

Calvinism Cast Out: The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland and the Free Offer of the Gospel

Philip Rainey

Introduction

It is now nineteen years since the event that marked the conclusion of my opposition to the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel within the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC) of Ireland. That event was the church's annual meeting of synod held in June 1996 at Bready, just a few miles south west of the city of Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The synod received, considered and rejected my protest against the free offer of the gospel. The significance of the synod of 1996 was twofold: it officially committed the RPC of Ireland to the doctrine of Arminian general grace—a grace of God for all men expressed in the preaching of the gospel; it also marked the conclusion of my three-year struggle against this doctrine within the church.

The story of my struggle within the RPC for the truth of particular grace over against the heresy of Arminian general grace (embodied in their doctrine of the free offer) began one Sabbath morning in April 1993. Little did I know that the sermon I was about to hear from my minister in Glenmanus RPC, Portrush, would occasion a doctrinal controversy that would last some three years.

My minister, Rev. Andrew Stewart, took as his text Isaiah 55: 1-3a, which reads:

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money;
come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without
price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour
for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is
good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me:
hear, and your soul shall live.

In his sermon, Andrew Stewart explained the text to mean that all men thirst for God. Since all men thirst for God, the gracious call and accompanying gracious promise of the text are for all men. The gracious promise of the text is nothing less than salvation: “and your soul shall live” (55:3a). The sermon embodied the false teaching of the free offer of the gospel—that God expresses a sincere and well-meant desire to save all who hear the preaching. Although I had known for some time that Stewart believed in common grace, I was still shocked by the blatant Arminianism of his sermon. I well remember turning to my mother as we drove home from church and saying, “That sermon was wrong; to say that the unregenerate man can thirst for God is just wrong!” I knew it was my responsibility before God to refute this false teaching and so, about a week later, I began to write a response to Rev. Andrew Stewart.

What follows in this article is both a commentary on the controversy and an elaboration on some of the issues in an attempt to sift truth from error which, in the form of the well-meant gospel offer, has all but carried the day in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Error, which in our day of shallow theological thinking (and, worse than that, a day characterized by an almost complete absence of coherent, critical thinking), has been well-nigh uncritically accepted by the membership of these churches. Accordingly, if this article serves to strengthen the remaining opposition to the heresy of the well-meant offer, it will have attained its purpose. Additionally, if it serves to lead to some re-evaluation among those who espouse the well-meant offer and to its repudiation on their behalf, I would be deeply gratified. Jesus calls attention to the blessedness of the knowledge of the truth when speaking to those Jews who believed in him: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

The Debate With Rev. Andrew Stewart

Commencing with my objections to his sermon on Isaiah 55: 1–3, my debate on the subject of the free offer of the gospel with Rev. Andrew Stewart was both precursory to and contemporaneous with the debate with the RPC as a whole. The relevance of my personal controversy with Andrew Stewart

is to be found in the fact that his arguments in defence of free offer doctrine largely represent the arguments used by the denomination, and the arguments used by the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian church world today in defence of this doctrine. Consequently, I begin my account of the issues involved in the controversy by outlining the main areas of dispute between Rev. Andrew Stewart and myself.

1. The Question of Knowledge

In his response to my article, Stewart made a number of preliminary remarks, one of which belongs in the realm of epistemology (the theory of knowledge). What he wrote there is indicative of a position to which he would return frequently during the controversy.¹ That position is essentially that dogmatic statements, being of human origin, can never authoritatively state what is infinite, namely, the attributes of God. His argument can be stated this way: dogmatic statements cannot authoritatively state what is infinite; God is infinite; therefore dogmatic statements cannot authoritatively state God. Rev. Andrew Stewart goes on to say that we must proceed with great humility, balance, and a sense of the wonder of God's grace which, he opines, cannot be reduced to the level of human logic.

It must be said immediately that these sentiments are by no means the least of the problems raised by Rev. Andrew Stewart's theology of the gospel offer. Upon reflection over the last eighteen years, I have come to the conviction that one's view of the nature of the knowledge of God lies at the very heart of the gospel offer controversy. It is well to recognize the context of Stewart's view that human statements of belief about God (statements of dogma) can never be definitive. That context is the aberrant epistemology of the twentieth-century theologians Herman Dooyeweerd and Cornelius Van Til. Especially Van Til's thinking was formative in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian circles.

¹ I contacted Rev. Andrew Stewart on two occasions seeking permission to quote from his correspondence. Since I received no reply, I do not feel at liberty to quote him directly; I do, however, feel at liberty to refer to his stated positions.

Dooyeweerd taught that there was a “boundary” that existed between God and the world, so that the laws of logic which apply below the boundary do not apply to God. In a similar vein, Van Til developed his concept of “analogical knowledge,” meaning that all human knowledge can only ever be a representation of God’s knowledge. In this view, there is no defined point of contact between God’s knowledge and man’s knowledge; there is never an identity between God’s knowledge of himself and our knowledge of Him. Hence, propositions cannot have the same meaning for God as they do for man, with the result that propositional knowledge of God ultimately becomes impossible.

