

Does God *Really* Desire to Save the Reprobate? (3)

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Calvinism, the truth of God's sovereign particular grace as taught in Scripture and summed in the *Canons of Dordt*, and free offer theology are not consistent and cannot be reconciled. There are many advocates of the free offer who are very explicit about this. "Calvinism and a desire of God to save the reprobate," they acknowledge, "I can not square them. I can not make them fit." However, instead of concluding, "Hold on, there is a problem here, since God's truth is one and always consistent," they declare, "It is a paradox, a mystery, an antimony." What they really mean is that it is a downright contradiction. But they gave it a fancy sounding word; they say it is a mystery or a paradox.

A desire of God to save the reprobate has been taught and promoted in Reformed circles especially in the last 100 years, and still no one has managed to show how the free offer and the Synod of Dordt's five points of Calvinism (including their "Rejection of Errors") fit. Yet all true doctrines, like the doctrines of the Trinity; the Deity, Person and two natures of Christ; creation; providence; irresistible grace; etc., are not contradictory but coherent. Consistency is a mark of truth; contradiction is a mark of the lie.

Moreover, principles work through. False doctrine, especially as it is more fully incorporated into one's theology and preached and defended, will seriously affect one's knowledge of the true and living God. In the history of the church and in the faith and lives of professing Christians this is clearly seen.

Here is one example. In seventeenth-century France, there was a heretic called Moses Amyrault. Amyrault's doctrine came to be called Amyraldianism or Hypothetical Universalism. Amyrault taught that there were *two* elections pertaining to the salvation of mankind. The first election is God's choice of absolutely everybody to be saved, on condition that they believe. But, of course, nobody will believe because we are all totally depraved. So God has a second election according to which He chooses to save those to whom He will give faith. What a contorted sys-

tem! Amyrault also taught a double-reference theory of Christ's atonement. Christ died for absolutely everybody head for head, *if* they believe. But nobody will believe, because all are in the bondage of iniquity. So God sent Christ to make atonement for the sins of those to whom He will give faith, those predestinated. Amyrault claimed that this was true Calvinism, the doctrine of John Calvin, founded upon the sacred Scriptures.

Within a relatively short time, through this Amyraldian "modification" of Calvinism, the Reformed church in France headed further towards Arminianism. Amyraldianism divided the church and sapped its spiritual power. The church's synods were not strong enough to deal with it. One analyst and historian of Gallic Calvinism called Amyrault "the gravedigger of the French Reformed Church."¹ If you go to France today, you would never guess that at one point almost half the country was Calvinistic. Why are there so few Reformed churches in France? Why are the few French Reformed churches so weak doctrinally? It started with Amyrault and his "modified Calvinism." He was the gravedigger and Amyraldianism was his spade. Principles work through.

Free offer theology and preaching finds its most suitable soil amongst those who do not know, love and rejoice in the robust biblical and Reformed doctrine of God—His perfect unity, His absolute immutability, His irresistible power, His infinite wisdom, and His sovereign decree—and the sharply antithetical Calvinism of the *Canons of Dordt*. Thus, in our day of great departure, many in nominally evangelical and Reformed churches who are not properly grounded in the truth are wide open to the free offer. This way they can claim to be Calvinistic and Reformed *and* compromise with Arminians and Arminianism. You can have your cake *and* eat it! What a wonderfully useful doctrine!

Ironically, apart from undermining the truth of God and His sovereign grace, the free offer does not actually do anything positive. According to God's eternal decree the number of the elect and the number of the reprobate are unchangeably fixed (*Westminster Confession* 3:4; *Canons* I:11). The elect are saved by God's irresistible grace in Christ and the reprobate perish in their sin and stubborn unbelief.

The free offer *does not* actually save anybody. The free offer *has not* saved anybody; not one single person has ever been saved by the free offer.

¹Professor Georges Serr, as quoted by Roger Nicole, *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2 (Fall, 1992), p. 396.

