

THE FREE OFFER ISSUE (6)

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Berkhof, Rev. Silversides and “The Three Points of Common Grace”
Being a continuation of a critical analysis and review of
Rev. David Silversides, *The Free Offer: Biblical And Reformed*
Marpet Press, 2005, paperback, 128 pp.

NOTE: In this article the following capitalized abbreviations are used:

DS is Rev. David Silversides.

CRC is the Christian Reformed Church, the denomination which
deposed Hoeksema in 1924.

CTJ is the *Calvin Theological Journal* printed by the CRC Calvin Semi-
nary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

3CG is the “Three Points of Common Grace” introduced into the
CRC in 1924 as a device to depose Hoeksema et al.

3PR is “The Three Points in All Parts Reformed,” a booklet by Louis
Berkhof defending the 3CG above.

In his chapter 1, entitled “Statement of the Question,” Rev. Silversides (DS) gives only brief mention of the ecclesiastical proceedings of the CRC’s (Christian Reformed Church of America) adoption of the “Three Points of Common Grace” and deposition of Herman Hoeksema. In two previous articles,¹ I dealt with parts of some modern CRC research findings that fill in the details, which expose the underhanded and illegal action that was taken to depose Hoeksema and his fellow-supporters, and also of the dubiousness of any notion that the CRC actually did, in DS’s own words, “adopt” the “Three Points of Common Grace”² (3CG) as a legally binding addition to the denomination’s confessional standards. The results of this research, I showed, thoroughly refuted the impression given by DS in his book.

DS further compounds the false impression (albeit unwittingly) by going on to inform us that in 1925 the 3CG were defended in a pamphlet by Louis Berkhof, which pamphlet was “condemned” in a response by Hoeksema.³

¹Cf. *British Reformed Journal*, no. 47 (Summer 2008), pp. 16-26; no. 48 (Winter 2008), pp. 26-28.

²Cf. D. Silversides, *The Free Offer: Biblical And Reformed*, p. 10.

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The average reader of DS's book, well steeped in "main-stream Calvinism," will immediately and virtually automatically view the juxtaposition of Berkhof and Hoeksema here with an a priori slant prejudicial to Hoeksema and the cause he espoused and for which he suffered. Louis Berkhof is one of modern Calvinism's exalted authorities. His *Systematic Theology* has gone through a multiplicity of reprints in the USA and in Britain, and is a well-known and authoritative *vade mecum* of theological reference worldwide. Berkhof is also the author of several other well-known works of theology. Such a man and his writings, championed by the Banner of Truth as well as worldwide Reformed churches, carries a theological "clout" compared to which Herman Hoeksema is made to look a mere little-known upstart, and a heretical upstart at that.

In his book, DS sweeps on from this brief and curt reference to Berkhof and Hoeksema concerning the 3CG, and sweeps his readers on with him. But to those of us who are willing to examine critically the assertions he makes here, a wholly different picture comes into view. We impress on the reader yet again, that we can turn not only to the defensive writings of Hoeksema in order to correct the distortion presented to us (albeit, we believe, in good faith) by DS. We are now in a position to view the whole matter as if *from inside the CRC* via the researches of some of their scholars, part of which I have previously showed in two previous articles. The reader will see that these researches support the protests of Hoeksema and his colleagues concerning the doctrine of (so-called) common grace.

Writing in the *Calvin Theological Journal (CTJ)*, CRC scholar and theologian Raymond A. Blacketer has given a perspicacious analysis of the substance of the 3CG and of Berkhof's defence of the same.⁴ To follow his analysis, it is apposite here to introduce the text of the first point of the 3CG, as given by Blacketer himself:

Concerning the first point, regarding the favorable disposition of God with respect to mankind in general, and not only to the elect, synod declares that according to the Scripture and the confessions it is certain that, besides the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is a certain kind of favor or grace of God that he shows to his creatures in general. This is evidenced by the afore-

³*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴Raymond A. Blacketer, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Re-examination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation," *CTJ* (April 2000), pp. 37-65 (www.prca.org/articles/ctjblack.html).

mentioned Scripture texts (the following texts were cited: Ps. 145:9; Matt. 5:44, 45; Luke 6:35, 36; Acts 14:16, 17; 1 Tim. 4:10; Rom. 2:4; Ezek. 18:23; 33:11) and from the *Canons of Dort* II, 5 and III/IV, 8 and 9, where the confession deals with the general offer of the Gospel: while it is evident from the aforementioned declarations of Reformed writers from the most flourishing period of Reformed theology that our Reformed fathers of old have advocated this opinion.⁵

Considering this first point, Blacketer observes:

The latter half of this point not only affirms a general offer of the gospel, but also adduces this universal offer as evidence for God's common grace to all humanity.⁶