Regarding his view of the knowledge of God, Rev. Andrew Stewart is a good disciple of Dr. Van Til. He is such both in his stated belief that to hold both double predestination and the well-meant gospel offer is “an apparent contradiction” or “paradox”; and he is such also in his stated view that we may not and cannot apply the laws of logic to the Being of God. Hence, Stewart does not like definitive theological statements; he severely criticized me for stating categorically and dogmatically that God cannot both love and hate the same person at the same time. For Andrew Stewart, that is an application of “mere human logic” to the truth about God. In his view, the truth about God always eludes our logical categories and it is the part of a true Christian humility to let the doctrine of a love of God for all men stand in tension with the truth of sovereign reprobation. This position represents a denial of the sufficiency of Scripture. According to Stewart, these two conflicting doctrines are taught in Scripture. But since Scripture is the revealed will of God, if it contains contradictions, then it is unclear, and if unclear, it cannot be sufficient.

Rev. Andrew Stewart’s position is self-contradictory: he has to use logic in order to disparage logic. His position is that God’s attributes cannot be reduced to the level of human logic. In his opinion, I am guilty of so doing. Yet it is only on the basis of logic that he can say I am wrong. Obviously, we cannot both be right at the same time; that would be a denial of the law of non-contradiction. Rev.

Andrew Stewart wants to deny logic only when it suits him, which means that he wants to deny logic when it exposes his false doctrine.

2. Unconstrained Mercy and the Nature of God

In his statement of the nature of divine mercy, Rev. Andrew Stewart attempts to refute my position that a grace of God for all men in the gospel is utterly incompatible with the Reformed doctrine of reprobation. My position was that double predestination makes the grace of God in the gospel particular to the elect. His solution to the obvious incompatibility between reprobation and a grace of God for all in the gospel is what he calls “God’s pure and unconstrained mercy.” For Stewart, unconstrained mercy explains how God may choose to “bestow temporary tokens of mercy” on those who finally perish in their sins. In other words, God is merciful to the reprobate in this life—the free offer of the gospel being one of the temporary tokens of mercy—but withdraws his mercy from them at death and plunges them into hell.

With all supporters of the free offer, Rev. Andrew Stewart makes an unfounded assumption here: that the preaching of the gospel is always and everywhere a token of God’s favour to every hearer. But this is simply not the case. Scripture is clear that it will be worse for those who hear and reject the gospel than for those who never heard it. This is clear, for example, from Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:20-24. The point is that the greater the light we have, the greater our guilt and the sorer our punishment if we reject it. Consequently, for the reprobate to hear the gospel and reject it, and for them to receive many good gifts such as food, health and houses, and be unthankful makes their punishment sorer. So, one must ask, how is it that greater guilt and sorer punishment can be favour? Such is a strange favour indeed!

Obviously, feeling the tension in his theology between predestination and a temporary mercy of God toward those whom he calls “the non-elect,” Rev. Andrew Stewart repairs to the infinity of God for his refuge. He claims that God in his infinite mind is capable of hating and loving at the same time.

What he means by this is that God both loves and hates a man at one and the same time. That is simply a contradiction. Such a view is a denial of the attribute of God's simplicity. The doctrine of God's simplicity means that God is one and undivided in His Being. Although we speak of and distinguish individual attributes of God, it is nevertheless true that his attributes are all one in Him. Hence, God's simplicity means God always acts consistently with His nature; God is always in harmony with Himself; there is no tension in the Being of God. The very thought is utter blasphemy. He is the one, perfectly blessed, incomparable God, unto whom be glory forever. Even in human relationships do we not regard consistency as a virtue? That we do is a reflection of the eternal and self-existent Jehovah, who as the I AM THAT I AM simply *is*. Jehovah God is never anything other than what he is. Hence, to will opposite things, such as is ascribed to him by Stewart, is impossible for God, as Job declares, "He is in one mind, and who can turn him?" (Job 23:13). God's will *is God* and so his will is one and undivided; you obviously cannot say this about one who wills both A and not A at the same time: God is not the great schizophrenic!

3. The Appeal to Mystery

The attempt to overcome the obvious contradiction embodied in the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel, namely, that God is gracious towards many whom He hates and has eternally decreed to destruction, by appealing to "paradox" or "mystery" has been made repeatedly over the last century. It has characterized the thinking of the Christian Reformed Church in N. America for the last century. As may be seen from the following quotation, the appeal to mystery was part of John Murray's defence of the free offer of the gospel:

We have found that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. This means that there is a will to the realization of what he has not decretively willed a pleasure towards that which he has not been pleased to decree. This is indeed mysterious, and why he has not brought to pass, in the exercise of his omnipotent

power and grace, what is his ardent pleasure lies hid in the sovereign counsel of his will. We should not entertain, however, any prejudice against the notion that God desires or has pleasure in the accomplishment of what he does not decretively will.²

Such a position is euphemistically called a mystery. It is not a mystery; it is a bald contradiction. It has God willing what He does not will and having a pleasure toward that for which He has no pleasure. The attempt to get around this clear contradiction by making the distinction between God's decretive and preceptive wills is mere sophistry. The preceptive or revealed will of God is the rule of man's duty, not the rule of what God is going to do. The distinction is therefore bogus and Murray still ends up with two contradictory wills in God.

