrine of preaching in at least two basic respects: grace for all in the gospel of Christ and a divine will for the salvation of all. It is incontrovertible that the offer teaches - does not imply, but teaches--that God's grace in the preaching is resistible, *and resisted*, and that God's will for the salvation of sinners is frustrated. Many towards whom grace is directed in the preaching successfully refuse it; and many whom God desires to save perish.

Indeed, we ask the defender of the offer, "On this view why are some saved by the gospel, and others not?" The answer cannot be God's grace and God's will, for His grace and His will to save are the same both to those who are saved and to those who perish. The answer must be the will of the sinner -- free will. The "well-meant offer" is forced to rewrite [Matthew 22:14](#): "For many are called. but few choose."

## **A "mystery?"**

A customary response by Reformed defenders of the offer to this attack on the offer has been the appeal to "mystery" and "paradox." How the offer harmonizes with predestination is a "sacred mystery," unknown and unknowable. Defenders of the offer condemn denial of the offer as unreformed logically, i.e., they criticize the PRC's use of logic in theological thinking.

## **Defense of the Denial of the "Well-Meant Offer" Against the Charge that It is Unreformed Logically**

Presbyterian and Reformed churches that defend the offer necessarily hold that God is, at one and the same time, gracious to all men and gracious only to some men; and that God, at one and the same time, wills that a certain man be saved and wills that that man be damned. Predestination has them teaching the one thing; and the offer has them teaching the other thing. This, they admit, is seeming contradiction - a "paradox." This does not embarrass them, for Reformed, biblical truth (so they argue) is paradoxical, illogical, and "mysterious."

The contention of those who deny the offer is that the God of the Reformed doctrine of predestination cannot be gracious in the gospel to all, and that the God Who has willed the salvation of some and the damnation of others cannot will to save all by the gospel. Particular grace in the gospel is in accord with the particular grace of predestination. The definite will of God for men's salvation in the gospel is in accord with His definite will in predestination (and, for that matter, with His definite will in the limited atonement of our Savior). The truth of the Reformed faith is consistent, harmonious, and logical.

## **Too Logical?**

Upon this aspect of the denial of the offer falls severest condemnation by the broad Reformed community: "scholasticism!" "rationalism!" "too logical!" "hypocr-Calvinism!"

The denial of the "well-meant offer" is unreformed, because it is theologically logical.

We have listened to the charge. We have considered it carefully. And we are constrained by the love of God's own truth to defend the denial of the offer against this charge.

We do not hold the view of the calling that we do because we think it logical, but because we think it biblical and creedal. Nevertheless, we regard the rational, non-contradictory, logical character of the doctrine as evidence of its truthfulness, rather than as proof of its falsity. That the denial of the offer harmonizes not only with such doctrines as predestination, limited atonement, and efficacious grace but also with Scripture's teachings about God's sovereignty, the power of preaching, and the bondage of the natural human will does not render it suspect, but rather commends it.

The truth of the Bible - Christianity is rational, non-contradictory, and logical. The Triune God is rational, non-contradictory, and logical. For this is the nature of His revelation in Scripture; and this revelation makes Him known as He is. Jesus Christ is "the Word," according to [John 1:1ff.](#), literally, "the Logos," (whence our "logic," so that even linguistically "logical" does not have to hang its head in shame among Christians) -- "the logical, non-contradictory Word of God." Because Jesus is the logical Word, He can declare God to us humans (v.18). If He were sheer paradox, an utterly illogical Word, a Jesus Whose word to us is "yes and no," we could know nothing of God, salvation, or heavenly reality (which is exactly the condition of much of the nominally Christian church today).

Biblical truth is propositional (to deny this one must repudiate the Bible as such); and this propositional truth is capable of being understood by the mind enlightened by the Holy Spirit, which is to say that it is logical and non-contradictory. Paul argues by reasoning from premises to conclusions, a procedure based on the logical character of divine truth. John instructs by contrasting opposites, a procedure based on the non-contradictory character of divine truth. And every human instrument of the Author of Scripture teaches on the basis of the fact that a thing cannot both be and not be, or be true and false, in one and the same respect.

The truth of the Christian religion, although it exceeds human comprehension, does not mock our minds. Although Christianity is, finally, supra-rational, it is not irrational. Although it ends in our adoration of the God Whose judgments are unsearchable and Whose ways, past finding out, Christianity does not end in our despairing of knowing anything at all about His judgments and ways.