Blacketer supports this assertion via the documentation to which he has had access in the CRC synodical archives. Therein he found the "report of the synodical advisory committee on common grace," which gives more specific details claiming to support the first point. This report, says Blacketer, firstly "argues that God is graciously inclined toward the godless and unrighteous, which naturally includes the reprobate." Then it goes on to assert on the basis of Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11 that "God comes to all with a well-meant offer of salvation," and that the *Canons of Dort* (II:5; III/IV:8-9) deal with the "general offer of the gospel." Only three passages from vintage Reformed writers were then cited in this report, viz. Calvin's *Institutes* 2.2.16 and 3.14.2, and one from Peter van Mastricht's *Theoretico-Practica Theologia* (2.17.15-16).⁷ This is hardly much backing for the assertion of the first point of 3CG, which avers,

[Common grace and the free offer are] evident from the aforementioned declarations of Reformed writers from the most flourishing period of Reformed theology ...

A careful examination of the few passages cited from Reformed theologians of the "most flourishing period," however, indicates that they are somewhat weak in their support of "common" grace. Calvin argues that whilst it is manifest that the godless receive good gifts of temporal utility in this life (a point which PRC theo-

⁵Ibid., p. 38, citing *Acta Synodica 1924*, article 132, pp. 145-146.

⁶Ibid., p. 38.

⁷Ibid., pp. 38-39, citing *Acta Synodica 1924*, article 100, p. 26.

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logians accept), nevertheless, he points out in the context of his argumentation that these gifts are occasions of further punishment in the reprobate, rather than reward, because the reprobate use such gifts with godless motives. It will hardly do to theologially label such gifts as “gifts of grace.” The “general grace” that Calvin argues for in these contexts concerns God’s overall preservation of the human race for the purpose of bringing forth the elect. Put simply, that is, via his natural endowments unto fallen mankind, God preserves and makes to flourish whole races of godless pagans, not out of *grace to them* but because through their generations must come the elect (cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.14.3, and Romans 8:28).

Blacketer is concerned that the proofs adduced for the first point of 3CG are, as he puts it, “problematic.” He notes that the Remonstrants or Arminians at Dordt conceived of “common grace” as a “factor that made all individuals capable of responding to the gospel call,” and that henceforth Reformed theology has generally been reluctant to connect any notions of common or universal grace with the process of salvation. Yet, as he rightly asserts, the first point of 3CG adduces that the universal nature of the gospel call is an evidence of common grace. It is what arises out of this whole notion that is now significant. Blacketer asserts that at this point the 1924 Synod of Kalamazoo in bringing in the notion of a universal, well-meant offer of salvation, “introduced quite a debatable doctrine into the church, and in so doing misinterpreted the Reformed confessions and prominent Reformed theologians,” with the result that Hoeksema et al. “were condemned in part for defending the proper interpretation of the Reformed confessions.”⁸

Even, says Blacketer, were one to consider Hoeksema et al. to be too extreme in rejecting all notion of “common grace,” their repudiation of the “well-meant offer” is much more defensible from a Reformed historical perspective, and the result of the first point of 3CG was that the CRC absorbed into its theology a doctrine that is of “doubtful logical coherence,” given the soteriological framework of the *Canons of Dordt*, and moreover this doctrine they absorbed is *not* supported by the great theologians of the “flourishing period of Reformed theology,” contra the position asserted in this first point of 3CG. Blacketer puts the blame for this on the fact that the study of the whole issue by the 1924 Synod was lacking in care and critical detail. We have already seen how the case against Hoeksema was rushed, and that the Synodical Committee of Pre-Advice was rushing to meet a dead-line for synod.

⁸Op. cit., p. 39.

They were expected to do in little over a week what really needed several months, if not years, of extensive research and debate.

At this juncture, Blacketer draws attention to Berkhof's pamphlet entitled "The Three Points in All Parts Reformed" (3PR). Berkhof, he notes, was a professor of dogmatics at the Calvin Seminary, a well known and "highly skilled synthesizer of the Reformed Faith," who, significantly, was "advisor to the Synodical Committee on common grace." At once we can see that it was this highly revered theologian's "clout" that was active behind the technical deliberations that went on behind the scenes at the 1924 Synod of Kalamazoo. But what is amazing is Blacketer's next assertion that, in the light of Berkhof's eminent scholarly prowess and attainments, he is to be found in this pamphlet on 3CG giving a defence of the "well-meant" gospel offer in a manner which is "surprisingly ... marked by *imprecision* and *misunderstanding* in his use of the important theological terms," and furthermore, likewise "lacking in its historico-confessional basis!"⁹

Blacketer's assertions are breathtaking, and quite contra the impression conveyed by DS on pages 10 and 11 of his book. On what evidence does Blacketer stand his damning thesis?