The appeal to mystery as a defence of the free offer of the gospel figured large in Rev. Andrew Stewart's attempts to answer my denial of the doctrine. He repeatedly stated that the doctrine of double predestination and that of the free offer—that in the preaching of the gospel God expresses a sincere desire for the salvation of all who hear including the reprobate—must be allowed to stand together. At this point, according to Stewart, we stand before a profound mystery. We cannot and may we not even attempt to reconcile these teachings of double predestination and a love of God expressed to all in the preaching of the gospel. To do so is to make oneself guilty of rationalism. This is a serious charge and it is one that Rev. Andrew Stewart leveled against me in our final correspondence.

The sentiments of Rev. Andrew Stewart with respect to the teaching of a double will in God, the use of human logic, and his appeal to mystery as a defence of the free offer are echoed in a voice from the past:

When He has revealed something to us in His word having to do with the dispensation of His will towards men, it is not our business to explore this in order to see whether or not this puts two wills in God which are opposed as if His nature

² John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (www.opc.org/GA/free_offer.html).

were something which could be comprehended by our understandings. His nature is an abyss which not only men's spirits, but even the intelligence of angels, cannot thoroughly examine ... No, my brethren, when on the one hand the Word of God will teach me that He has reprobated some and consigned them to eternal punishment, and that on the other hand this same Word will teach me that God wills all men to be saved, that He invites them to repent, that He extends his arms to them, that He goes before them and calls them with a lively voice ... although my reason found there some things which seemed to be in conflict, although whatever effort that I exert I am not able to harmonize nor reconcile them, still I will not fail to hold these two doctrines as true. Nor will I undertake to resolve the opposition of these two wills of God which seem so repugnant.³

The words are those of Moses Amyraut. Interesting, to say the least.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland and the Free Offer of the Gospel: An Evaluation

The remainder of this work is devoted to an evaluation of some Scripture passages at issue in the controversy, together with certain theological issues. The significance of the issues here at stake ought not be overlooked. Especially they ought not be overlooked by members of the RPC of Ireland. This is so for two reasons. First, only those members of the church who were delegates to synod had the opportunity to read both sides of the matter. When the church published its *Minutes of Synod* a short time after the 1996 synod, it printed the response of the Reformed Witness Committee (RWC) to my protest while deliberately and inexcusably withholding my protest, which was the occasion for the committee's response.⁴ Second, the church in its highest court made the heretical doctrine of a grace of God for all men in the gospel officially binding on every member of the RPC of

³ Moses Amyraut quoted in Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

⁴ The Reformed Witness Committee is a standing committee of the RPC synod; its official response to my protest to the 1996 synod together with my protest and the committee's article of February 1996 are all included in the Appendices at the end of this work.

Ireland. It did this when, by an overwhelming majority, it voted to reject my protest (thereby approving the RWC's response) and by endorsing the RWC's article of February 1996. The doctrine of a grace of God for all men in the gospel (reprobate included) is therefore officially binding upon every member of the RPC of Ireland, for which they are and will be responsible before Almighty God.

The Ezekiel Texts

“Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?” (Eze. 18:23).

This verse, together with its parallel in Ezekiel 33:11, is appealed to by the RWC in both its article and response in support of the free offer of the gospel. Appeal to these passages was also made by Rev Stewart in his correspondence with me. These two passages also figure largely in Murray and Stonehouse's defence of the free offer and have become the stock in trade of all those who teach the free offer. The idea of these passages, according to such men, is that God expresses a sincere desire for the salvation of all men, including the reprobate wicked. In rejecting this understanding of the passages as Arminian, I here explain them in their context.

The theme of this chapter is the justice of God in his dealings with Israel. Evidently the people of Israel who were in captivity, together with those who remained in the land of Israel, were bringing an accusation against God. This is evident in their use of a certain proverb that taught that God punishes the children for the sins of the fathers (Eze. 18:2). God rejects that proverb and makes clear that every man will answer for his own sins (4b). The following verses make clear that God will deal with everyman according to his works: if a man is just and does what is right (5) “he shall surely live” (9); if a man is wicked and “hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die” (13). In strict justice God will render to every man as his works shall be.

Consequently, there is no contradiction between this passage and Exodus 20:5, which states that God “visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them

that hate [him].” Obviously having this verse in mind when they charged Jehovah with injustice, they nevertheless misunderstood it. Exodus 20:5 does not say that God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children in succeeding generations; it says God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children in the generations that hate him. Clearly, when the generations following do not hate Jehovah but do what is right in his sight, according to Ezekiel, they will not be punished for the sins of the fathers (Eze. 18:19). No one may blame his wicked ways on the sins of his father. The matter is succinctly stated in verse 20, which is axiomatic in its nature.

Having established the principle of the equitable nature of God’s dealings with men, He now proceeds to exhort sinners to repentance: “But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die” (Eze. 18:21). This exhortation also includes the promise of salvation to those who repent: “he shall surely live, he shall not die.” This exhortation to repentance is repeated in verses 30-32.