The free offer *will not* save anybody. Why? Because the free offer *can not* save anybody. It cannot save even one single person *by definition*. The free offer is a desire of God to save the reprobate, but the reprobate by definition cannot be saved! Thus God has a fervent desire to save those who can not be saved. He has an ardent passion to save those *whom He decreed can not be saved*. What a strange and useless doctrine! Yet, according to its advocates, unless you preach it, you are not truly preaching the gospel! That is, unless you preach a weak and always resisted desire of God to save those who can not be saved according to God's eternal reprobation, you are not really preaching the gospel. You are then denounced as a hyper-Calvinist! Yet the biblical and Reformed "gospel of Christ" is "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 1:16)! That is why we are "not ashamed" of it (v. 16) and that is why the free offer is such a shameful parody of the "gospel of the [irresistible] grace of God" (Acts 20:24) of apostolic Christianity!

Note the radical differences between free offer theology and "the true grace of God" (I Peter 5:12). The free offer is resistible and always resisted; God's grace is always irresistible. The free offer is ineffectual and always ineffectual; God's grace is always effectual. The free offer is finite and has not saved anybody or brought one single sinner even an inch nearer the kingdom of heaven; God's grace is omnipotent and always saves. The free offer is a changeable, temporal grace; God's grace is unchangeable and eternal, "for his mercy endureth forever" (Ps. 136:1-26).

So how can this alleged desire of God to save the reprobate really be ascribed to the true and living God? By definition, the free offer is a resistible, impotent, changeable and temporal grace, whereas the true grace of God is irresistible, omnipotent, unchangeable and eternal. The free offer has the attributes of the Arminian god, that is the attributes of man: resistible, impotent, changeable, and temporary.

There is always this tendency in the church to make God more like ourselves. In Psalm 50, God rebukes Israel, "thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself" (v. 21). For this sin of making a god after their own image, God says that He will "reprove" them (v. 21) and "tear [them] in pieces" (v. 22).

Evangelism

Though the free offer itself is not part of that "doctrine which is ac-

cording to godliness” (I Tim. 6:3) through which the Son of God “gathers, defends and preserves” His church (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 54), it does have its “uses” for its advocates. It is “useful” with regard to evangelism. Consider a professing Calvinist who holds the free offer. He has, in effect, two gospels. There is Calvinism which teaches God’s particular grace in election, in the cross, in regeneration, in justification, in preservation, in glorification, etc. There is also free offerism and Arminianism: “God loves you and wants to save you.”

From my time as a student at Queen’s University in Belfast, I remember a young man who was an exponent of this same two-track theology. In witnessing to unbelieving students, he would come with this line: “God loves you and wants to save you.” Yet when he was talking to me, he would say he was a Calvinist and produce his Calvinist credentials. But God’s sovereign grace was not his message to the unconverted. He had two different messages for two different parties. I brought the same gospel to all, unconverted or converted, for there only is one gospel of God’s sovereign grace (Acts 20:24).

You can see how this nicer, softer, gentler, non-threatening approach is much “easier” for the Christian to adopt as he approaches unbelievers. Just tell them that God loves them and wants to save them! Oh, how “useful” the free offer is! It avoids the biblical offence in evangelism: the reproach of the cross, the offence of the gospel. I am not saying, of course, that we should be offensive in evangelism. No, we must be gracious, “speaking the truth *in love*” (Eph. 4:15). But we must speak “*the truth* in love” and not the lie. What ought we testify? “... ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, *that I am God*” (Isa. 43:12). We have no authority to witness of a failing, frustrated, contradictory, lying god who is not perfectly one, immutable, omnipotent and wise, that is, a god who does not save the reprobate even though he ardently and passionately desires to do so.² We proclaim that God is God, not that He is altogether such an one as ourselves (Ps. 50:21).