## The Weight of Christian Tradition

In our view of the logical nature of truth, we have the whole, great weight of Christian tradition on our side. Read Augustine. Read especially Augustine's close argumentation in his anti-Pelagian writings. Listen to Luther say at Worms, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture *and plain reason*.... I cannot and will not recant..." Read the church's creeds, not only the Reformed creeds, but also the ecumenical creeds. They are logical (and ominously all are being discredited today as "philosophical" and "scholastic"). Consider the Westminster Confession's

view of the nature of biblical truth when it says in Chapter I, VI, "The whole counsel of God... is either expressly set down in scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...*" Deduction of the counsel of God by good and necessary consequence is an absolute impossibility unless Scripture is logical.

Jesus is perfectly logical in [Matthew 22:14](#) with regard to the matter at issue: the call of the gospel. First, the very fact that He *explains* the twofold effect of the call shows Jesus to be a logical thinker (if truth is illogical, explanations are ruled out): "*For many are called, but few are chosen.*" Second, the explanation is the difference in the call itself, corresponding to God's differing purpose with the different objects of the call - a logical explanation: The "few," He calls according to election; whereas the "many" are called only outwardly, without any divine love or will to save.

It is part of our defense of the denial of the offer that we take the offensive against the offer. We charge that the offer involves a Calvinist in sheer contradiction. That God is gracious only to some in predestination, but gracious to all in the gospel, and that God wills only some to be saved in predestination but wills all to be saved by the gospel, is flat, irreconcilable contradiction. It is not paradox, but contradiction. I speak reverently: God Himself cannot reconcile these teachings. Nor is there any similarity between this contradiction and the truth of the Trinity that surpasses our understanding. The truth of the Trinity is not contradictory, for it holds that God is one *in being* and three *in persons*, not, therefore, one and three in the very same respects.

There is no relief for the sheer contradiction in which the offer involves a Calvinist in the doctrine of "common grace," as though the grace of predestination were a different kind of grace from that revealed in the gospel. For the offer exactly teaches that the grace of God for *all is grace shown in the preaching of the gospel*. This grace is not some non-saving favor directed towards a prosperous earthly life, but saving grace, the grace of God in His dear Son, a grace that desires eternal salvation for all who hear the gospel. The offer proposes universal saving grace - precisely that which is denied by predestination.

Nor is there any relief from this absolute, intolerable contradiction in a distinction between God's hidden will and God's revealed will. This is attempted as some kind of explanation and mitigation of the contradiction: The desire to save all (of the offer) is God's revealed will; the will to save only some (of predestination) is His hidden will. But this effort to relieve the tension of the contradiction in which the offer involves Calvinists gets us nowhere. For one thing, the will of God to save only some and not all is not hidden, but revealed. It is found on every page of Scripture. It is Jesus' teaching in [Matthew 22:14](#): God has eternally chosen only some ("few") to be saved, in distinction from the others ("many"). For another thing, the distinction leaves us right where we were before the distinction was invented: God has two, diametrically opposite, conflicting wills. [14](#)

Such teaching is destructive of truth and fatal to knowledge of truth. Such teaching thrusts confusion and strife into the very being of God:

Does God, or does He not, desire every human to be saved? Is God, or is He not, in His own being, gracious in Jesus to every human? I make bold to suggest that the god of the offer had a very peculiar way of displaying his grace to all and of carrying out his will to save all in the time of the old covenant, when he showed his word unto Jacob, but did not deal so with any nation (cf. [Psalm 147:19, 20](#)). Is it presumptuous humbly to request of the offer-god worshipped by professing Calvinists that he make up his mind between the alternatives of the offer (the will to save all) and of predestination (the will to damn some)?

Fact is, this contradiction cannot and will not be maintained in Presbyterian and Reformed churches. The one teaching must drive the other out. The doctrine of the "well-meant offer" will drive out the doctrine of predestination. Universal grace is intolerant of particular grace. The Arminians pointed this out at the very beginning of the effort to introduce universal grace into the Reformed church. Affirming in Article 9 of their "Opinions" that God's revealed will is the salvation of all, they denied any hidden will in God that contradicts this revealed will by decreeing the salvation of the elect only.

Evidence abounds in Reformed churches today that predestination and the offer are incompatible and that embrace of the offer results in repudiation of the theology of predestination. Official decisions are made by Reformed churches in the Netherlands rejecting the double predestination of the Canons of Dordt as "scholasticism" and "determinism."