The equitable nature of God’s dealings with men is also revealed in God’s exhortation to repentance. God calls all the house of Israel to repent of their sins. Those who repent, who turn from their sins and do what God commands, shall live. Those who continue impenitent, who refuse to turn from their sins, will die. God promises life and salvation to the penitent; at the same time, God promises death and ruin to the impenitent. As we read in Proverbs 28:13, “Whoso confesseth and forsaketh [his sins] shall have mercy.”

That God promises life and salvation to those who repent of their sins is just on God’s part, thus reflecting the justice of his dealings with men. That God promises death and ruin to those who refuse to repent of their sins is also just on God’s part. This is so because God has clearly revealed what pleases him, namely, repentance; and God has clearly revealed what displeases him, namely, impenitence. This is the meaning of God’s words in Ezekiel 18:23: “Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?” God

is pleased that men repent of their sins; God expresses approval of repentance and disapproval of impenitence. God expresses approval with repentance because it is in accordance with his revealed will. On the contrary, God has “no pleasure in the death of him that dieth” (32) simply because he cannot approve of the sinful impenitence of the wicked. Such impenitence is contrary to the revealed will of God and severely displeases God.

The conclusion of the matter is given in verse 30, which begins with the word “therefore,” indicating a conclusion. God will judge them according to their ways. Those who repent and turn themselves will not be ruined; those who continue impenitent will find that iniquity will be their ruin. This is all according to the justice of God.

The Ezekiel passages must be understood in their context. Even the most ardent disciples of free offer theology ought to be able to see that it is God’s precept or command that explains these passages. To make these passages teach a desire of God to save all, elect and reprobate alike, to whom the gospel comes does not fit the context. The passages are not so much a revelation of God’s will of decree as of his rule for our actions. We are dealing here with God’s precept or, as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* puts it, “that duty which God requires of man” (Q. & A. 3). If the passages taught a well-meant offer of salvation to all men, then it would follow that the promise of mercy would be to all men. But try as they may, the proponents of the well-meant offer will never be able to get a general promise of salvation out of these texts. That the promise of mercy is particular in Ezekiel 18 ought to be clear to anyone with eyes to see it: “But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, he shall surely live, he shall not die” (18:21). The passages make a clear distinction between the wicked that turn and the wicked that do not turn. The gracious promise is only for those who turn.

The RWC makes the same fatal error with respect to these texts as do all supporters of the free offer. They reason from an imperative to an indicative: from God’s precept—“turn”—they conclude that it is God’s desire or purpose that all turn and be saved. Their reasoning is fallacious. From the precept

or command of God we learn the rule of our duty; we may not infer from the precept what is the mind of God with respect to individual sinners.

To view these texts as expressing a desire of God to save all who hear the gospel is a fundamental misunderstanding of the will of God. The doctrine of the simplicity of God is essential to Reformed orthodoxy. As God is one and undivided, so is His will. Although we distinguish between God's decretive will and His preceptive or revealed will, we may not accord these wills equal ultimacy.

Common Grace

1. Luke 6:35 and Matthew 5:43-48: The Common Grace Texts?

“But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:35).

Luke 6:35 and Matthew 5:43-48 are appealed to by the RWC's article in support of the theory of common grace.⁵ The RWC committee elaborates on this theory in Point 2 (a) of its response in the Minutes of Synod: “We use this term [i.e., common grace] simply to refer to all those expressions of God's lovingkindness in this world which are not confined to the elect.” In Point 2 (b) of the article, this lovingkindness of common grace is extended to the reprobate in the preaching of the gospel. Once again I draw attention to the fallacy of the committee's position to which I referred in the third point of my protest. The fallacy is this: common grace by definition has to do with the good things God gives to all men alike—elect and reprobate—in this life, such as “food, rain and sunshine, health and a variety of abilities and skills” (“The British Reformed Fellowship: How Reformed Is It?” Point 3), things that are by definition non-saving and temporal. Therefore, common grace has no part in any discussion of a grace of God expressed to all men in the gospel, which is the realm of *saving grace*.

⁵ “The British Reformed Fellowship: How Reformed Is It?” Reformed Witness Committee article, *Covenanter Witness* (February, 1996), Point 3.

This is a fallacy endemic in all free-offer theology, beginning with the official formulation of common grace by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924, through John Murray and Ned B.

Stonehouse's 1948 formulation, right up to the present day. It is interesting to note that Murray and Stonehouse, in seeking biblical support for their doctrine, turned first to Matthew 5:44–48, a passage that they even admit "does not indeed deal with the overtures of grace in the gospel ... The particular aspect of God's grace reflected upon here is the common gifts of providence, the making of the sun to rise upon the evil and good."⁶ Yet the passage is used to support their idea of a grace of God for all men, elect and reprobate, in the preaching of the gospel.

It is clear from their reference to Luke 6:35 in both the article and the response that the RWC understands the words "[God] is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil" as applying to absolutely all the unthankful and evil, including the reprobate unthankful and evil. The idea is then that believers are to love all their enemies without exception as a reflection of the love that God has for all His enemies without exception.

This interpretation is based on a fallacy. The fallacy is that God is kind to *all* the unthankful and evil. If God is kind to all the unthankful and evil, including the reprobate unthankful and evil, then the text proves too much for the committee. This is because the RWC, in line with all proponents of common grace, wants to make a distinction in the grace or kindness of God between common grace and special or saving grace. But the kindness mentioned in the text is the one saving kindness of God's love. It is the love of God for His people: the love that God has for His people when they were His enemies. And this love God causes His people to know as a love that is capable of being kind and merciful to His enemies.

