

The Free Offer Issue

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Being a general overview of a book recently published on this topic

The reader ought to consider carefully the following quotations:

(i) It is for this reason that we have confined ourselves to saying, “The overtures of the gospel are an expression of God’s love, in that he delights in the promised blessedness that is held forth, even though, concerning the non-elect, he has not decreed the bestowal of the faith necessary for that blessedness to be conveyed.”

(ii) There is much of great value in the theological writings of Herman Hoeksema and others who have followed him. Their desire to safeguard the truth of God’s absolute sovereignty in election and predestination is highly commendable.

Question: Who was it who wrote the above? By the wording and the sentiments expressed, surely it looks like a Protestant Reformed writer from North America, or maybe someone from the BRF, or from Australia’s Evangelical Presbyterians.

Well, now for the shock, or rather sequence of shocks.

1) These two quotations above were written, and published recently in a book, *not* by a man in sympathy with the PRC and the BRF position concerning the so-called “free offer” of the gospel, but by one who zealously opposes the PRC and the BRF on this matter. Rev. David Silversides (hereafter DS) of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland has, for some 15 years or more, pursued the BRF and the PRC with consistent criticism and polemics over the matters of the “free offer” and “common grace.”

2) The first quotation is very important. I have not changed its import or meaning by lifting it out of its original context in DS’s new 128-page paperback, *The Free Offer: Biblical and Reformed* (Marpert Press, 2005), page 86. He is there re-iterating what he says on page 47, in a closing appen-

dix wherein he clarifies and encapsulates the conclusions he has reached through his polemics.

3) But surprisingly, instead of now affirming that he actually agrees with the PRC and the BRF position on this, he regards his whole undertaking as having critically refuted the PRC and the BRF. So also do his backers in this publishing venture, viz. Rev. John J. Murray of the Banner of Truth, who wrote the foreword, and Rev. Malcolm Watts of Salisbury who penned a recommendatory blurb for the book's back cover.

Evidently, something is very awry here. DS cannot spend some 86 pages in polemic against the PRC and the BRF and then finally espouse the very position he argues against! The question arises then, as to whether DS would understand by the wording he has used exactly the same thing that we of the BRF and those of the PRC would understand. Otherwise he would be shooting himself in his own foot, so to speak, with the words of his own book. It behoves us therefore to examine his work very carefully, in order to critically understand his position, and test it against the Scriptures. This (DV) we aim to do in several articles over this and the next several issues of the *British Reformed Journal* (BRJ).

First, it is necessary to appreciate certain historical details that have led to the present confrontation as manifest in DS's book. In the late 1980s and on into the early 1990s, as minister of Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church, DS evidently came into contact with believers in Northern Ireland who were receiving ministry from the North American Protestant Reformed Churches. From 1993 onwards under the ministry of PRC missionary Rev. Ron Hanko, these Ulstermen were organised into a congregation. During this time, via public lectures, debates, and published articles, a controversy was maintained with DS over the issues of common grace and the free offer. In the pages of the *BRJ* the debate was carried on between DS and Allen Baird. And subsequent to a public speech made by DS controverting Prof. Hanko, the latter printed a privately circulated "Answer to David Silversides," a perspicacious analysis which we thought at that time, should have set all the records straight. However, DS continued to battle against the PRC and the BRF. He debated the matter publicly with Rev. Ron Hanko in 1995 and has since lectured on the topic as far afield as the Bible Presbyterian Church in Adelaide, Australia, in 1999, and again at the Free Church School of Theology at Larbert in 2001. Now, in 2005, he has produced the book to which we address this series of arti-

cles. Checking back to the recordings of his lectures and his articles of some 10 to 15 years past we see that DS's present volume is basically an encapsulation of his arguments presented over the years in a form easily accessible to and understood by the ordinary non-theologue. As such, of course, this 128-page paperback cannot possibly do justice to the maze of scholarly discussion and technical issues that underlie the whole debate, and at the outset I must make this salient criticism of the work: that it presents the issue to the ordinary Christian reader as if all is cut-and-dried, and that there are no vital and technical caveats that the reader need concern himself with.