## **Does God Love All?**

Synods of Reformed churches in the United States approve the boldest teaching of universal atonement and the sharpest attack on the doctrine of an eternal decree of sovereign reprobation. The most effective rejection of predestination, however, goes on in the preaching and teaching in the congregations and in the churches' work of evangelism. The prevailing message in Reformed pulpits, catechism classes, seminaries, and mission fields is that of a love of God for all, of a death of Christ for all, and of the ardent desire of God to save all. This explains why Reformed churches can cooperate in evangelism with the most notorious free will preachers and organizations. Of reprobation, nothing is heard. Of an election that constitutes one eternal decree with reprobation, nothing is heard. And this means that nothing is heard of Reformed, biblical election. But if nothing is heard of biblical election, silence falls over the doctrines of grace.

Indeed, it is now the rule that Reformed and Presbyterian theologians defend the universalism of the offer by appeal to those texts of Scripture that Pelagius used against Augustine, that Erasmus used against Luther, that Pighius and Bolsec used against Calvin, and that the Arminians used against the Synod of Dordt: [Ezekiel 33:11](#); [John 3:16](#); [1 Timothy 2:4](#); [II Peter 3:9b](#). The point is not so much that the defenders of the offer are found in the company of the conditional universalists of all ages, using select texts against the doctrine of unconditional particularism, as it is that their appeal to these texts, on behalf of the offer and against predestination, necessarily involves them in a thoroughgoing semi-Pelagianism. Their deep attachment to the semi-Pelagian doctrine of universal, conditional grace (despite their avowals of Calvinism) manifests itself in their hostility towards those whose only offense is their faithful

confession of the sovereign, particular grace of predestination. They inveigh against these Reformed saints at every opportunity as "harsh hyper-Calvinists."

But denial of the "well-meant offer" destroys good, urgent gospel-preaching. Especially does it make evangelism and missions impossible. Denial of the offer is unreformed *practically*. This is a third charge of the friends of the offer against the denial of the offer.

## **Defense against the Charge that Denial of the "Well-meant offer" is Unreformed Practically**

The charge is that a Reformed church that denies the offer cannot preach the gospel to all, cannot call all to believe, cannot do missions. Such a church has no compassion for lost sinners. She intends to preach only to the elect, and can only preach to the elect.

This is a damning indictment. Any doctrine that restricts the preaching of the gospel in this way is false doctrine. Any doctrine that requires the preacher to ascertain the election of his audience before preaching to them is false doctrine. Any doctrine that binds the church to disobey the "great commission" ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)) and that forbids her to command all men everywhere to repent ([Acts 17:30](#)) is false doctrine. For God commands the church: "Go ... into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, call to the marriage" ([Matt. 22:9](#)).

But this is not the doctrine of the PRC in our denial of the offer. It is not intended to be our doctrine. It is not the implication of our doctrine. We have considered the charge that the denial of the offer is unreformed practically and testify before God and men that the charge is false.

Our denial of the offer involves no restriction upon the preaching, no rejection of missions, no embarrassment at calling sinners to Jesus Christ. We believe that the gospel is to be preached everywhere, to everyone "promiscuously and without distinction" (Canons of Dort, II/5); that the ascended Christ sends the New Testament church out to do missions; and that all who hear the preaching are to be called to come to Christ.

The basis for this, however, is not universal grace and a universal will to salvation, as the "well-meant offer" likes to have Calvinists believe. Rather, the basis is predestination. God has chosen certain persons unto salvation. These persons, found among all peoples in all places, must be gathered unto Christ by the gospel. For their sakes is the gospel preached to all. It is also God's will that the gospel come to the reprobate with whom His elect are mixed in natural life. It is not merely the case that the gospel unavoidably comes to them also, because of their proximity to the elect. But this will of God that the gospel come also to the reprobate is not a will, or desire, that they be saved. For God has eternally rejected them, appointing them to stumble at the Word and perish ([1 Pet. 2:8](#)). But they have an obligation to believe on Jesus Christ (even though they are unable to do so by virtue of their bound wills). And God wills to expose their outrageous wickedness, render them inexcusable, and harden them, as "vessels of wrath fitted to destruction" ([Rom. 9:22](#)), for His own glory and to illustrate the sheer graciousness of His effectual call to the elect.

All of this is to say that the necessity, the freedom, the promiscuousness, and the urgency of the preaching of the gospel are not *in spite of* election, but *because of* election.

We appeal to the teaching of our Savior in [Matthew 22:1-14](#). Although only few are chosen, *many* must be called. This condemns all hyper-Calvinistic restriction of preaching to the elect, or to the regenerated, or to the "sensible sinner." Election in no wise hampers the promiscuous preaching or the serious call to all. But neither may the call of the many ignore, or conflict with, or destroy the election of the few. The sole *saving purpose of* God with the call of the many is the salvation of the few. The preaching of the gospel has its source, basis, and reason in the election of the church.