That the kindness of God mentioned in the text is the one saving kindness of God's love is clear from Luke 6:36: "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful." This verse is connected to and explains the kindness of God mentioned in verse 35: God's kindness to the unthankful and evil is His

⁶ John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (www.opc.org/GA/free_offer.html).

mercy. The kindness of verse 35 is not the common favour of common grace, nor is it the RPC's "expression of God's loving-kindness to the non-elect" (a thoroughly ambiguous phrase). It is rather the one saving kindness of God's mercy, the mercy that God shows only to His elect when they too were His enemies. This is why the RWC's interpretation of the text—that God is kind to absolutely all the unthankful and evil—proves too much. If God is kind to all His enemies, including His reprobate enemies, then He is also merciful to all His reprobate enemies with His one saving mercy; and then the distinction the committee wants to make in the grace of God between common and special grace no longer exists.

Nevertheless, God is indeed kind to the unthankful and to the evil. God is kind with His one saving love and mercy to His dear people when they were His bitter enemies. As a gracious heavenly Father He is merciful to His children; to them He speaks in the text, for they are "the children of the Highest" (Luke 6:35). For them alone is it true that "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Upon them God lays the obligation to love their enemies as a reflection of God's love for His enemies, but not absolutely all His enemies, for it is not the *scope*, but the *character* of God's love—a love for *enemies*—of which the text speaks.

Matthew 5:44–45 is also quoted by the RWC in support of the doctrine of common grace ("The British Reformed Fellowship: How Reformed Is It?" Point 3). Presumably their reasoning is that we are commanded to love and bless our enemies. In doing so we are a pattern of God's love for all His enemies, the manifestation of His love for all His enemies being that "he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

The RWC simply assumes that the text teaches a love of God for *all* His enemies, including his reprobate enemies. Together with all proponents of common grace, the RWC views the good gifts that all men alike receive in this world, things such as rain and sunshine, as evidences of God's love and favour. But this is simply not the case. Psalm 73, for example, makes clear that God's favour and blessing is not in things. The prosperity of the wicked mentioned in this psalm, which certainly

includes rain and sunshine, was not God's blessing on them. This was how Asaph understood the prosperity of the wicked and why he had almost given up on being a child of God. Asaph had to understand God's purpose in giving earthly prosperity (good gifts of his providence) to the wicked. He speaks of their "end" in Psalm 73:17; this "end" is the purpose of God with the reprobate wicked which is declared in verse 18: "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction." God's giving good gifts to the reprobate was his setting them in slippery places in order to cast them into hell. Blessing is not in things.

2. Common Operations of the Spirit and Common Grace

Both the article and the response of the RWC refer to the term "common operations of the Spirit." In the mind of the RWC, when the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (the confession) uses this term it is speaking of common grace. As they say in the article, God restrains sin in the non-elect and convinces them of their sin but without renewing the heart and will. In line with the usual understanding of common grace, these operations of the spirit are temporal (only for this world) and non-saving (expressing a general favour of God).

The RWC believes that such common operations of the spirit are an expression of "God's lovingkindness to the non-elect." That this is exactly *not* what the confession is saying is clear from Matthew 7:22, the first proof text cited for the statement. This verse speaks of those who in response to the gospel performed many great and noteworthy works, at least in their own minds. But what does Jesus say about those who have these common operations of the Spirit? He says this: "I never knew you." The verb "knew" here does not merely mean that Jesus was cognizant of these people, that He merely knew certain facts about them. When Scripture uses the verb *to know* in connection with persons, it means the knowledge of love: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). This obviously does not mean that God was unaware of the other nations and that he only had knowledge of Israel; it means that he loved only Israel. Jesus says of those who

have the common operations of the Spirit (those to whom according to the RWC God expresses His loving-kindness) that He never loved them.

Bearing in mind that this text is one of three proof texts for the confession's phrase "common operations of the Spirit," which phrase is an example of common grace, according to the RWC, there is something else that must be pointed out. What needs to be understood regarding Matthew 7:22-23 is not only is it not teaching common grace but it also flatly contradicts common grace in the most unmistakable terms. The standpoint of Jesus' condemnation of false professors of religion is the Day of Judgment (Matt. 7:22; 25:41). Jesus does not say "I will not love you" with reference to eternity, as if He loved them for a time, but at the end of the world pronounces judgment upon them. Jesus is emphatic: He says He *never* loved them. He never loved them during all the course of their lives in this world when they were prophesying, casting out devils and doing many other wonderful works in His name.

It is, therefore, clear that the term "common operations of the Spirit" is not an example of common grace, at least not in the minds of the authors of the *Westminster Standards*. They chose their proof texts carefully and respecting the phrase "common operations of the Spirit" the use of Matthew 7:22 makes clear that what they meant by this phrase flatly contradicts the common grace position of the RWC.