Well, he first points out that analysis of Berkhof's pamphlet "demonstrates *very little familiarity with the actual views of Hoeksema and Danhof*," and that moreover Berkhof actually "*frequently mischaracterizes their position*" thus:

- (i) He accuses Hoeksema et al. of preaching the gospel only to the elect.
- (ii) He ridicules them for this in that only Christ could know who the elect are, and yet Christ did not limit his preaching to the elect.

In doing this, Berkhof has, says Blacketer, manifestly based his critique on *hearsay*, and not on the then already published apposite writings of both Hoeksema and Danhof. And in relying on hearsay, Berkhof goes so far in his pamphlet as effectively to *admit* that he was so doing! Blacketer points this out, when he draws attention to a point of anti-Hoeksema "evidence" culled by Berkhof as being introduced by the phrase "According to reports ..." We ask, what kind of documentation is that?

But Berkhof's pamphlet is replete with further gross errors. To quote Blacketer:

⁹Ibid., p. 40.

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There are *numerous historical and logical errors* in both the synodical report and Berkhof's defense of the well-meant offer.¹⁰

First, Berkhof (and the synod) commits the glaring error of leaping from the concept of a "call" of the gospel to that of an "offer." Blacketer points out that in Berkhof's pamphlet and in the synodical material pertaining to these matters, they use the two terms "call" and "offer" "synonymously and interchangeably." Says Berkhof, "this *calling* of the gospel, or this *offer* of salvation, is according to the synod, *universal*."¹¹ As such they have failed to take note, right at the beginning of their arguments, that Hoeksema and Danhof were pointing out, and quite rightly, that the nature of a "call" is *not* the same as that of an "offer." One might illustrate the stark logical distinction between these two terms thus:

- 1) A soldier is "*offered*" a commission to the rank of officer.
- 2) A soldier is "*called*" back to duty suddenly from half way through his home leave.

In 1) the soldier may safely decline. In 2) he'd better not decline, or else ...

In this, we see that the nature of an "offer" is such that one is given equal right without threat, let or hindrance to accept the offer or reject it. Effectively, to offer someone something is to grant them free personal choice as to acceptance or rejection of what is offered. It follows too, as night follows day, that to introduce into this equation a threat of severe punishment contingent on rejection of the offer, is effectively to tell the subject that really he has no choice, and that your "offer" is not really an "offer," it is a camouflaged ultimatum.

To conceive of the gospel as an "offer" is intrinsically to say that it is something that individuals may accept or reject without any personal risk or peril. Hence underlying all this talk of a gospel "offer" is nothing more than naked Arminianism, based on the notion of "free will" and "free choice." And it carries something else ... in common with its Arminian cousin. It carries intrinsic logical hypocrisy, in that what it portrays as an "offer" is in point of fact carrying a threat of eternal damnation in hell fire if the "offer" is rejected. In their very moment of "free offer" glory, Arminianism and its hybrid cousin, modern Calvinism, hypocritically misrepresent both the notion of what an "offer" logically and necessarily entails, and simultane-

¹⁰Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹Ibid., p. 40, citing Berkhof, "The Three Points in All Parts Reformed," p. 13.

ously, in substituting this for the scriptural and confessional assertions that the gospel is a “call” they obscure the truth of the real gospel. For an “offer” effectively denies the sacred imperative intrinsic to the gospel, that to reject Christ is to insult God, to trample underfoot the sacred blood of the covenant and to incur a worse damnation in hell than one would have deserved if one had never heard the gospel. On hearing the true biblical gospel, *no man has any choice at all*. No man has the right to disobey the divine injunction: “[God] now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), and “this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ” (I John 3:23). No man can possibly have any right whatsoever to disobey such divine injunctions, and where there are no rights, there can be no “choices,” and where there can be no choices there can be no “offers.”

Hence it is, that the *Canons of Dordt*, and Hoeksema et al., speak consistently and scripturally of the gospel as a “call,” not an “offer.”

However, those who insist on ignoring the distinction between “call” and “offer,” build their theology on rickety principles. Thus it was that Berkhof and the synod then moved on in 3CG and in 3PR to cite as evidence certain parts of the *Canons of Dordt*, which say they, “deal with the universal *offer* of the gospel” (italics mine). *Canons* II:5 and III/IV:8-9 are presented as evidence.

Pure nonsense. Blacketer rightly exposes the fact that these passages in the *Canons* “speak of no such thing.”¹² In my opinion what is happening here is that Berkhof and the synod were so stymied in their search for confessional backing for their 3CG that they really had to scrounge in the *Canons* for something that could, given a bit of spin, be pressed into service to bolster their cause. Let us examine those *Canons* cited by Berkhof and the synod:

Firstly, *Canons* II:5:

Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.

¹²Op. cit., p. 40.

