

## The Free Offer Issue (3)

H. L. Williams

**Being a critical analysis and review  
of a book by Rev. David Silversides entitled  
*The Free Offer: Biblical And Reformed*  
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Across the broad sweep of Reformed Churches world-wide we see dialecticism ensconced now as a fundamental hermeneutic methodology. One only has to observe how modern Calvinists are wont to assemble their dogmas. Whereas some Scripture truths indubitably convey “mystery,” such are lumped in with “paradox” as if they are the same thing. Van Til himself was prone to lump together “paradox,” “contradiction,” and “mystery” as if they were all to be comprehended under the one notion “paradox.” The effects of all this have been to put a “spin” on the presentation of Christian dogma, so that “paradox” appears to be emerging everywhere. Dr. Robert L. Reymond could say:

It is commonly declared, for example, that the doctrines of the Trinity, the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ, God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, unconditional election and the sincere offer of the gospel, and particular redemption and the universal offer of the gospel are all biblical paradoxes, each respectively advancing *antithetical* truth unmistakably taught in the Word of God that cannot possibly be reconciled by human reason.<sup>31</sup>

Van Til adds more such “biblical paradoxes:”

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<sup>31</sup>Reymond, *Op. cit.*, p. 104; emphasis Reymond’s.

<sup>32</sup>John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995), p. 156.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 65ff. Frame is a big fan of Van Til, and is himself one of the “paradox” school of theologians. Yet even he finds difficulties here and throughout his book in dealing with Van Til’s reasoning.

God brings evil to pass, but he is not to be blamed for it.  
God's glory is perfect and complete, yet he requires us to glorify Him.

God's will is secret and revealed.

Prayer and the counsel of God.

Mankind existing and not existing "in Adam."

Unregenerate man being able, yet unable, to know the truth.

The image of God in the "wider" and "narrower" senses.

Sin being able, yet unable, to destroy the work of God apart from common grace.

The Trinity as Three Persons and One Person.<sup>32</sup>

Notable is that last example of Van Tillian logic. Whereas he carefully affirmed on the one hand the dogma expressed in the *Athanasian Creed*, that is, one God in three Persons, Van Til also had a "supplementary" way of looking at the Trinity, and was bold enough to cast the doctrine in a form which carried an intrinsic internal contradiction, in which the "law of the excluded middle" is openly swept to one side. In the Athanasian way, the doctrine of the Trinity emerges as a "mystery." In Van Til's formulation, it emerges as a blatant "contradiction,"<sup>33</sup> but then he would have preferred to call it an "apparent contradiction." A "paradox."

The question arises now as to how Van Til et al. can affirm with full assurance, that the "contradictions" they claim arise in Scripture and consequently in Reformed theology are in fact, only "apparent." Since they state explicitly that resolution of the "contradictions" is, and ever will be, beyond the scope of human comprehension, it is evident that they cannot, in principle, appeal to any "extra knowledge" by which they can identify the "contradiction" as being merely "apparent" and not "real." Only God has, and *can* have that knowledge, they insist. But just here they find the riposte which they imagine will silence all their critics. We can, say they, by faith know that the contradiction must be only apparent, *because it is in the Word of God*. And because God can never lie, never, that is, never *really* break the law of excluded middle within the eternal depths of His own consciousness, we can have full confidence that all Scripture "contra-

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<sup>34</sup>Van Til, *Op. cit.*, p. 67; emphasis mine.

dictions” *must* be only “apparent,” even if to us mortals, they have, and must have, and always will have, the full appearance of being “real.” Let Van Til say it again:

Faith abhors the really contradictory; to maintain the really contradictory is to deny God. Faith *adores* the apparently contradictory; *to adore the apparently contradictory is to adore God* as one’s creator and final interpreter.<sup>34</sup>

But this statement is a logical abortion.

First, one notes the ending, that only God can reconcile the “apparent” contradictions, and that therefore He is the “final interpreter.” Van Til seems to have forgotten here that that “final interpretation” can only, *by his definition*, take place in the mind of God, and never in the mind of mortal humans, not even in the beatified post-resurrection state, because even there we will *still be finite creatures*. The result of this is that God, in this schema, becomes a “final interpreter” who will never, and *can* never, “finally interpret” His truth to the minds of His creatures. The paradox will for all intents and purposes stand for eternity, and must so do. Indeed, by Van Til’s dictums it is in the paradox *per se* that one worships the Creator.