The second proof text is Matthew 13:20 which refers to what may be called "the stony ground hearer." The operation of the Spirit in and upon this hearer is produced by the preaching of the gospel—"he that heareth the word"—with the result that he receives that word with joy for a time. That the response of the stony ground hearer is due to the work of the Holy Spirit in him is indeed true, but the fact of the Spirit's operation in and upon someone tells us nothing of the motivation of the Spirit. In this case, the Holy Spirit produces a *natural* understanding of spiritual things, not a *spiritual* understanding of spiritual things. There is only one of the four hearers in whom the Spirit produces a spiritual understanding of the gospel: the good ground hearer. In keeping with the

parable, the good ground represents the heart prepared by regeneration; it is good ground in distinction from the other soils precisely because the goodness of God is bestowed upon it. The other soils are not good, do not produce fruit and are rejected, precisely because there is not bestowal of God's goodness and grace upon them.

The motivation of the Spirit with respect to the four kinds of hearers in Matthew 13 is described in verses 11–17. Jesus explains the different responses to the preaching of the gospel represented by the different hearers of the parable, and He does so in terms of election and reprobation. Jesus declares that those who believe the gospel and bring forth good fruit—the good ground hearers—do so because it is “given” to them (11). Their response of saving faith is given to them by the grace of God. But to the other hearers “it is not given” (11); there is no bestowal of God's goodness upon them. Upon the latter group, the Spirit's motivation in His work in them is clear: the preaching of the gospel stops their ears and shuts their eyes, “lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them” (15). In other words, the operation of the Spirit in them by the preaching of the gospel effects God's decree of reprobation. It is clear therefore (at least in the minds of the authors of the confession) that the common operations of the Spirit in the non-elect have nothing to do with a common grace of God towards them.

The third proof text for the phrase “common operations of the Spirit” is Hebrews 6:4–5. These verses teach a work of the Holy Spirit in some non-elect that “enlightens” them and grants them a “taste” of heavenly things. It is clear that these verses refer to the reprobate within the sphere of the visible church; it is there that the gospel is preached and by it the things of heaven are brought near to them, for they “have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come” (5). Such people receive a natural understanding of spiritual things and a corresponding natural sense or taste of such things. However, those who receive the “common operations of the Spirit” as

described in these verses are subject not to the common grace of God but to his curse. This is clear from verse 8, where it is said of such persons that they are “nigh unto cursing.”

I have dealt with this term in some detail because it is commonly used by the defenders of the free offer in the RPC as confessional proof of their doctrine, whereas, as evinced by the proof texts cited by the confession’s authors, such “common operations of the Spirit” as are found in the reprobate have nothing to do with common grace.

Is the Gospel a Conditional Promise?

The concept of a conditional promise of salvation figures large in the thinking of the RPC of Ireland. It is stated in the RWC’s article (Point 2) and reiterated in the response (Point 1). I explained in my protest how their thinking on this matter is erroneous. There are only two possible ways of understanding the concept of faith as a condition in salvation. There is the limited sense in which the Westminster divines used the word; in this view “condition” is equivalent to “means to an end” or “requirement.”⁷ There is also the absolute sense of the term that is the view of the RPC; in this view “condition” means something on which the result of a purpose or plan is really suspended. The position of the RWC is that God sincerely promises salvation to all head for head who hear the gospel; this “overture of mercy” is grace to all who hear since it confers on them the right to believe the promise is for them; and the condition on which salvation depends is faith. It ought to be clear to anyone that faith as a divinely appointed means or instrument of salvation is incompatible with faith as a cause that leads to salvation. Since the RWC in their response rejected my careful and precise definition of condition as means, the only other option is condition as a cause that leads to salvation; that the latter is their position is evinced by the weight they lay on “the initial exercise of saving faith.”

⁷ See J. G. Vos’s explanation of “condition” as used by the Westminster divines as quoted in page 2 of my protest.

With reference to Point 1(b) of the response, if, as the RWC avers, there is no uncertainty in the mind of God respecting the outcome of the promise, it follows that the promise of the gospel is only to those for whom God intended it, that is, those who repent and believe. If there is no uncertainty respecting the outcome of the promise, then it cannot be made to those who never actually repent and believe, for if God promises salvation to all men and many of them never repent and believe, then the promise is not realized with them; and if the promise does not take effect in many to whom it is sincerely made, then there is uncertainty in God's mind and purpose. Hence, to speak of a conditional promise that is certain is a contradiction.

Contrary to the RWC in Point 1(d), it is not I who "simply insists the promise is for the elect." That the promise of the gospel is for the elect is explicitly stated in the confession: "[God] freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe" (7:3). Furthermore, and contrary to the RWC, I do not "ignore the fact stated in the original article that the confession teaches that saving faith 'entails embracing the promises of God' (14:2)." But I do notice in chapter 14:2 that the activity of "embracing the promises of God for this life and that to come" is for a Christian: "By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word ... and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth ... and embracing the promises of God ..." Furthermore, this chapter strictly limits the activity of saving faith (which includes embracing the promises of God) to the elect: "The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls ..." (14:1). I suggest to the RWC that it is they who ignore what the confession so clearly teaches in this chapter.