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As Blacketer rightly says, this passage does no more than speak of the command to preach the gospel to all nations, “and really *has no bearing on whether this activity, known as the external call, constitutes an offer on God’s part to all who hear it.*” But of course, it is at such a juncture as this that Berkhof skids on his own banana peel, because he has already conflated the notions of “call” and “offer,” as we have seen above. And thus he spins the evidence of this passage from the *Canons* into an “offer.” In further examining Berkhof’s pamphlet, Blacketer notes how “very imprecise [Berkhof] is in his description of the offer.”¹³ I find this pregnant with the suggestion that Berkhof was conscious of the tenuousness of his logic. Imprecision of expression and definition is a tell-tale that almost always points to something dubious in the logical underpinnings of the argumentation. It is interesting to note that this shakiness of Berkhof over his “free-offerism” has been noticed and picked up by one of Berkhof’s modern eulogisers, namely the notable modern “main-stream” Calvinist and stalwart Banner of Truth man, Rev. Geoffrey Thomas of Aberystwyth in Wales. Now Thomas is no lover of Hoeksema and the PRC or the BRF. Thomas is a “free-offer” man all the way. But in 2007, he gave the annual lecture at the Evangelical Library in London, and his subject was “Louis Berkhof, 1873-1957.” The lecture has been printed in the Spring 2008 issue of *In Writing*, issue no. 114, the magazine of the Evangelical Library. Through 13 double-column pages, Thomas gives a fascinating outline of Berkhof’s life and work with a positive and appreciative evaluation at the end. He is not entirely uncritical, however. In dealing with Berkhof’s position on common grace and the free offer as published in Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*, Thomas maintains that it is only “helpful as far as it goes” and draws attention to the fact that it

fails to deal with... Hoeksema’s position, his denial of the general love of God for all men, and his [i.e., God’s] sincere offer of salvation to them all, so that there is a tension between the two wills of God, the secret determining the salvation of the elect and the revealed will in which God declares that it is not his will that any should perish but that all men should repent and believe in Christ, so that all men without exception are sincerely offered Jesus Christ and implored to receive his salvation. You will not find sympathy in Berkhof for the free offer expressed in such a way; you must go to John Murray for that.¹⁴

¹³Ibid., pp. 40-41.

This is a feature of Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* I had noted myself many years ago, which gave me the impression then that either Berkhof did not himself really believe in the "free offer" or that he was distinctly unsure of himself on this point. These later and independent observations bolster Blacketer's criticisms of Berkhof on these issues.¹⁵ Furthermore, Blacketer points out that Berkhof's imprecision and confusion of language on the "offer/call" issue is also just as evident in the 1924 Synod's report over these issues.

Secondly, *Canons* III/IV:8:

As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly shown in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him.

Again, it is manifest here that there is *no mention of an offer of any kind*. Of course, what is here is the phrase "as many as are called by the gospel." Now put Berkhof's conflation of "call/offer" spin on this phrase, and you can press it into service as meaning "as many to whom the gospel is offered." Well, Berkhof can slip on his own banana peel if he likes, a wise man will kick it out of court. Effectively, Berkhof and all those who follow his lead on this make the *Canons* say something different to what the venerable men of Dordt actually wrote.

Notable too, in this passage of the *Canons*, is the requirement to proclaim promiscuously the promise of "eternal life and rest" to "*as many as shall come to Him*," etc. It is apposite to draw special attention to this, as it is a well-founded scriptural concept, that God promises salvation to *all who come to Him*. It was a perversion of this concept that caused the tortuous schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1953, when many of their ministers and members fell under the spell of Klaas Schilder and the "Liberated" Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. The perversion emerged right in Hoeksema's congregation at Grand Rapids, when one of the co-pastors, Rev. De Wolf, asserted from the pulpit that "God promises *every one of you*, that if you believe you will be saved."¹⁶ In contrast, the correct, Dordtian orthodoxy would have

¹⁴Cf. Geoffrey Thomas, "Louis Berkhof 1873-1957," *In Writing* (Spring, 2008), p. 20.

¹⁵The reader will find the apposite sections in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 432ff.

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been: God promises everyone who believes that they will be saved. There is a world of difference betwixt those two formulations. They are two *different* gospels! The De Wolfian version is synonymous with Arminianism, whether they are willing to admit to this or not! For the De Wolfian formulation is effectively a promise made to all men without exception, elect or not. And it is redolent with the suggestion that contrary to Scripture, believing is within the capacity of every hearer. For a professed Calvinist to assert this formulation is an abomination, for he must know that such a “universalised promise” is completely beyond the grip of the non-elect, since none can believe unless God sovereignly works faith in them. Such a formulation makes the gospel a mockery, effectively like promising all blind men that you will make them millionaires if only they will see. Worse, the De Wolfian formulation makes God look deceitful, in that He, and He alone, can work faith in them, but chooses not to, whilst apparently simultaneously giving them a promise on condition that they have faith. Functionally, and logically, it portrays God as a hypocrite.