Second, the internal logic of the paradox schema carries intrinsically the fatal instrument of its own destruction, that is, it murders faith in God. For the Scriptures tell us that now “we see through a glass darkly” in this present age, but that in the future resurrection age we will see “face to face,” and that we will be recipients of a greater revelation than that already granted us thus far in the form of Holy Writ. Now faith, in this present age, reposes in the reliability of God’s Word. But if God’s Word, in principle, *must* appear contradictory to us *because of the finitude of our nature*, then in the post-resurrection age we will still be finite creatures, and that fuller revelation of that future age will still of necessity appear as “apparently contradictory” to us. And in this new revelation in the new world, therefore, it must be possible, on Van Til’s terms, to receive revelations that “apparently contradict” the Bible we have in the here and now. Logically, again, in “paradox” terms, we might be shocked to discover post-resurrection that God has now “apparently contradicted” all his promises of eternal life. You say, “NO! Impossible! God never lies! He has prom-

ised us this redemption for eternity.” BUT, might it not be that God can abrogate all His promises, and “*apparently* tell lies,” but that back of it all in the divine consciousness there is no “real contradiction” in all this, and that the resolution of this “apparent contradiction” being only possible in the divine mind, is consequently incommunicable to the puny minds of even resurrected saints? In principle “paradox” theology has not, and cannot possibly have, any answer to such a *reductio ad absurdum* of its own principles.

This is another fatal wound to all “paradox” theology. If God in revealing Himself necessarily must give the appearance to human beings of breaking the law of excluded middle on the level of our apprehension, then we can never, ever trust Him, even if within Himself there is no contradiction to be found. For paradox theology in principle is actually teaching that within the divine consciousness what are to human minds inescapable and unresolvable logical contradictions are perfectly harmonised, and that this harmonisation is in principle incommunicable to humans. Once grant this as a logical principle, and *there are no boundaries with which to limit the scope of “apparent contradictions.”* God could abrogate all His promises, and we could be just told, “It’s only an *apparent* contradiction.”

Now in the modern Calvinist main-stream of thought, Van Til is hailed as *the* twentieth century doyen of Reformed theology. His teachings have in fact gathered up and systematised the paradoxical hermeneutics which have been filtering in to Calvinism for some 300 years. While most modern Calvinists have never studied Van Til’s writings (and would more than likely experience serious difficulties if they did), nevertheless his teachings have reinforced the manifestation of paradoxism in theology at a popular level. At somewhere nearer this popular level DS’s book functions, and it breathes Van Tillian principles through and through without referring to Van Til once. It is immediately evident, therefore, that if Van Til’s principles are fatally cracked (and as we have seen above, they indubitably are), then DS’s foundational principles are doomed also, since, whether he is consciously aware of it or no, Van Tillianism, or dialecticism, or paradoxism, is the very foundation on which he stands *when he essays to exegete Scripture*. Proof positive of this is the fact that DS ends his formal written arguments on page 80 approvingly quoting from Spurgeon the notion that the gospel is “inconsistent!” “Paradox” is occult in his presuppositions, occult in his work, but manifest in his final conclusions!

It is evident therefore that the epistemological and exegetical foundations of almost the whole modern Calvinist system are built on dialecticism as a fundamental logic (sic!) that conditions the understanding. Ramifying this is the fact that a perennial grouse levelled at Hoeksema and the PRC is that they are mutating Scripture truth by a “rationalist” argumentation that would undermine, and remove, the paradoxes. As such they are then pejoratively accused of being “rationalistic.” However, this accusation, in a back-hand sort of way, serves to testify on the one hand to the *irrationality* of the paradox position, and on the other to the sane Scripture-informed common sense of the Hoeksema school.

More. There is, in the “paradox” school, an intrinsic hypocrisy with respect to the utilisation of logic. The “paradox” school utilises *rational* deductive methods themselves in erecting, via their skewed exegetical principles, the *irrational* paradoxical structure that is the final product of their theology. This involves them in an internal contradiction of methodology, and reminds one of the famous assertion put by the author, Herman Melville into the mouth of Captain Ahab, in that classic novel *Moby Dick*: “All my means are rational, only my ends are insane.”

In that the absence of rationality ineluctably produces irrationality, and that the latter, psychologically considered, is synonymous with insanity, Melville’s aphorism fits here all too well.

It is insanity. Try it. Try to believe that a pair of contradictories are both simultaneously true, that to follow the correct route you must simultaneously turn left and right, that the same thing can be simultaneously unqualifiedly right and wrong, that God predestines the non-elect to destruction and simultaneously wants to save them, that Christ did not die for all men, but he is dead for all men, that God is three persons and one person, that God can love and hate the same people simultaneously.