There is something else stated in the article and reiterated in the response that is very problematic. The RWC wrongly assumes that in order properly to preach the gospel, it is necessary that it be preached as a general promise to all men. In Point 2 of the article, they take issue with the truth that the promise is particular when they say, "This means that there are no promises to any non-

Christian, since no one can know they are one of the elect prior to their conversion. This, in turn, means that saving faith in its initial exercise can no longer be defined as entailing embracing the promises of God.” In Point 1(d) of the response they return to this position when they ask the question, “Since no one can know his election till after conversion (2 Peter 1:10), then how do the elect embrace promises that they cannot know are addressed to them?” Their reasoning is that only if the promise of the gospel is made to all men can anyone believe it is for him personally. This amounts to saying that a sinner must know and believe that God’s promise is to him before he can rightfully be called to faith. But the confession, in line with Scripture, teaches that receiving the promise of God personally is only for those who possess saving faith—for Christians (14:2). The RWC ends up with the absurd position that I must believe the promise is to me before I believe.

Contrary to the Amyraldian scheme of a conditional promise espoused by the RWC, the Bible makes clear that God’s promise of salvation is to those who repent and believe: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31); “if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Following the example of Peter on Pentecost, we promise salvation to the penitent: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart ... Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:37-39). The promise is to those who repent and believe, and we have no right to promise salvation to any but them. The call of the gospel is general; the promise of the gospel is particular—to those, and those only, who repent and believe.

Amyraldianism

In my protest I levelled the charge of Amyraldianism against the teaching of a conditional promise of the gospel. Amyraldianism is an insidious heresy that was condemned by the Reformed churches in

the seventeenth century. In the first point of their response, the RWC disputes my charge. I stand by it.

The RWC's characterization of Amyraldianism as a teaching that has to do only with the extent of the atonement is wrong. It is true that a universal reference of the atonement was the centre of Amyraut's heresy but he did not concern himself just with the question of the extent of the atonement. Amyraut developed "hypothetical universalism" as an aberrant theology. Amyraut develops his hypothetical universalism in his *Brief Treatise*, from which we learn that it involved the following elements: a universal, conditional salvific will of God; a universal, conditional reference of the atonement; and a general, conditional promise of salvation to all men. That such is indeed the teaching of Amyraut ought to be unmistakably clear to anyone who takes the time to read his work.

At the beginning of his seventh chapter, he writes,

Since the misery of men is equal and universal and since the desire that God has had of delivering them by such a great Redeemer proceeds from the compassion which he has for them as his creatures that have fallen into such a great ruin and since they are equally his creatures, the grace of redemption which he has procured and offered to them ought to be equal and universal, provided that they are also found to be equally disposed to receive it.⁸

Here we have the three elements listed above: God desires the salvation of all men; he has procured the redemption of all; and he offers redemption to all on condition they are willing to receive it.

Amyraut goes on to elaborate upon the blessings procured by Christ's redemption for all men, concluding with these words: "But all of this depends upon the condition, that they do not show themselves unworthy."⁹ What Amyraut means by condition becomes clear a little later when he says:

⁸ Moses Amyraut (1596-1664), *Brief Treatise on Predestination and its Dependent Principles*; translated with an introduction by Richard Lum; 1985, unpublished thesis, p. 38.

⁹ Moses Amyraut, *Brief Treatise on Predestination and its Dependent Principles*, p. 41.

It is therefore necessary, before this Redeemer to whom has been committed the charge of accomplishing our salvation exercises the power of his spirit in our regeneration and glorification and makes us feel the effect of his communion in these things, that men accept him and come to be united with him. And this is what he himself calls, 'to come to him, to look upon him and to believe in him' ... It is that which the apostles call in so many places 'faith.'¹⁰

This is the idea of condition embodied in the free offer of the gospel as taught by the RWC. It is condition in an absolute sense as something on which God's offer of salvation is suspended. As Amyraut says, "Before this Redeemer ... exercises the power of his spirit in our regeneration ... and makes us feel the effect of his communion in these things." Before Christ can exercise His power in us, we must do something, namely, fulfill the condition of faith. This makes faith a condition *to* salvation and not a part *of* salvation. And that is exactly the position of the RPC of Ireland resulting from the enactments of their 1996 Synod, notwithstanding the evasions of the RWC in Point 1(c) of their response.

Proceeding with his development of a universal grace of God which offers salvation to all men on condition of faith, Amyraut says,

But if you consider the condition which he [i.e., God] has necessarily established—to believe in his Son—you will find that while this compassion of giving men a Redeemer proceeds from a marvelous love toward the human race, nevertheless this love does not exceed this limit—to give salvation to men, provided that they do not refuse it. Consequently these words, 'God desires the salvation of all men' (1 Timothy 2:4) receive this necessary limitation, 'providing that they believe.' If they do not believe, he does not desire it. This will to make the grace of salvation

¹⁰ Moses Amyraut, *Brief Treatise on Predestination and its Dependent Principles*, p. 42.

universal and common to all men is in this way conditional, that without the accomplishing of the condition, it is entirely ineffectual.¹¹

The conditional scheme of salvation outlined in the above quotations from Amyraut is embodied in the Reformed Presbyterian teaching of the free offer of the gospel. Both schemes contain a will or desire of God for the salvation of all men (or at least of all who hear the gospel) and a general, conditional promise of salvation to all men, in which faith is the condition. The only difference between the two schemes is that Amyraut roots all of this in a universal atonement of Christ, whereas the Reformed Presbyterians want to maintain a limited extent of the atonement. Whereas Amyraut teaches that the offer of salvation to all men was procured by a redemption for all, the Reformed Presbyterians would have us believe that God makes a sincere offer of salvation to many men for whom Christ procured no redemption. To those who believe that such an offer of salvation is sincere when it is made to many for whom no salvation has been procured requires, I would suggest a redefinition of the word *sincere*.