Fellowship with Arminians

Not only is the free offer “useful” in evangelism, but it is also “useful” in enabling fellowship with Arminians. Let us be quite clear about this: Calvinism, as summed in the *Canons of Dordt*, teaches that Arminianism is

²See part 2 of this article in *BRJ* 46, esp. pp. 35-39.

not an alternative form of the gospel but deadly heresy. Yet most free offer men who claim to be Calvinists (and who dub those who do not agree with them “hyper-Calvinists”) praise Arminians like John Wesley who hated Calvinism—God’s sovereign grace in Jesus Christ!—with a passion and who called predestination “blasphemy.”³ John Wesley told people that they should never go to any church that teaches Jesus Christ died for the elect alone. He even said—in so many words!—that the blood of Christ was shed for people who go to hell.⁴ His brother, Charles Wesley, wrote many hymns opposing election, reprobation, particular atonement, irresistible grace, etc. In praising Arminians, like John and Charles Wesley, “free offer Calvinists,” like Iain Murray, reveal that theirs is not the orthodox, biblical Calvinism of the *Canons of Dordt*.⁵

The vast majority of “free offer Calvinists” fellowship with Arminians. See how useful the free offer is! You can claim to be a Calvinist (thus gaining a name for orthodoxy) and keep the Arminians happy by preaching a love and desire of God reaching out for the salvation of everybody. Thus you do not have to take a stand for the truth of God against the lie of Arminianism, and you can fellowship with those who deny the truth of the gospel.

It ought to be pointed out too that the vast majority of “free offer Calvinists” have Arminians in their churches as members or even deacons, elders or ministers. These “free offer Calvinists” refuse to admonish and discipline them, even though their own confessions teach that Arminianism is heresy. Their pulpits are significantly silent regarding the heresy of Arminianism, yet those who hold the pure, antithetical Calvinism of the *Canons of Dordt* are denounced as hyper-Calvinists!

John Owen rightly warns against fellowship with Arminians and their free willism: “One church cannot wrap in her communion Austin [i.e., Augustine] and Pelagius, Calvin and Arminius.”⁶ Those who hold to the truth of God’s sovereign, particular grace in Christ must not seek a carnal peace with Arminians:

³Wesley railed that the “blasphemy” of predestination “represents the most holy God as worse than the Devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust” (quoted in Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley, A Biography* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], p. 78).

⁴*The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), vol. 10, p. 297.

⁵Cf. Iain Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Great Britain: Banner, 2003).

⁶*The Works of John Owen* (Great Britain: Banner, repr. 1967), vol. 10, p. 7.

The sacred bond of peace compasseth only the unity of that Spirit which leadeth into all truth. We must not offer the right hand of fellowship, but rather proclaim ... “a holy war,” to such enemies of God’s providence, Christ’s merit, and the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Those who tolerate Arminians in their congregations and berate those who hold to God’s unadulterated sovereign grace as “hyper-Calvinists” reveal that they are not true Calvinists. Their criticism of those who love and maintain the truth of the *Canons of Dordt* ought to be exposed for what it is: sheer hypocrisy.

We ought to say, though, that there are other people, who have been told by those with a reputation for orthodoxy that God loves everybody and wants to save everybody, and who have simply accepted the free offer without really having thought about it. Now is the time to search the Scriptures and try the free offer spirits (Act 17:11; I John 4:1)!

Preaching

What then is the reason for preaching the gospel, if it is not a desire of God to save everybody? The command of God: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15; cf. Matt. 28:18-20). The Lord exhorts us, “Preach! Proclaim to the gospel to all!” The gospel is taught in all the word of God, especially as it centres on Christ crucified, risen and exalted, and on reconciliation, righteousness, forgiveness and peace though His cross. This gospel comes with commands and exhortations. All those who hear the gospel are commanded to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, the only saviour. The Bible requires us to call everybody to come to Christ for salvation. Scripture uses words like repent, convert, turn or believe and its synonyms, such as, trust, come, eat, drink, hear and look. These exhortations are to be brought in the proclamation of the gospel of God.