Rev. Silversides is a good man, and a stalwart minister of his denomination. Moreover, he is a stalwart member of the committee of the Trinitarian Bible Society, wherein he lends his weight to the furtherance of Bible distribution and the maintenance of the Textus Receptus. Also, he was a well-appreciated speaker at the BRF Conference in Castlewellan in 2002. And it is no doubt in regard to this latter that he can say in this book that he has "enjoyed fellowship with brethren from the Protestant Reformed Churches in America" and that "there is much of great value in the theological writings of Herman Hoeksema and others who have followed him" (p. 82).

It is therefore with great regret that I have to take up a serious polemic against his arguments as articulated in this book. This is not to detract in any way from the high character and good standing of DS. On these issues concerning common grace and the free offer, I believe him to be mistaken, and must say so.

In general overview, DS has presented us with a book which takes this following overall shape:

i) A foreword by Banner of Truth man John J. Murray, which specifies the PRC and the BRF clearly as having "not helped" the situation vis-à-vis gospel preaching in the British Isles, in that they "embraced ... the denial of God's offer of mercy to all sinners as an expression of his loving kindness." Murray then gives his encomium to DS for "this restatement of the biblical and historic Reformed position on the gospel offer" (p. 4).

ii) Six chapters then follow occupying some 76 pages, under the following headings, which, with their sub-headings, usefully adumbrate the whole sweep of the argument DS presents.

1) Statement of the Question

- 2) God's Love and the Free Offer of the Gospel
 - Does God show love to the non-elect in this life?
 - Does God command us to love those whom he does not?
 - Did Christ fulfil God's law?
- 3) Common Grace and the Character of God
 - Common grace is compatible with the true nature of God's love to sinners
 - Common grace is compatible with God's hatred of the wicked
 - Common grace is compatible with God's unchangeableness.
- 4) The Free Offer An Expression of Divine Loving-Kindness
 - The free offer is an expression of God's kindness to those who need Christ
 - The free offer is an expression of divine kindness, not divine frustration
 - The free offer is indiscriminate
 - The free offer contains a conditional promise
 - The free offer in the writings of Westminster Assembly members
- 5) The Warrant of Faith
 - The warrant of faith is not the knowledge of our election
 - The warrant of faith is not the knowledge that "Christ died for me"
 - The warrant of faith is not conviction of sin
 - The warrant of faith is the indiscriminate gospel offer addressed to every sinner who hears

6) Conclusions

iii) There then follow two appendices, occupying a further 38 pages, namely:

A. The Question of "Desire" in God for the Salvation of the Non-Elect

B. Additional Testimony of Reformed Writers

iv) The book then concludes with an index of some 241 Scripture references culled from Old and New Testaments and a short index of names consisting of some 83 entries.

Strangely, the contents page, while admirably outlining the course of DS's argumentation, omits to give page numbers to anything, something

which is an unfortunate oversight and inhibits quick and easy access.

That DS should spend so many years and so much energy on these two points, common grace and the free offer, is evidence that he regards the issue as very serious indeed. Very serious in that he plainly (with the support of John J. Murray and Malcolm Watts, et al.) regards gospel preaching as deficient and compromised if the preacher is not thoroughly imbued with a belief in common grace and what he terms as the “free offer.”

