

The “Free Offer” and Conditionalism

The preacher comes to the end of his sermon. He says, “Come to Christ! He is able and willing to save you! He wants to save you! Just come to him! He is offering you salvation today! Will you take His salvation? See His outstretched arms! See the gracious and compassionate Savior waiting to save you! See how patiently and graciously He is waiting for you to come! There is mercy and grace for you in His blood! Will you reject such a gracious and merciful proposal? Oh, come to Him today!”

Does that sound familiar? If you have a *Trinity Hymnal* (Orthodox Presbyterian Church), you will see songs with the following words under the category “The Free Offer of the Gospel”: “The Spirit calls today;/Yield to his power;/ O grieve him not away;/’Tis mercy’s hour.” “Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,/Weak and wounded, sick and sore;/Jesus ready stands to save you,/Full of pity joined with power:/He is able, He is able, He is able,/He is willing; doubt no more.” “Come to the Saviour now,/He gently calleth thee;/... He waiteth to bestow/Salvation peace and love ...”

The preacher’s words and the words of the songs put forth a savior who is ready and waiting. What is he waiting to do? He is waiting to bestow salvation. What or whom is he waiting for? He is waiting for the sinner to do something. How does the sinner know what to do? The “free offer” tells him what he needs to do to gain salvation from this savior.

What is this “free offer”? Some historical documents mention that Christ is “freely offered” in the gospel or that God “freely offers” salvation by Jesus Christ. Is this akin to the “free offer” of today? One must delve into the meaning of the word “offer” and how it was used during these times. The word comes from the Latin word *offerre* that means “to bear,” “to bring,” “to present.” It is possible that these documents are talking of this kind of offer. Christ is certainly presented in the gospel. Salvation by Jesus Christ is freely presented to sinners. In this sense, the “free offer” is orthodox. The gospel is to be preached freely to all without exception, and all without exception are commanded to repent and believe the gospel.

Do the modern “free offer” advocates merely hold to the “free

presentation” of the gospel? It is quite obvious from their writings that their “free offer” is heretical. The word “offer” now implies that the offerer desires that the offeree accept the offer. For example, if Mr. Smith offers Mr. Jones an apple, it is because Mr. Smith desires that Mr. Jones accept the offer of the apple. In the same way, if God offers salvation through Christ to all without exception, it is because God desires the salvation of everyone to whom He offers it.

In 1948, John Murray and Ned Stonehouse (of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) wrote a treatise entitled “The Free Offer of the Gospel.” It is the definitive work on the subject of the “free offer” according to modern “free offer” advocates. The first sentence of the treatise clearly spells out the issue: “It would appear that the real point in dispute in connection with the free offer of the gospel is whether it can properly be said that God desires the salvation of all men.” Murray and Stonehouse go on to say that God does indeed desire the salvation of all men: “We have seen that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfillment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass.” And they boldly proclaim that this “free offer” is a manifestation of God’s grace and love to all without exception: “The full and free offer of the gospel is a grace bestowed upon all. Such grace is necessarily a manifestation of love or lovingkindness in the heart of God. And this lovingkindness is revealed to be of a character or kind that is correspondent with the grace bestowed. The grace offered is nothing less than salvation in its richness and fulness. The love or lovingkindness that lies back of that offer is not anything less; it is the will to that salvation. In other words, it is Christ in all the glory of his person and in all the perfection of his finished work whom God offers in the gospel. The loving and benevolent will that is the source of that offer and that grounds its veracity and reality is the will to the possession of Christ and the enjoyment of salvation that resides in him.”

Not only do the modern “free offer” advocates believe that God desires the salvation of all without exception, but they also believe that this must be preached: “Does God *desire* the salvation even of those who are reprobate? ... I assert that this is the heart of the matter. *Does God desire the salvation of all men?* The answer is, Yes! Therefore we must, in our preaching, declare indiscriminately to all our hearers that God desires to see them saved. Further, we are preaching the gospel to sinners properly, only when we are convinced of the truth of such a desire in God and say so very clearly. We can only persuade sinners to be reconciled to God when we are persuaded that God not only delights

in their salvation, but he actually *desires* it” (David Gay, “Preaching the Gospel to Sinners: 2,” *The Banner of Truth*, Aug.-Sept. 1994: 42).