The command of Matthew 11:28 (“Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest”) is more specific, for here Jesus is specifically addressing those who “labour and are heavy laden,” those for whom sin and guilt have become a burden that oppresses them, like an animal with a heavy load upon its back. This sense of the burden of sin is

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 7.

itself the fruit of election (*Canons* I:12). Jesus calls those who are burdened with their sins to believe in Him to find rest. Come to Him with all your sins and guilt and shame! All who flee to Christ in repentance and faith will certainly be saved (John 6:37).⁸

The Bible also teaches that we must address those who are outside of Jesus Christ who do not feel the burden of sin. Turn from your sins and come to Him! The minister should reprove and exhort the unconcerned unconverted, calling them to repentance and faith.

Hyper-Calvinism, on the other hand, denies duty repentance and duty faith, that everyone is to be called to forsake their sin and to believe in Jesus Christ. We, however, teach duty repentance and duty faith. God “commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). All must repent. All must believe. If they do not repent and do not believe, this is a heinous transgression that greatly offends God. The Almighty is angry with this sin too, as well as all their other sins. God’s wrath is particularly against the sin of unbelief because it shows the stubbornness of man’s heart, his proud self-righteousness and his despising the Father’s well-beloved Son. We oppose hyper-Calvinism and preach against it. And yet we are called hyper-Calvinists for all that! A new definition of hyper-Calvinism is drafted up and then Reformed Christians and churches are falsely branded with this term of opprobrium.⁹ Thus people do not have to study the issues. Advocates of God’s particular grace are summarily dismissed as hyper-Calvinists by many people who would be hard-pressed even to state what Calvinism is.

Desiring the Salvation of Our Neighbour

This, however, also needs to be stated: although *God* does not desire the salvation of all men head for head, the Christian’s calling—your calling and my calling—is to desire the salvation of our neighbours. This is biblical. The apostle Paul said to King Agrippa: “I would to God, that not only thou, but also all those that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds” (Acts 26:29). Paul desired or wished or wanted (“I would to God”) that everybody there (Agrippa and “also all

⁸Cf. Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), pp. 295, 340.

⁹E.g., Phil Johnson even calls A. W. Pink a “hyper-Calvinist” (“A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism;” www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm).

those that hear me this day”) would become a Christian, though not a prisoner, like himself (“altogether such as I am, except these bonds”). This apostolic desire is our example for emulation.

Paul says something similar at the very start of Romans 9, that great chapter on unconditional, double predestination (even in the generations of believers). First, he affirms three times that he is speaking the truth: “[1] I say the truth in Christ, [2] I lie not, [3] my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost” (v. 1). His solemn assertion is that he is deeply grieved and burdened: “That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart” (v. 2). About what is he so heart-broken? “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (v. 3). In other words, the apostle so sincerely desired the salvation of the Jews, his fellow countrymen, that if his going to hell for them would achieve it, he would do it. This is an earnest and ardent desire! This zeal puts all of us to shame. This is the passion of the apostle Paul.

But this is *Paul’s* attitude or desire; *not God’s*.¹⁰ Paul, of course, says I “*could wish*,” that is, “I know I can not perish for them and atone for their sins. Only Christ can do that. But if I could, I would do it.” The true Christian also feels this; not to the extent that Paul did, for the apostle was a particularly godly man. If, by our suffering, we could see our unbeliev-

¹⁰Ezekiel 33:11, Matthew 23:37, I Timothy 2:4, II Peter 3:9, etc., are wrongly interpreted and scraped up in defence of a desire of God to save the reprobate. Their true interpretation lies outside the scope of this article. Some or all of them are explained in the following: Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, ed. Henry Paolucci, trans. J. F. Shaw (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1961); John Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 1987); John Knox, *Against an Anabaptist: In Defense of Predestination* (Edmonton, AB: SWRB, no date); John Owen, *The Death of Death: in the Death of Jesus Christ* (Great Britain: Banner, 1983); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillippsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992-1997); John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publisher, 1971); Abraham Kuyper, *Particular Grace* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2001); Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 1980); Garrett P. Johnson, “The Myth of Common Grace,” *Trinity Review* (March, 1987). For a superb treatment of many of the issues raised in the 3 parts of this article, see the famous work by Italian Reformer, Jerome Zanchius (1516-1590), *Absolute Predestination* (USA: The National Foundation for Christian Education, no date).