Such a conception of God is a damnable abomination. An utter blasphemy.

But our “main-stream” modern Calvinists want to insist that this is all to be justified under the blanket term of “paradox,” or as Geoffrey Thomas puts it, “a tension between the two wills of God.”

But to return to *Canons III/IV:8*. Blacketer notes that in this statement the *Canons* “declare that those who are called through the gospel are called seriously” and that the “seriously called” is a translation of the Latin *serio vocantur*. He says rightly, that the Synod *and* Berkhof read this Latin phrase as an “obvious indication that God genuinely offers salvation to all who hear the gospel, including the reprobate—those whom he has decreed to leave in their state of rebellion and to withhold from them ‘saving faith and the grace of conversion.’” Again, he says, we see both synod and Berkhof assuming “that *call* and *offer* are synonymous.”

Right at this point we find the very nub of the error intrinsic to Berkhof and all of modern main-stream “Calvinism.” Blacketer rightly draws attention to the fact that *Canons III/IV:8* are “a direct response to one of the Remonstrant objections to the Reformed doctrine of predestination.” Quoting from the *Sententia Remonstrantium*

¹⁶On De Wolf and the controversies surrounding this period, see Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), pp. 200f. DS refers approvingly to De Wolf (*Op. cit.*, pp. 57-58).

section III/IV:8, he reveals that the Arminians at Dordt held an interpretation of the “serious call” of the gospel in terms of it being “a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save,” and that thus the gospel declaration, *according to the Arminians*, was one that honestly, and sincerely, and passionately declared God’s will to save all who heard, in that it was to be so declared to all.¹⁷ This concept of the “serious call” is what, however, *Canons III/IV:8* are designed to refute and rebut, says Blacketer. And “what Berkhof assumes, but does not demonstrate, is that Dordt has the same understanding of what it takes for a call to be serious as the Remonstrants did. It is quite clear however, that Dordt does not share that view ...”¹⁸ In taking up the language of *serio vocantur*, the *Canons* do not share the Remonstrant view that God must sincerely intend and will to save anyone who receives the call.

In short, the term “serious call” meant two different things to the two parties at loggerheads at Dordrecht. And the *Canons* omit any reference to the term as inclusive of a desire and intention to save all hearers. Rather, in the light of *Canons I:6* and *15*, Dordt *rejects* the idea that God wills or intends to save all. And what the *Canons* actually do in III/IV:8 is to explain how *serio vocantur* can really be a “serious call” when, “in fact, God *does not intend or will the salvation of the reprobate!*”¹⁹

In sum, as Blacketer goes on to say, *Canons III/IV:8* point up the distinction between God’s *preceptive will* and His *decretive will*. The preceptive will indicates what God righteously demands from every sinner, and thereby the obligation under which every sinner finds himself. This preceptive will has nothing at all to say about what God determines shall happen under the agency of his decretive will. For Berkhof et al., however, a problem emerges under the aegis of these concepts: How can God offer forgiveness of sins and eternal life to those for whom he has not intended those gifts? Berkhof asserts that “it need not be denied that there is a *real difficulty* at this point, but this is the difficulty with which we are always confronted, when we seek to harmonize the decretive and preceptive will of God ...”²⁰

What is immediately evident is that Berkhof’s dilemma is caused by his conflation of the notions of “call” and “offer.” Remove this conflation, and the apparent tension between the preceptive and decretive wills of God simply vanishes.²¹ For in the theology of the “call,” God is laying upon every sinner their obligations to Him.

¹⁷Op. cit., p. 41, n. 20.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 42; italics mine.

²⁰Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 462, cited by Blacketer, Op. cit., p. 43.

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The fact that they are by nature unable to fulfill those obligations is no excuse, as their condition of inability was voluntarily taken upon them in Adam. A drunken driver is still under as much obligation to drive safely as is a sober driver. The fact that he cannot will not obviate his liabilities under the law, as his inability he voluntarily took on himself in getting drunk in the first place. A policeman sounds his siren at him, and he takes no notice, because he's drunk. But he is still liable for the offence of refusing to obey the law officer. Inability does not intrinsically imply excusability. And thus it is with the gospel call. It is the warning siren from the Great Lawgiver. It is couched in the language of "call," not in the language of "offer." This is the first frontal wave of the gospel, to wake up all sinners to their obligations to God, these obligations being focused in the Person of Christ. All sinners are first called in the gospel to receive Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Intrinsic with this they are commanded to believe on Christ, and follow Him in obedience to His instructions. All sinners, elect and reprobate, are equally under this obligation, and ought to be pointed to it with zealous, passionate preaching and exhortation. This is the language of "call," and it presents God's minimum standard of responsive behaviour for all sinners. It reflects, too, God's good pleasure, that sinners should repent of their wickedness and humble themselves in obedience to Christ. And with it all, the severe warning note must go out that they must "flee from the wrath to come" (cf. Rom. 1:18; 2:5; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6). All this is no "offer," it is an *ultimatum*!