I have to say that the issues DS debates herein range over a vast phalanx of theological considerations. And the controversy over all this has raged over many more than the 15 years or so DS has been involved in it. It is gratuitous to think that a 128-page paperback is going to sort out the controversies of several centuries and a host of learned scholars. For example, when DS expounds in Chapter 3 on common grace, he becomes somewhat befuddled as to the nature, basis, and operations of this supposed grace. Further, he seems not to realise that there are several distinctly, and importantly, different interpretations of what “common grace” is supposed to be.¹ The learned Abraham Kuyper, for instance, had a radically different conception of common grace to that initially, and somewhat tentatively, launched in the Puritan period. Again, in the USA today, a logically consistent development of Kuyper’s common grace has evolved in the Christian Reformed Church which would appal Kuyper were he alive to see it. More, various Reconstructionist writers in the USA and elsewhere have another kind of “common grace” doctrine which amongst some, at least, of their writers, is radically different to that espoused by DS. Indeed, in this respect it is worth noting here that in his tape recorded lecture defending the free offer to the Bible Presbyterian Church in Adelaide, Australia, in June 1999, DS explicitly admits that “common grace” is not the best term that could be used to label the doctrine hitherto denominated as such.

Of course, as we intimated above, in a small volume of this kind, all these issues are more than the author could possibly be expected to handle. His book, nay, his chapter three alone, would have run perhaps to several hundred pages! But the omission of such data and discussion means that for the ordinary reader DS’s book is readable, and easily comprehensible,

¹Cf. Prof. Herman Hanko’s useful series of articles on the variant types of common grace printed in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* beginning in Volume XXV, No. 2, (April 1992), and running for some nine instalments until Vol XXX, No. 2 (April 1997), all under the heading “Another Look at Common Grace.”

but, we have to say, regrettably inadequate and consequently somewhat misleading to say the least.

Similarly, in Chapter 2 on “God’s Love and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” there is inadequate discussion of the spectrum of key words used for “love” in the Greek and Hebrew originals of the Scriptures. In consequence, the ordinary reader will read “love” as meaning “love” without the vital nuances of qualification manifest in the ancient languages in which the Scriptures were written. To such a reader, “love” as a word tends only to signify “love” in all the fullness which the English word is intended to convey.² Careful philological analysis is necessary at such points of Scripture interpretation. If DS had included such in his book, it would probably have become unreadable to the general public he has set out to reach, but regrettably again, such deliberations are necessary as steps to a proper resolution of these exegetical problems. That DS’s presentation omits to reference such data gives a distinctly false impression.

It is in Chapter 4, entitled “The Free Offer An Expression of God’s Kindness to Those Who Need Christ,” that one encounters a key to the wellspring of DS’s interpretation. It is under the fourth sub-heading which runs “The Free Offer contains a conditional promise.” In this section, after expounding what he deems to be the free offer, DS brings up the case of one of Hoeksema’s former co-pastors, De Wolf, showing how De Wolf (rightly in DS’s view) stated in a sermon that “God promises every one of you that if you believe, you will be saved.” DS then pillories Hoeksema for asserting that (i) such a sentiment is Arminian, and (ii) presupposing that “every one of you” have it in their power to believe, if they so will. Hoeksema would have gone on to say that for God to proffer such a *promise* to the non-elect would not be an offer, it would be a mockery, for if God did not give the gift of faith, how could the hearer believe? To make a promise like that to all hearers is like promising a thousand dollars to every legless man if only they would walk a mile. Worse, it would imply hypocrisy in God, for God knows the inability of the hearers, and knows that only He can restore the faculty of faith necessary for them to believe. (Or, in the words

²For instance, in English there tends to be a conflation of “loving” and “liking.” Clearly the Scriptures whilst commanding us to “love” our enemies do not command us to “like” our enemies. In ancient Greek four words were used to differentiate different types and levels of “love,” and their interrelationships have been hotly debated. Suffice it to say here that the matter is difficult to resolve purely on a philological level.

of the example above, God has the power to bestow legs to a legless man, and if He decrees not to do so, then his “offer” to such a cripple is a mockery, and by no means grace.) DS misses the point entirely on this issue, and totally misunderstands Hoeksema’s polemic over “conditional promises.” Furthermore, DS shows here no appreciation for the whole history and rise of the 1953 schism in the PRC, and how the foundations of it went right back into a defective view of the covenant of grace and infant baptism as promulgated by Klaas Schilder. But again, to include a properly nuanced discussion of all this would have expanded DS’s chapter 4 to encyclopaedic proportions. Regrettably again, the ordinary reader will be misled at this point because of the absence of these details, and the presence of a “cut-and-dried” attitude by DS in his frame of expressions only reinforces the impression that he is uttering the final word on it all.