¹¹The “Appendix” to this article contains quotes from three stalwart defenders of particular grace which make the same point.

ing family members or neighbours or countrymen saved in Christ, we would do it.¹¹

But there is a difference between what we are called to do *as creatures* and what God does *as the Creator* whose will is one, undivided, sovereign, omnipotent and irresistible (Ps. 115:3; 135:6). This is a difference as high as heaven and a whole lot higher, for He is Almighty God and we are but men of the dust.

God does not desire the salvation of the reprobate, but He *approves of and delights in* people repenting and believing. Unbelief and disobedience are sins before Him which He detests. On the other hand, the righteous Sovereign approves of and delights in faith and repentance and in people keeping the Ten Commandments by hallowing His name, loving His truth, honouring their parents, etc.

But there is a vital distinction here. Truly, God *delights in* people believing, repenting and keeping His commandments. But to say that God *desires* the salvation of the reprobate is not the same thing. This does not come to pass, and so the Almighty is presented as having a frustrated desire, which is contrary to His attributes, His decree and His blessedness.

Let me restate this, relating it to God's will of command and His will of decree:

1. God's will of command (what He tells us we must do—repent, believe and obey Him) indicates behaviour He *approves of and delights in* as the infinitely just, righteous and holy Lord.
2. God's will of decree (His eternal, all-embracing purpose, including election, reprobation and everything which comes to pass) expresses what He *desires, wishes and wants* (and always affects for His glory), as the eternal, unchangeable, omnipotent, all-wise and perfectly simple Jehovah.

The free offer position confuses God's command to unbelievers (some of whom are reprobate), indicating His approval, delight and pleasure in repentance and faith, as meaning that He *desires* the salvation of the reprobate (though He fails to affect this desire). This error (wittingly or unwittingly) impugns God's character, counsel and salvation, as we have seen.

Moreover, it likens the Almighty to the lazy fool of Proverbs 13:4: "The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing." According to free

offer theology, the “soul” of Jehovah ardently “desireth” the salvation of the reprobate, yet everyone of them, by definition, perish in their sins and so, with respect to them, the ever-blessed God “hath nothing.” Biblical Calvinism affirms that the God of all glory realises all His desires and wishes according to His eternal decree: “The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul” (v. 19)!

This is God’s desire in the preaching of the gospel with regard to the elect and the reprobate: God wishes and wants (and affects) the salvation of the elect and—this is the terrible part—the hardening of the reprobate. What the Most High desires actually happens (Job 23:13; Ps. 115:3; 135:6). Thus Paul declares that apostolic preachers are to the one (the reprobate) the savour of death unto death and to the other (the elect) they are the savour of life unto life (II Cor. 2:15-16). This is the divine result and intention with the true preaching of the gospel.

God’s command to Christian ministers is: “Proclaim My Word—all of it—as a faithful herald. Do not keep parts back and do not mix it with falsehood” (cf. II Cor. 2:17; 4:2). He who proclaims the gospel must will that God’s will be done through the preaching: the salvation of His elect church and the hardening of His reprobate enemies. The minister must face these questions: Am I willing to preach God’s Word faithfully and not add to or subtract from it? Am I willing to preach knowing that this two-fold effect of the Word is God’s purpose and desire? Even though some of those who are hardened by the Word I preach may be members of my family or my friends? We need to remember that those who love father or mother or friends or wife or anyone more than Christ are not worthy of Him (Matt. 10:37). The minister must be able to say that although, personally speaking, he would desire to see everybody saved who comes under the preaching (Acts 26:29; Rom. 9:1-3), God’s sovereign will must be done.