In all such preaching, there is no dichotomy with the *decretive will* of God, for the whole process is one in which the sinners are faced with their *obligations*. But behind this "frontal wave" of the gospel, comes the proclamation of the divine promises of salvation to all who respond in obedience to the "call." It is to such positive responders that the promises are addressed, not to the total *massa damnata*. Now it is at this juncture that Berkhof, DS et al. make their departures from a proper understanding of biblical and Reformed theology. They insist that the promises *are* addressed to the *massa damnata* as a whole, and hence that Christ is held out to the whole as an "offer," which, in order to maintain divine sincerity, they insist means that God actually earnestly desires that the sinner will accept the offer, whether the sinner be elect or reprobate! The promises of salvation are, they say, made to the reprobate as equally as to the elect. At this point, mainstream modern Calvinists can often be found preaching like John Wesley and Jacob Arminius. They begin pleading and cajoling

²¹Blacketer, Op. cit., p. 43.

and appealing, many punctuating these exercises with tears and multiple histrionics as they try to urge their hearers to accept the “offer of salvation in Christ.” In this they speak about the “wooing note” that must be in what they conceive as “proper gospel preaching.” And bluntly, this is what modern “Calvinism” has largely become. It is as if Wesleyan Arminianism has been bolted on to a “quasi-Reformed” core.²² It is this that breeds the side-effect of “tension” and “paradox” in their theology.

Contrastingly, Blacketer rightly sums up the teaching of the *Canons* III/IV:8:

The call is a promise of salvation for all who *do* repent and believe, namely, the elect.²³

In fact, Dort rejects the idea that God wills or intends to save all, as should be clear from *Canons* I:6 and 15.²⁴

It appears immediately from *Canons* I:6 and 15 that the text of the *Canons* shouts down any “free offer.” The “free-offer” theology demands that a sincere, earnest and passionate desire exists in God for the salvation of the non-elect, and that this sincere desire should be announced in the preaching if the gospel is to be preached properly. In contrast to this stands the wording of the *Canons* I:6:

... According to which decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy ...

In no way can such wording be reconciled to the idea intrinsic to “free-offerism,” that God sincerely and earnestly desires the salvation of the non-elect. He softens

²²Lest the reader should think I exaggerate at this point, I urge him or her to study two works by Iain H. Murray, the main leader of the Banner of Truth and of much of modern “Calvinism.” First, his book entitled *The Old Evangelicalism* (Edinburgh: Banner, 2005) in which there is a chapter entitled “What We Can Learn From John Wesley.” Therein in the first paragraph, Murray laments that in his younger days he exchanged “a fine china figure of [John Wesley] for a second-hand set of Daniel Neal’s, *History of the Puritans!*” This sets the tone for what follows in the next 28 pages or so, in which Murray effectively berates eighteenth-century Calvinism for not following Wesley in proclaiming a love of God desiring the salvation of all men. Like DS, Murray follows Wesley too in his insistence that the gospel promises pertain to the whole *massa damnata* of mankind. The second book by Murray, namely *Wesley and the Men Who Followed Him* (Edinburgh: Banner, 2003) makes the claim that true Calvinism teaches the love of God in Jesus Christ for all

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the hearts of the elect “however obstinate” and “inclines them to believe,” but does not do so vis-à-vis the non-elect. How so if His arm is not shortened that it cannot save and that He purportedly sincerely desires to save them?

Nowhere in the *Canons* is there any support for any notion of God earnestly and sincerely desiring the salvation of the non-elect. To the contrary the *Canons* assert, as Blacketer rightly summarises, that God “leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy.”

What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election is the express testimony of sacred Scripture that not all, but some only, are elected, *while others are passed by* in the eternal election of God; whom God, out of His sovereign, most just, irreprehensible, and unchangeable good pleasure, *hath decreed to leave in the common misery* into which they have wilfully plunged themselves, *and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion*; but leaving them in his just judgment to follow their own ways, at last for the declaration of His justice, to condemn and punish them forever ... (*Canons* I:15).

Let the reader examine the phrases emphasised in the paragraph above. And let him juxtapose those phrases with the idea that God in the gospel sincerely offers salvation to all men coupled with a proclamation that He earnestly wants to save all men. How can He sincerely offer that salvation if He has purposed from eternity “*not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion*”?