Chapter 5 deals with the so-called “Warrant of Faith.” The first three sub-sections discuss what the warrant is *not*. Three things, viz., knowledge that one is elect, knowledge that Christ “died for me,” and conviction of sin, are all denied as “warrants of faith.” DS here says some very useful things, clearing away the false Arminian-Wesleyan notions about “believing that Jesus died for you” as being the first step of faith, for instance. Such a false gospel needs to be shovelled out of the way unceremoniously. Unregenerate souls, convicted by the light of natural conscience concerning their wicked ways, can all too easily be “brought to the Saviour” as if the act of “believing Jesus died for them” is some sort of insurance policy. Such hypocrites go out of the counselling rooms in a thousand crusades with their consciences salved and their hearts not in any way brought to terms with Jesus as the Christ. Hence has arisen the “Lordship Controversy” and the reprobate “other gospel” which teaches that you can accept Jesus as Saviour without yet accepting Him as Lord.

DS asserts that the true warrant of faith is the indiscriminate free offer of the Gospel “to every sinner that hears.” All a very interesting discussion, but, we have to ask, what exactly does DS mean by the notion of a “warrant” of faith? Such language smacks of an Arminian notion of sinners coming to God by mutual agreement or compact, as if every sinner is given by God a kind of “voucher” which *entitles* him or gives him the *right* to come to Christ if he so wish. True, the idea of a warrant is pursued at some length in “The Sum of Saving Knowledge” often appended to (though not part of) the *Westminster Standards* but that is no validation for the

idea whatsoever. It might be a salient testimony to what certain theologians at that time were believing and teaching on this matter, but as to whether the whole notion of a “warrant” is scriptural is an area that needs careful examination. This we do not find in DS’s book, and we hope to supply this lack in forthcoming articles (DV). Suffice it to say at this juncture that we find the whole notion of a “warrant” to be defective, and inappropriate to the reality of the situation sinners are in, for they are under the weight of a terrible obligation rather than in possession of any warrant or entitlement. It is evident too that DS’s commitment to applying the promises of God to “all sinners as such” or “every sinner that hears” is fundamental to the notion of a sinner having a “warrant” at all. Clearly, we would say, that all the promises of God are invalid to the minds of unbelievers, who, as the apostle asserts, being “natural men” are unable to receive “the things of the Spirit of God,” because they are foolishness to them, neither can they receive them, for they are spiritually discerned (I Cor. 2:14). One asks, what of the so-called warrants in such cases? *Obligations*, yes, they all have as sons of the first Adam, but *warrants*?

In DS’s exposition there is a lack of discrimination between sinners. He emphasises that the gospel *promises* are for “every sinner who hears,” but nevertheless seems to have forgotten the Saviour’s words “he that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Two kinds of sinners are manifest in biblical narrative, Pharisees and publicans. Both are sinners. But one thinks he is righteous. The other mourns under conviction, and he is one such as is “poor in heart” and the object of divine blessing under the beatitudinal teachings of Christ. Hence we must discriminate between “poor” sinners, and “sinners,” as indeed the Lord did himself. “Woe unto ye ...” were his words to the Pharisees, but he pronounced blessing on all those who mourned and laboured under the convictions as manifest by the publican in the parable. To such as the publican, the promises of God in the gospel are truly addressed, whereas to those like the Pharisee, the thunder of divine threats are appropriate. We must get things in the right order. The gentle drawing of the divine promises applies to all such as are truly convicted as to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth,³ and consequently their own predicament as