Having defended the denial of the offer against the unfounded and unjust charge that it restricts preaching, we may be permitted to put the hard question to those who criticize the denial of the offer as making missions impossible: Do they really want to maintain that a faithful carrying out of Christ's command to the church to preach the gospel is impossible apart from universal grace and a universal will to salvation? This is what the defenders of the offer are really arguing here: Good, urgent, promiscuous preaching, especially a serious call to every hearer, is impossible except on the basis of a love of God in Jesus Christ for every human and on the basis of a will of God for the salvation of all men. But this has always been the objection of Rome and of the Arminians to the Reformed doctrine of predestination and sovereign grace: The Reformed doctrine of particular grace, expressed especially in predestination, makes preaching impossible.

The Roman Catholic Church condemned, as a denial of the gospel call, the Reformation teaching that grace is limited to the elect in Canon 17 of the section "On Justification" in its "Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent":

If any one saith that the *grace* of Justification is only attained to by those who are predestined unto life; but that all others who are called are called indeed, but receive not grace. as being, by the divine power, predestined unto evil: Let him be anathema.[15](#)

The Arminians likewise condemned the Reformed doctrine of particular grace as a fatal weakening of the gospel-call in Articles 8-10 of their "Opinions" concerning the conversion of man.[16](#) Article 9 has been quoted above. In Article 8 the Arminians gave their own view of the call of the gospel and rejected the Reformed conception:

Whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save; nor do we assent to the opinion of those who hold that God calls certain ones eternally whom He does not will to call internally, that is, as truly converted, even before the grace of calling has been rejected.

In Article 10 the Arminians repudiated the Reformed doctrine that the call of the reprobate, though serious on God's part, is without grace for them (which is, of course, exactly the position of the PRC in their denial of the offer):

Nor do we believe that God calls the reprobate, as they are called, to these ends: that He should the more harden them, or take away excuse, or punish them the more severely, or

display their inability; nor, however, that they should be converted, should believe, and should be saved.

Is it indeed true that the doctrines of predestination, limited atonement, and efficacious calling hinder, or even destroy, free preaching, urgent missions, and a serious gospel-call? Is it indeed the case that a Reformed church needs the teachings of universal grace and a universal will to salvation to come to the rescue, so that she is able to preach and to evangelize? Then Rome and the Arminians were right! Let us admit it! Let us renounce Dordt! Let us call a world-wide Reformed synod, preferably at Dordt, in order to rescind the condemnation of Arminianism and in order to make humble confession of our fathers' sins against Arminius, Episcopius, and the others! And let us come, caps in hand, to the head of Rome, acknowledging that at least with regard to its fundamental doctrine of sovereign grace the Reformation was dead wrong!

While we are at it, let us also make the necessary correction in the teaching of Jesus in [Matthew 22:1-14](#). As the explanation of the promiscuous preaching of the gospel and its twofold effect, let us put, "For many are called and many are chosen, but only a few exercise their free will to accept the well-meant offer."

Thus, we will have arrived at the false gospel that Paul damns as "gospel" in [Romans 9:16](#), "It is not of him that willeth. . . but of God that shows mercy." But we will, at least, be honest and forthright.

We warn the advocates of the offer that, so far is it from being true that the denial of the offer destroys gospel-preaching, the offer-doctrine itself corrupts biblical preaching. The teaching of the "well-meant offer" creates preaching that assures all and sundry of the love of God for them in the cross of Jesus. It creates preaching that then must proclaim faith, not as God's free gift to whomever He wills, but as the condition which the sinner must fulfill, to make God's love effective. It creates preaching that soon adopts the most atrocious free will abominations, on the mission field and in the congregations: the altar-call and all its accessories. It creates preaching that silences basic biblical truths - truths that Jesus Himself loudly preached in His own evangelism: "ye must be born again"; "all that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me"; "no man can come to me, except the Father...draw him"; "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight."<sup>17</sup> In the end, the offer silences preaching altogether, for more effective methods of winning all to Christ are discovered.

Yet I must end with a warning to ourselves who deny the offer. There has been a cold, callous, careless hyper-Calvinism. There is the danger that we are afraid to preach to all, afraid to call all, afraid to exhort and admonish - afraid, lest we compromise Calvinism, and afraid, lest someone accuse us of compromising Calvinism.

Read Calvin.