But DS in his book herewith under review insists that the *Canons of Dordt* actually do teach the “free offer.” On page 62 he asserts:

men without exception and that Wesley did not realize this because he was confronted with a Calvinism that taught reprobation, etc. For a perceptive and jaw-dropping review of this second work by Murray, see the *Standard Bearer*, vol. 80, no. 6 (Dec. 15, 2003), pp. 123-126, written by Prof. D. Engelsma. Engelsma appositely quotes some tell-tale statements in Murray’s book, like “Arminius, Calvin, Baxter, all excellent men in their own way ...” The mind boggles! Engelsma rightly sums up by saying, “It is now evident what Iain Murray and the Banner of Truth under his command are doing to the Reformed faith in Great Britain, and, as they have opportunity, across the world. They are destroying the Reformed faith from within.”

²³Op. cit., p. 43; italics mine.

²⁴Ibid., p. 42.

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The term ‘offer’ or ‘free offer’ also appears in the (*Westminster Standards*) ... and this terminology can also be found in the Dutch *Three Forms of Unity* (e.g. *Canons of Dordt*, III/IV, Article 9).

DS is not strictly correct here. “This terminology,” that is, “offer or free offer,” does not appear quite like that in the *Three Forms of Unity*. DS simply leaves it at that, and a distinctly false impression is given. In fact, in the whole of the *Three Forms of Unity* “offer” emerges only once, in *Canons* III/IV:9, and there the meaning of the word will not support DS’s contentions, as we shall now see.

It is interesting that DS has referred to *Canons* III/IV:9 without discussing anything of the preceding *Canons* we have discussed above, and which were advanced by Berkhof in his 3PR. I wonder why. But his move on to *Canons* III/IV:9 strangely is coincident with something that happened in the Committee of Pre-Advice investigating the Hoeksema and “common grace/free offer” affair in those hectic couple of weeks leading up to the Synod of Kalamazoo in 1924. This committee moved on from *Canons* III/IV:8 to III/IV:9 as well, because there happens to be in III/IV:9 what looks like, *prima facie*, a golden nugget to bolster the “free offer” school of thought. DS has noticed this too in III/IV:9 and he has boldly wheeled it out as evidence. Strangely, though, the Synod’s committee of pre-advice in 1924 did not. They did not refer to it in their report to Synod. Neither did Berkhof refer to it in his 3PR. Why did they not pull this one out as evidence against Hoeksema, one wonders? Blacketer considers it “somewhat ironic” that they did not make use of III/IV:9, and one wonders if Berkhof and the Synod committee knew something about III/IV:9 which Rev. DS does not know. Something which would render it useless in the respect for which they might have wanted to use it. Blacketer investigates,²⁵ and in following his argument it is apposite first to quote the relevant article herewith:

The fact that many who are called through the ministry of the gospel do not come and are not brought to conversion must not be blamed on the Gospel, nor on Christ, who is *offered* through the gospel, nor on God, who calls them through the gospel and even bestows various gifts on them, but on the people themselves who are called ... (*Canons* III/IV:9).

Firstly, let the reader note that what DS has termed “this terminology” (“offer” or “free offer”) is not quite the same as “offered,” the term used by the *Canons*.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

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Particularly one should note the absence of the word “free” in the *Canons*. This is important as it is a trenchantly held part of DS’s definition of the “gospel offer,” the very title of his book is not “The Offer, Biblical and Reformed,” but “The *Free* Offer ... etc.” Immediately one sees that in the language of a “free offerer” there is need for auxiliary wording to adequately convey the notions they wish to impart.

Secondly, Blacketer points out, saliently, that this is the *only* place in the whole of the English text of the *Canons* where the term *offer* arises. Why then did not Berkhof and the Synod make use of it? Let us follow Blacketer’s investigation.

First, Rev. DS is evidently relying on an English translation of a continental document, originally produced in first Latin, then Dutch, German, and French. Then finally in English. Now it is axiomatic that if you want to know what was originally written in a foreign document, you are *not on safe ground unless you check the originals in the original language*. This principle is a feature of all sound exegesis, including the exegesis of the Bible. No exegete worth his salt would found doctrinal precision on the basis of any English version of the Scriptures, no not even on the beloved AV. He must refer back to the original Greek and Hebrew. Tedious, technical, unglamorous, unsuitable for pulpiteering, but absolutely necessary for exegetical precision. It is the same with any historical document.

Blacketer takes us to the original Latin of *Canons* III/IV:9. The phrase translated into English as “Christ, who is offered through the gospel” was originally written by the stalwart men of Dordt as “*Christo per evangelium oblato*.” It’s that word *oblato* that is translated as “offered” in the English text, and it is interesting to see that in *Latin* the word *does not mean* “offer” in the sense of modern English!