³Cf., for instance, Matthew 16:13-17 and I John 5:1. Belief concerning the actual *identity* of Jesus of Nazareth is manifest in the New Testament as a fundamental first point of belief, and around it revolved the whole issue by which the Lord was crucified. Also, in the ancient sub-apostolic churches, the first great attacks on Christian doctrine were centred on the matter of *who* Jesus actually is.

sinner. Those who “have ears to hear,” who “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” knowing the famine of unrighteousness that blights their own nature. By contrast, those who are *unconvinced* that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God will have no qualms about their condition. Not believing themselves to be sinners in need of a Saviour is the direct consequence of unbelief in the person and authority of Immanuel. To suggest, as DS, and Messrs. Murray et al. do, that those precious promises are given to all and sundry is faulty exegesis that casts pearls before swine.

In Appendix B, DS introduces a plethora of quotations from various Reformed worthies extending from the Reformation to more recent times. To an ordinary reader such a concatenation of apparent support will look impressive. But there are serious caveats to this whole procedure, not to say that 37 pages offer really but a narrow slit of a window into the masses of writings that have accrued around this subject over the centuries. First, there is the matter of de-contextualization of the quotations. To be properly appreciated they must be read in their original settings, a task for most ordinary readers that is beyond their resources. This is a serious matter, and is evident immediately in the way DS quotes from John Calvin at the beginning of this appendix. The ordinary reader will not be aware that Calvin can be quoted equally, if not more copiously, in support of the very opposite position for which DS makes him function! Again, more of this anon (DV).

Again, another caveat arises with respect to the interpretation of these Reformed writers, particularly those from the continent, who, like Calvin, originally wrote in a language other than English. DS seems to quite nonchalantly assume that the English translation of these worthies is unquestionable, when in fact it is one of the seriously debated issues in historical scholarship. Recent scholarship examining the 19th century translation of Calvin’s Old Testament commentaries from French to English made by the Calvin Translation Society has discovered material that is seriously defective, with whole chunks of the original French or Latin being by-passed, and the actual translation often “massaged” to make Calvin say in English what a true and stalwart (so-say) nineteenth century English evangelical Calvinist believed he ought to have said, but what in fact he did NOT say!⁴ Furthermore, the historical researches of Richard Muller, Heiko Oberman,

⁴Cf. David J. Engelsma’s review of *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* by T. H. L. Parker in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, Vol XXVII, No. 2 (April 1994), p. 53.

Carl Trueman, and a host of others seem to be totally unknown areas of theology to DS.⁵ A careful examination of their works would have made him much more careful about quoting Reformed scholars in the way that he has.

To refer to the works of such worthies without the nuancing of critical analysis as to context (both literal and historical), translations, the necessary historical research in linguistics and word-meanings, is to introduce a rough and ready article which carries no guarantee that it will, when put to the test, bear the weight DS might want to put on it.

It is also to be regretted that, in this book, as in his recorded lectures and articles of previous years, we find a serious lack of Christological focus in DS's arguments over these issues, especially with regard to God's treatment of elect and non-elect wicked persons. This as we hope to show in subsequent articles, involves DS in a lop-sided understanding of the relationship between God's immutability and the gospel.

Such, in brief overview, are the idiosyncrasies we find in this work by the Rev. Silversides. It will, as we have already averred, be necessary to attend to them in proper detail via future articles, which, God willing, we hope to launch as a series beginning with the next issue of the *BRJ*.

There are, finally, certain other controversial points which arise, and which testify to further inadequacies in DS's little book.

DS has seriously missed out with respect to recent and extensive scholarly work on this very issue of the so-called "free offer" or "well-meant" offer of the gospel. He is not to be faulted, or at least not entirely faulted, for this lack. It is a pity he had no editors knowledgeable enough to draw his attention to all that has been going on.