Thus it is that the “paradox principle” manifests itself as an intrinsically wicked attack on the logicity and firm finality of even the divine Word. Thus I aver that it is in principle blasphemous, and has no business in the science of Christian hermeneutics. Regrettably, so many good men, like DS, work seemingly blithely and willingly within its framework and with its principles.

Any exegetical exercise which yields contradictory results is, and must be, *de facto* an exercise blighted by the error of one or more misinterpreta-

tions or misunderstandings or just plain ignorance somewhere. The answer to the problem is to go right back to the beginning, work through again, with another and independent supervisor, and apply acute critical analysis to every factor in the exegesis. This is just plain honesty. This is what an engineer would do in working out the structural steelwork design and specifications for a bridge, or a skyscraper. Failure to produce full harmony in the results will result in catastrophe in the world of engineering. But Calvinist theologians have an epistemological “licence” to ignore such precautions in their exegesis? Well, that is what the “paradox” principle would grant them. And matters of eternity are at stake here; not just the safety of a tall building.

So where exactly does “Paradoxism” or “Dialecticism” originate?

Certainly not in Scripture or in Christianity. Certainly not in Reformed theology at the time of the Reformation. This is not to say that the Reformers had sorted out everything or that Scripture does not teach “mysteries.” But it is at this juncture we find evidence of the “hidden hand” of sabotage which has penetrated deeply into the very citadels of the Reformation. A brief overview of the history of Reformed theology over the last 300 years gives us a startling picture of tragic apostasy. Look at the premier Calvinist theological schools. What happened to Geneva, Leyden, Montauban, Saumur, Sedan, Heidelberg, Oxford, Cambridge, Aberdeen, Harvard, Yale, Andover, Princeton, Columbia, McCormack, Amsterdam, Free Kirk Edinburgh, Calvin College in Grand Rapids, and now Westminster in Philadelphia? The story of these theological fountainheads of the Reformed faith makes utterly depressing reading. As institutions they have *every one veered from Scripture truth*, notwithstanding a few good professors here and there within them. And all along the way one finds the same old strategy, that by subtle infiltration the worldly dogmas of godless philosophers were given currency in those schools. Inch by inch, and year by year, it went on, eroding the epistemological foundations of Bible-based Christianity, until at the end everything Christian has gone out of the window, the Bible is ripped to pieces under the withering subjectivist attacks of “higher criticism,” and instead of being fountainheads of biblical Reformed theology, these institutions now are mostly fountainheads of what is effectively quasi-paganism. This apostasy has “knocked-on” into the pulpits and pews of every major Protestant denomination, utterly destroying the old Reformation heritage they were originally set up to con-

tinue. And all of this is just happenstance?

A study of the history of all these institutions soon evinces that they were all under concerted and deliberate attack. Every Reformed faculty was quietly infiltrated by men whose “fingers were crossed” and whose tongues were in their cheeks when they publicly took their oaths of office. Their intent was to reduce Calvinism to the quasi-paganism these faculties manifest today, a religion more akin to the secret pagan cultus of ancient Rome’s mystery religions, a religion that can embrace all “faiths” under the banner of “a new world order,” in that, via an eclectic dualism, all faiths are seen as manifestations of the one. Intrinsic to this endeavour has been the practice of dialecticism, the presence of which was and is marked by a manifold concatenation of “paradox” symbolism, exemplified by such as the double-headed Janus idol of the Romans, the black-and-white chequer-board flooring of Masonic Temples, the yin and yang duality of oriental religions, the two-headed demon gods Amon-Ra and Horus-Set of the Egyptians, the two serpents coiled around the winged Caduceus staff symbol of the god Mercury, and the two-headed eagle of ancient lore now the mark of 33rd degree International Freemasonry. All such symbolism represents the dualistic and dialectic philosophy of the Lucifer worship at the back of this whole cultus. It can be traced through the Masonic schools of interpretation through the Knights Templar, who, after the Crusades, lodged themselves in Scotland as their fortress, and whose secret cult has been a dominant feature in the lives of the Scottish nobility since then. The foundational epistemology of all these cults was dialecticism, the notion that polar opposites must be brought together in tension in order to attain truth. The drawing together of “opposites” produced a dynamism that was supposed to work “magic.” (In Van Til-speak, for “magic” substitute “adoration.”) At the very top of the pyramid, so to speak, in these eclectic mystery cults was the worship of the devil as Lucifer. Indeed, the discerning eye will isolate the first “dialectic” theologian as being a subtle Edenic creature with an aptly bifurcated tongue.