It is this modern version of the “free offer” (sometimes called the “well-meant offer”) that we will address in light of the gospel of salvation conditioned solely on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ.

The “free offer” advocates state very clearly that God wants, desires, wills, wishes that everyone, including the reprobate, be saved. Not only this, they *preach* to everyone without exception that God wants, desires, wills, wishes that they be saved. And remember: these are those who profess to believe and preach the doctrines of grace!

What kind of preaching is “free offer” preaching? It is similar to the example at the beginning of this article. It talks of a Jesus who is lovingly offering salvation to everyone out of a desire to save everyone. How does this compare to true gospel preaching?

At its most basic, “free offer” preaching is a preaching of *salvation conditioned on the sinner*, while true gospel preaching is a preaching of *salvation conditioned on Christ*. Of course, the “free offer” advocates will insist that they are preaching salvation conditioned on Christ, just as the Arminians will insist this. But it is *impossible* to preach the “free offer” without preaching salvation conditioned on the sinner.

Consider: The “free offer” advocates preach that Christ is ready and waiting and willing to save every lost person within the sound of the preaching. So if Christ is *ready* and *willing* to save them, what is He *waiting* for? Of course, it is for the sinner to do his part. The “Calvinists” who preach this say that God, in his eternal decree, decreed that the reprobate *will not* fulfill the condition of faith, while the elect *will* fulfill the condition of faith. They will even go so far as to say that God *enables* the elect to fulfill the condition. Yet it is still salvation conditioned on the sinner. For example, Murray and Stonehouse said, “Our Lord in the exercise of his most specific and unique function as the God-man gives expression to a yearning will on his part that responsiveness on the part of the people of Jerusalem would have provided the necessary condition for the bestowal of his saving and protecting love, a responsiveness, nevertheless, which it was not the decretive will of God to create in their hearts.” Here Murray and Stonehouse are teaching that *responsiveness* is a condition for salvation and that Jesus wished that God would have bestowed this responsiveness so that He (Jesus) could, in turn, bestow salvation. Thomas Chalmers, a professing Calvinist, was even bold enough to say in one of his sermons, “God is willing to save you: are you willing to be

saved?” (“Fury Not In God”)

The “free offer” is inextricably connected to a certain universality in the atonement. Thomas Boston said that the basis of this offer is Christ’s position as the “official Savior” of all without exception: “Our Lord Jesus Christ is the *official* Savior, not of the elect only, but of the world of mankind indefinitely. ... Any of them all may come to Him as Savior, without money or price, and be saved by Him as their own Savior appointed to that office by the Father. ... If it were not so that Christ is the Savior of the world, He could not warrantably be offered with His salvation to the world indefinitely, but to the elect only. If He were not commissioned to the office of Savior of all men, it would be no more appropriate to call all men to trust Him as Savior any more than He could be offered lawfully to fallen angels. ... No one could be held guilty for not turning to Christ for salvation, unless there is a sense in which God has appointed Him to be a Savior of that guilty one” (from the sermon “Christ the Savior of the World”). And to what does this universalism lead? It leads to preaching of the conditional “free offer”: Boston said, “He sent His Son from heaven with full instructions and ample powers to save you, if you will believe” (ibid.).

The preaching of the true gospel does not offer a salvation to sinners if the sinners would only do their part. The preaching of the true gospel is an *unconditional promise* of salvation that is conditioned on the work of Christ alone. God’s covenant of grace is not a conditional covenant. It is a sure and certain covenant that ensures the salvation of all whom God gave to Christ. It is based on the finished, efficacious work of Christ. God is not waiting for the sinner to respond before He can do His saving work. God saves unconditionally. And when He saves His people, He causes them to believe the true gospel of salvation conditioned on Christ and to repent of ever thinking that salvation was conditioned on themselves.

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