For instance, three vitally important learned research papers appeared in the *Calvin Theological Journal* about five years ago, which greatly illuminate the whole common grace/free offer controversy as centred around Herman Hoeksema and the PRC. The data brought to light in these papers indicates the strength of Hoeksema's position, and the weakness of those who opposed him. One is staggered to read therein of the serious errors perpetrated by no less than Louis Berkhof when he argued for the

⁵Richard Muller's four volumes of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) and his various books on the development of Calvin's theology, for instance, point out idiosyncrasies in the English translations and presentations of the *Institutes*, and also indicate how Calvin's theology "developed" gradually.

three points of common grace and the free offer. In contrast, DS merely repeats the briefest of details concerning the 1924 Common Grace and Free Offer Controversy, and notes that “subsequently [Hoeksema was] deposed from the Christian Reformed ministry” (p. 10). The lack of proper detailing on this issue will leave an ordinary reader with the distinct impression that Hoeksema was rightly and deservedly booted out, thus casting a slander on that man and all those who then and subsequently stood with him. While it is true that the *Calvin Theological Journal*, being a technical publication, has a limited circulation and a probably even more limited appreciation, facts are facts, and the whole issue of common grace/free offer must be examined in the light of all the facts. The fact is, as the writers in the *Calvin Theological Journal* have shown, the whole action against Hoeksema was squalid and unjustified. Those who now wish to continue this unjust vilification of Hoeksema should beware lest they too become tainted with slanderous motives.

To continue, there is no reference to, or interaction with, the long-standing work of Prof. Herman Hanko in his seminary syllabus, “The History of the Free Offer.” This illuminating thesis has been available since 1989, and it is a serious omission that Rev. Silversides has failed to interact with it. Again, from Prof. Hanko, some time about 1990 or soon after, came a privately printed document of some 14 sides of A4 entitled “Answer to David Silversides.” This document was a refutation of the arguments Rev. Silversides was using against the PRC and the BRP back in those days, and nowhere in his book does the Rev. Silversides answer the points made in Prof. Hanko’s paper.

More, over the last 15 years, the Evangelical Presbyterians of Australia published a series of excellent booklets on the matter of the free offer and common grace. In these booklets the Rev. Stebbins, an Australian exponent of “free-offerism” was well and truly refuted, yet the Rev. Silversides seems to be oblivious to all this.

Furthermore, in the pages of the *British Reformed Journal* over the years 1995 up to about 1999, in various articles, Allen Baird debated with Rev. Silversides, and space was given in the *BRJ* for the latter to respond to Baird, but Baird was always able to refute him. No reference to these refutations appears in Rev. Silversides’ book, let alone any adequate response to them.

Lastly, comes an item which we cannot blame the worthy Rev. Silversides for missing, because it is yet to appear in print. Shortly we hope to see the learned Ph.D. thesis of a Cambridge academic come forth from the presses, it being a detailed tracing of the history of the so-called “free offer” of the gospel which promises to be something of an eye-opener.

I was saddened in reading Rev. Silversides’ book to see that over the last 15 years, he has not really answered any of the points made by PRC or BRF writers, but has continued to bludgeon on as if the other side has not so much as fired one shot at him. Compounding all this, is the eminent shadow of the Banner of Truth lurking in the background. In his foreword to the book, a top “Banner” man John J. Murray specifies explicitly the British Reformed Fellowship, its literature, and its conferences, as being the source of what he implies is an unbiblical mode of preaching the gospel in Britain, and that it is all supported by the PRC of America. And in the November 2005 issue of *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Iain Murray, the “number one” man at the Banner, has endorsed DS’s book. One thinks of Iain Murray’s evident quasi-Wesleyan proclivities as manifest in several of his tomes on historic revivals and evangelicalism, and one can understand where the Banner of Truth is headed, and why they major on common grace and so called “free-offerism.”⁶

That Rev. Silversides is evidently caught up in this whole web is something we deeply regret.

⁶One thinks particularly of Iain Murray’s book *John Wesley and Those Who Followed Him*, and the more recent *The Old Evangelicalism* in which he has a chapter of some 30 pages under the title “What We Can Learn from John Wesley.”