Christ Himself, that great preacher of God’s grace, declared, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight” (Matt. 11:25-26, quoted in *Canons I:R:8*). The minister who is not willing to be a means of hardening for the reprobate, as well as saving the elect, and who can not add his “Amen” to these words of our Lord Jesus, he is the one who is not truly preaching the gospel.

Appendix

Augustine: “Hence, as far as concerns us, who are not able to distinguish those who are predestinated from those who are not, we ought on this very account to will all men to be saved ... It belongs to God, however, to make that rebuke useful to them whom He Himself has foreknown and predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son” (*On Rebuke and Grace*, ch. 49).

Calvin: “... the obedience we render to God’s providence does not prevent us from grieving at the destruction of lost men, though we know that they are thus doomed by the just judgment of God; for the same mind is capable of being influenced by these two feelings: that when it looks to God it can willingly bear the ruin of those whom he has decreed to destroy; and that when it turns its thoughts to men, it condoles with their evils. They are then much deceived, who say that godly men ought to have apathy and insensibility, lest they should resist the decree of God” (Comm. on Rom. 9:2).

Herman Hoeksema: “What the apostle means is: were I placed before the alternative that my brethren according to the flesh be saved, or I; were I permitted to choose between their salvation and my own, could I effect their salvation by my being accursed, I could indeed wish to be accursed from Christ in their behalf ...

... let us note that the apostle’s attitude in approaching the tremendous subject of God’s absolute sovereignty in election and reprobation is intended by the Word of God as an example for us. When, as children of God, we approach this subject, and speak of God’s sovereign predestination, it is but proper that our attitude should be deeply spiritual. It may not be, it could not possibly be the attitude of pride and self-exaltation; for if it pleased God to ordain us unto salvation in distinction from others, it certainly is no cause for us to boast in self. One who really understands the truth of this point will humble himself deeply before God. Let no flesh glory in His Presence. And this also implies that one cannot very well speak of the subject of God’s sovereign rejection of the reprobate, who in time are our fellow men, our kinsmen according to the flesh, without feeling to an extent the same heaviness, the same continual sorrow for them

which the apostle here so emphatically declares to feel in his heart. No cold-blooded rejoicing in the damnation of our fellow men may characterize our contemplation of God's sovereign dealings with the children of men. The fact that God's predestinating purpose divides our race, makes separation between men of the same flesh and blood, always remains a matter of suffering as long as we are in this present time. And this leads me to another remark. From the viewpoint of our flesh, of our earthly, natural life and relationships, it is not so strange—barring some theological objections—to hear the apostle declare that he could wish to be accursed from Christ for his kinsmen according to the flesh.

Without wishing to place ourselves on a par with the apostle, we may safely say that, in a degree, we can often repeat these words after him. Just imagine a parent who experiences the grief of seeing one or more of his children walk the way of sin and destruction. Just imagine a pastor, who, in the course of years becomes attached to his flock and earnestly desires their salvation, but who beholds many of them that are not the objects of God's electing love. And what is true of our own flesh and blood in the narrowest sense of the word and of the Church of Christ in the world in general can be applied to mankind as a whole. Out of one blood God has made the whole of the human race, and they are, according to the flesh, all our brethren. And we can understand a little, at least, of the attitude of the apostle when he speaks of the great heaviness that burdens his soul and says that he could wish to be accursed from Christ for his kinsmen according to the flesh. And in as far as we could wish in our present flesh and blood, we could indeed desire all men to be saved" ("Our Approach to the Doctrine of Predestination [Rom. 9:1-3];" www.prca.org/articles/predestination/predestination_1.html).