In the eighteenth century, dialecticism emerged powerfully in political and economic life, whereby polar opposites such as rich and poor were emphasised, and the situation enflamed to produce revolution. In the nineteenth century Marx and Engels codified its principles as political philosophy, and the revolution deemed to be the resultant synthesis of the juxtaposition of two opposites in tension rolled on through Europe to domi-

nate it in the twentieth century. Over this long period, “tension-theology” rose high in Scottish Presbyterian Calvinism in the Free Kirk, where the top theologians could build on the foundations laid for them by their “Marrow” predecessors, and go so far as to promote a dynamic tension at the level of the Bible itself. It was at once the Word of God and the fallible words of man. Evidence indicates that there was an influx of free-masonry quietly into the ministry of all denominations world-wide. Scotland, with its powerful Knights Templar tradition, would hardly have escaped such influences. Markedly, socialism made giant and open inroads into the pulpits of that era, and socialism itself is built on the Marxist dialectic. Then came the men in Scotland with “crossed fingers.” A. B. Bruce, A. B. Davidson, Alexander Whyte, William Robertson Smith, Marcus Dodds, Henry Drummond, James Denney, et al., could affirm with alacrity a “born-again” Bible-based evangelical faith, yet simultaneously rip the Scriptures to pieces via the tools of higher criticism. Now there’s a gargantuan dialecticism for you!<sup>35</sup>

But running through all this, a notable feature of evangelicalism in those times was the ability of the Calvinists to accommodate the Arminians. Whereas at Dordt in 1618-1619, the Calvinists thoroughly trashed the Arminian schema, yet in contrast by the nineteenth century the so-called “Calvinists” were actually accepting Arminianism as a form of orthodoxy.<sup>36</sup> They could eulogise John Wesley. By the end of the nineteenth century they were saying that Calvinism and Arminianism were but two sides of the same coin! Now there’s another gargantuan dialecticism for you! Please note it has not stopped there. Today the Banner of Truth can eulogise

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<sup>35</sup>Cf. H. L. Williams, “The Decline of Reformation Calvinism in Nineteenth Century Scotland” in *British Reformed Journal*, nos. 22-25, for documented details tracing out the path of the growing modernist apostasy in Scotland. Also see Hamilton, *Op. cit.*, and *DSCOT* in loc.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFPA, 1980) for the fullest treatment of the proceedings at Dordt; Peter Y. De Jong (ed.), *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 1968); Thomas Scott, *The Articles of the Synod of Dordt* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, repr. 1993).

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Banner of Truth publications over the years, particularly certain volumes written by Iain H. Murray, including *John Wesley and the Men who Followed Him* and *The Old Evangelicalism* which contains a chapter entitled “What We Can Learn from John Wesley.” Also there are two or three books Murray published within the last 10 years majoring on the topic of revivals, particularly *Revival and Revivalism* ably reviewed by Marc Carpenter in *British Reformed Journal*, no. 19, July-Sept. 1997, where Carpenter thoroughly and sharply critiques Murray’s embracing Arminians as being blessed by the Spirit of God.

Wesley too, and announce that it believes God blessed Wesley's preaching and movement with tremendous revival. If this means anything, it means this at least, that the Banner believes that either God endorses Arminianism, or is not really bothered about it.<sup>37</sup> This is diametrically contra the Synod of Dordt!

In the twentieth century came Barth, Brunner, et al., who effectively subsumed nearly the whole of Protestantism under a modernist theology driven by the logic engine of dialecticism. When asked what was the most profound thing he had ever learned, Barth could answer "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Yet throughout all his theologising, he insisted that the Scriptures not only could, but did, err in every line.<sup>38</sup>

We finally come down to the present situation. Reformed theology today can be categorised as centering around three major poles. I say, "major" poles, because there are doubtless a plethora of smaller and less significant poles that can be isolated by careful analysis, notably the "Amyraldian" pole, and the "hyper-Calvinist" pole. But of import for our purposes we need to concentrate on the three *major* poles, which appear thus:

1) *Barthian-modernist*, in which dialecticism has come to overwhelming prevalence. Probably 90% of all Protestantism is in the clutches of this, or some form of it. Scripture is viewed dialectically as being simultaneously the Word of God and the fallible word of man. All men are simultaneously elect and reprobate.