Conclusion

I have already drawn attention to the action of the RPC of Ireland with respect to its report of the events of the 1996 Synod. In the minutes of synod, the church printed the response of its RWC to my protest without also printing my protest, which was the occasion for their response. While this is by no means the salient result of the controversy (the salient result being the official synodical endorsement of the heresy of the free or well-meant offer), it is perhaps one that in the interests of justice the church ought to consider correcting.

This work represents not only a significant portion of my own spiritual biography; it is also meant to be a contribution to the defence of the gospel of sovereign grace against the teaching of a grace of God for all men in the gospel, so that in the preaching God supposedly expresses a desire for the salvation of all men. That this is taught and promoted by reputedly orthodox men who loudly

¹¹ Moses Amyraut, *Brief Treatise on Predestination and its Dependent Principles*, p. 43.

proclaim their adherence to Reformed orthodoxy makes it all the more dangerous. The bottle of poison that is unmarked or marked with the label “poison” is markedly less dangerous than when it is labelled “health-promoting.” We are well acquainted with Arminianism as it is set out and exposed in the *Canons of Dordt*; we know that Amyraut and his disciples were condemned by the Reformed churches, but when essentially the same teaching is vigorously promoted by those who wrap themselves in the colours of Calvinism, I charge them with wearing false colours.

It is a dreadful reality that official acceptance of the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel by Reformed and Presbyterian churches inevitably leads to the death of orthodox Calvinism among them. This is aptly demonstrated by the history of the Christian Reformed Church and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In smaller and erstwhile “conservative” denominations such as the RPC of Ireland, while double predestination is not officially denied, the doctrine of sovereign reprobation is silenced to death. I know, for I was a member of that denomination for almost five years and never once heard reprobation taught in sermons or in any other form. The reason for this is not hard to find: holding double predestination alongside the free offer of the gospel’s teaching that in the preaching God expresses a sincere desire for the salvation of all men cannot long continue. It cannot exist logically and it has not historically. If double predestination is not officially denied (usually in the process of reinterpreting the confessions or at least in dropping strict subscription), then it is silenced to death.

Reserve, timidity, or silence on the part of Reformed churches regarding their proclamation of double predestination is shameful. It is so because it is this doctrine that enthrones God and dethrones man; it is this doctrine that makes God everything and man nothing; it is this doctrine that makes God the Almighty Saviour of sinners and man utterly dependent on the grace of God. Thus it is by our bold, uncompromising declaration of this truth that we confess with the apostle: “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification,

and redemption: That, according as it is written, “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:30–31).

The well-meant offer teaches a universal, resistible grace and an ineffectual, frustrated will of God in that God expresses a sincere desire for what never comes to pass, and makes faith a condition to be fulfilled by unsaved man and not a part of salvation. A Reformed man, jealous for the glory of his God, must utterly repudiate such a doctrine, as must any Reformed and Presbyterian church in which there still burns a love for that glorious system of biblical truth that we call the Reformed faith.

Appendix A

Statement by the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC) of Ireland on the gospel offer (13 June, 1995)

This statement originated in the opposition of myself and another member of the RPC to the doctrine of the well-meant offer of the gospel. At the time, we had both made application to become ministerial students. Knowing that the teaching of the free (or well-meant) offer was being vigorously promoted by some prominent ministers of the church, we thought it well to state our opposition to this teaching from the outset. As a result, our applications were refused and the church subsequently made its statement. The statement was ambiguous; its conclusion purported to reject certain statements, or propositions, which were of themselves negative, meaning the church affirmed nothing. The statement was also ambiguous in that it failed to say who was guilty of the propositions to which it objected and was thus without theological context.

Appendix B

Petition (8 November, 1995)

Since the above statement of the Synod of the RPC was clearly unsatisfactory, I petitioned the Northern Presbytery of the church for clarification of the statement’s conclusion.

Appendix C

The British Reformed Fellowship: How Reformed Is It? (February, 1996)

This article appeared in The Covenanter Witness, the denominational magazine of the Reformed Presbyterian Churches of Scotland and Ireland. It provided clarification of the statement made by the RPC synod of 1995, specifically regarding their doctrine of the gospel offer. The article embodied the Arminian doctrine of general grace, that the preaching of the gospel is grace to all.

Appendix D

Protest

This is my protest to the RPC Synod of 1996 against Points 2, 3 and 4 of the above article in The Covenanter Witness.

Appendix E

Response

This is the response of the Reformed Witness Committee to my protest (above), which response the RPC Synod of 1996 sadly adopted.

Appendix F

Minutes

Minutes 84-88 of the RPC Synod (10-12 June, 1996) contain the Synod's decisions regarding my protest.