Study the Canons of Dordt:

And that men may be brought to believe, God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings... by whose ministry men are called to repentance and faith. ..(I/3).

This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel (II/5).

Most importantly, hear our Lord: "Go ye. . . and as many as ye shall find, call... for many are called, but few are chosen."

---

## ENDNOTES:

1. By this time, it is not even a matter of debate, whether the PRC are hyper-Calvinistic. The hyper-Calvinism of the PRC is an established fact. Reformed authorities merely pass the information on to the world in their works. In *On Being Reformed* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1983), I John Hesselink speaks of "More recent hyper-Calvinists such as Herman Hoeksema (founder of the Protestant **R**eformed denomination)..." (p.133). Under "Hyper-Calvinism" ("an exaggerated or imbalanced type of Reformed theology"), in the recent, popular *New Dictionary of Theology*, Peter Toon identifies the latest hyper-Calvinist: "The most prominent recent theologian is the Dutch-American, Herman Hoeksema, in his *Reformed Dogmatics* (New Dictionary of Theology, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson. David F. Wright, J.I. Packer, Leicester, England, Intervarsity Press, 1988, pp. 324, 325).

2. *Minutes of the Fifteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948, Appendix, pp. 51-63.*

3. M.J. Arntzen, *De Crises in de Gereformeerde Kerken* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1965). Cf. particularly chapter 3 "*De vitverkiezing en de tweeerlei bestemming van de mens.*"

4. Edinburgh: The Handles Press, 1985.

5. For an appeal to the "well-meant offer" in support of universal atonement, cf. the series of articles by Harold Dekker on God's love for all men in the Dec., 1962, Feb., 1963, March, 1963, Dec., 1963. Jan., 1964, March, 1964, May-June, 1964, and Sept., 1964 issues of *The Reformed Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.). Harry R. Boer argues that the "well-meant offer" implies the falsity of the creedal doctrine of reprobation in his *The Doctrine of Reprobation in the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983). Boer's gravamen to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church against the doctrine of reprobation as taught in the Canons of Dordt appears in the "1977 Acts of Synod" of the CRC, pp. 665ff

6. Especially Baptists who claim to be Calvinistic because of their adherence to the "doctrines of grace" are holding conferences **at** which the offer is defended. At such a conference in New Jersey in 1985, a paper was given entitled, "The Crux of the Free Offer: God's Indiscriminate

Desire for the Salvation of Sinners," in which the PRC's rejection of the "well-meant offer" was criticized as hyper-Calvinism. A similar conference was held in New Jersey in October, 1989, Apparently, certain "Calvinistic Baptists" are now taking it upon themselves to add a section on common grace to the Baptist Confession of Faith, which is an adaptation of the Westminster Confession to Baptist purposes. The proposed section on common grace that is to be added includes the statement that common grace's "ultimate expression is his (God's) sincere and benevolent offer of mercy and salvation from sin through Jesus Christ, made to sinners indiscriminately, to elect and reprobate sinners alike, through the Gospel."

7. Strathpine North, Australiaia: Covenanter Press.

8. *De Drie Punten in Alle Deelen Gereformeerd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co.).

9. On these theologians and churches and their doctrine, cf. David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), pp. 9ff.

10. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950.

11. Kampen: J. H. Kok N.V., 1959. Chapter 3 is entitled, "*Strijd over de Walmeenende Aanbieding*" ("Controversy over the 'Well-meant Offer'"). The PRC ought to do more with the history and doctrinal controversies of the Secession. Veenhof shows that Kok, Joffers, and VanVelzen, prominent preachers and theologians of the Secession, fought for a particular promise and for particular grace in the gospel and in the sacraments, repudiating as unreformed the notion of a "well-meant offer" advanced by other ministers of the Secession.

12. Cf. *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, Peter Y. DeJong. editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), pp. 221ff.

13. *Crisis*, DeJong, p.227.

14. This illicit and impossible distinction between two, opposite wills in God must not be confused with a distinction in the will of God that is taught by Scripture and sanctioned by Reformed tradition: the distinction between the will of God's decree (God's plan, or counsel) and the will of God's command. There is no contradiction between these for God's decree is His decision as to what He will do, whereas His command sets before a man what he ought to do. From God's command, e.g., "Let My people go," it cannot be inferred that it is God's decree that the command shall be obeyed, e.g., that Pharaoh will let the people go.

15. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume II (New York; Harper & Brothers, 1890), p.114.

16. *Crisis*, DeJong, pp. 226, 227.

---

For published materials on the Well Meant Offer, please click [here](#).