2) *Main-stream Calvinism*, in which dialecticism has not totally obliterated the truth but undermined and poisoned it. Dialectics herein are not used to undermine the idea of Scripture as the Word of God, *but rather to mollify the understanding of Scripture in a dialectic direction*. Probably less than 10% of Protestantism adheres around this pole.

3) *Classical Calvinism*, which has self-consciously purged itself of dialectic epistemology. A remnant.

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<sup>38</sup>Cf. Barth, *Op. cit.*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 529-530.

Around each pole individuals cluster, their beliefs patterned on the characteristics of the pole, but gradually diluting the further away from the pole they feel content to settle. Finally some will bleed right away across into the polar district of the next category. Excessive bleeding seems to have run from Pole 2 up into Pole 1 during the twentieth century, and also some bleeding from it into Pole 3. Also Pole 2 has bled to some extent into the minor poles of Amyraldianism on the one hand and hyper-Calvinism on the other. Little bleeding has been evident from Pole 3 to Pole 2, or from Pole 1 to Pole 2. In fact Pole 2 seems, like an unstable isotope, most eminently vulnerable to the loss of its alumni in one direction or another.

With respect to the DS, it is obvious that he belongs in the second polar group of the three listed above, in that he openly espouses “free-offerism” and “common grace” which lead logically to the paradox dialectic. We do have a suspicion, however, that he is not altogether self-conscious of his affinity to the full Van Tillian position, and we suspect he might have some reservations about it. Certain tell-tale signs in his book seem to suggest this, and that he is positioned away from the centre of the pole 2 in a direction toward Pole 3. (Of these signs, DV, more anon.) In contrast, Herman Hoeksema and the PRC, Australia’s Evangelical Presbyterians, the BRF, the Trinity Foundation, the James Begg Society, and many other small groups here and there world-wide, belong in the third group. These latter have consciously purged themselves of the leaven of dialecticism, thereby migrating away from Pole 2 into Pole 3. This migration is a necessary consequent of that change of epistemological stance whereby the notion of dialectical tension is reprobated from being a legitimate principle of hermeneutic science.

Hence the disparity between DS and the PRC, BRF, and others. This is not to say that those men, who, like DS, stand in Pole 2 are necessarily not Christians, or that much of what they preach is not truthful, nor edifying. We are persuaded otherwise. Whereas there is an obvious variation of biblical fidelity across the whole spectrum centred around Pole 2, we are con-

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<sup>39</sup>Cf. Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFPA, 2000) for a doctrinal history of the Protestant Reformed Churches over the 75 years 1925-2000, and the emphasis of the PRC concerning the maintenance of an “antithesis” between church and world. This “antithesis” was notably abandoned in the Christian Reformed Church as a direct result of their espousal of “common grace,” and logically so, since via “common grace,” God is seen as working virtuously among the ungodly.

vinced that DS and many others fully endeavour to maintain 100% fidelity to God's Word, and thus probably are to be located in that Pole 2 nearer its borders with Pole 3. But we have to take serious issue with the measure of dialecticism they have imbibed, whether consciously or subliminally, and where it seriously affects Christian doctrine.

It should be noted at this point that post 1924, the little denomination that sprung up in the wake of Hoeksema and Ophoff's valiant stand against "free-offerism" and "common grace" has maintained its allegiance to Scripture as the Word of God all through the decades until now,<sup>39</sup> *whereas by sharp contrast*, those who opposed Hoeksema et al. in 1924, namely, the Christian Reformed Church, have worked out their "free offer" and "common grace" principles to their logical conclusion. They have grossly apostatised such that probably 90% of the denomination is now either eclipsed by the "Barthian" theology of Pole 1, or gone further even than that. Except for a remnant of "last stand" die-hards, liberal modernism and higher criticism are rife at Calvin seminary and in the denomination's ecclesiastical courts. They have denied the Scriptures as the infallible, inerrant Word of God. Building upon the "Three Points of Common Grace" of 1924, they have denied election and reprobation on the grounds of the logic of the Free Offer, denying the *Canons of Dordt*. At the denomination's main university college, modern youth culture dominates, replete with concomitant perversions right out in the open. In their churches, women are admitted into office, and in the denomination's day schools evolution walks tall. And they justify all this by invoking the doctrine of "common grace." By their fruits ye shall know them.

But more than epistemology is at work in these matters addressed by DS in his book. For DS works within the parameters of the Westminster Confessional theology of the Puritans and Scots, and there are certain factors of traditional interpretation of that document and its associated catechisms and supplements that regrettably leads DS into the position he has taken on the free offer, and with respect to "paradox." We shall (DV) look at this in the next article.