Oblato, we find, is a participial form of the Latin word *offero* which, says Blacketer, is frequently translated with its English cognate, *offer*. But in Latin, “offer” is *not the primary meaning of the Latin verb*. Says Blacketer,

Rather, its most basic meanings include: to put in a person’s path, to cause to be encountered; to show, reveal, exhibit; to present as something to be taken note of, to bring or force to someone’s attention.²⁶

Now such language is consistent with the idea of “call,” but will not sit comfortably with the language of “offer” as used in modern English. Blacketer notes at this juncture that “set in the broader teachings of the *Canons* and the writings of major

²⁶Ibid., p. 45.

Reformed theologians from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” the interpretation “confront” or “present” appears to be “more plausible than” that of “offer.”

Now DS has noted in his book that something is afoot that he calls “revisionism,” in which he says that some modern Reformed theologians are arguing for a “revised” interpretation of the word “offer” that makes it come over as “present” or “confront.”²⁷ Let us attend to his actual words:

A revisionist view of the meaning of the word ‘offer’ in 16th and 17th century theology has been attempted by Prof. Herman Hanko, to the effect that it meant no more than to ‘exhibit’ or ‘present’, without any connotation of gracious overture or invitation...²⁸

DS goes on then for several pages giving quotes from Calvin and other sources which he considers indicates that when they used the word “offer” they actually must have meant the same as he means by “offer” when he uses it in English today. Here, of course, he is trying to evaluate Calvin from the English translation, a dangerous procedure indeed, as we have adumbrated above. But what is important for us at this juncture is to note how DS regards this all as “revisionism.” And he locates Prof. Herman Hanko as apparently the initiator of this trend. He will be surprised, no doubt to find CRC theologian Raymond Blacketer advancing the same view as Prof. Hanko. CRC theologians are not known for supporting PRC causes! But now we ask, is it just “revisionism?”

On the contrary. It is properly to be regarded as a *correction for etymological drift*. If DS cogitates about it, he will be aware that words change their meanings as they are used down through the passage of centuries. Via the process known to linguistic science as *metonymy*, a word can accrete new elements of meaning, or even change meaning completely, as it tumbles through the parlance of centuries. It is apposite at this juncture that I emphasize this fact, because it is something apparently unknown to, or at best unappreciated by, mainstream evangelical and Reformed exegetes over the last 200 to 300 years, and moreover it is a factor that undermines the veracity and usefulness of a good deal of the material in standard concordances and dictionaries of the Bible, and of lexicons of the biblical languages, particularly in the case of so-called “Theological Dictionaries of the Bible.”²⁹ For some 200 years

²⁷*Op. cit.*, pp. 11, 62-65.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 62, citing Herman Hanko, “A Comparison of the Westminster and the Reformed Confessions,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1 (November, 1986), pp. 16f.

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and more “etymologism” has been the regnant philosophy governing philological research and presentation, and “metonymy” has been seriously neglected. Because of this we find the Baptists, for instance, making a complete and utter hash over the meanings of the Greek verbs *bapto* and *baptizo*. And most Bible students are, or should be, aware of such *drifts of meaning* as for instance illustrated by the word “prevent.” Seventeen times this word crops up in the AV, and it consistently means “to be; to go before; to put before; to come; to anticipate.” Today in modern English it almost universally means “to hinder; obstruct; balk; preclude;” and the older meaning is virtually absent from common English parlance. Only in legal documents will one generally find its usage in the older sense. Now to argue that one who insists that “prevent” as found in the AV does not mean “prevent” as used in modern English parlance is a “revisionist” would be ridiculous, because what they are actually doing is *correcting for etymological drift*.

In short, to refer to the case in hand, that is *oblato* in *Canons III/IV:9*, we find it to be a star example of *etymological drift*, and if we wish to investigate the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth regarding this, we need to have recourse to a reliable dictionary of the Latin language, a modern one, which takes note of modern advances in linguistic science, and will show us everything there is to know about the latin verb *offero*.

It costs a lot of money to purchase one of these scholarly tomes, but it is absolutely essential to consult it if one is to make sure what’s what about *offero*. Anything less won’t do. Maybe the reader can try to access it via a university library. He will be looking for *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, corrected edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996) edited by P. G. W. Glare. It is listed on the publisher’s website for £250.

Blacketer has saved each reader this large sum, and a lot of inconvenience. He can tell us that in this dictionary under the entry for *offero* it is *not until the eighth through tenth definitions* that the sense of the modern English word “offer” comes through! That is, Rev. DS’s definition of “offer” is way down the list from the primary meaning of the verb, signifying that such a meaning is rarer and the result of metonymic accretion. The context of its usage will determine the actual meaning element active in any statement. What is the context of *Canons III/IV:9*? The whole teaching of the *Canons of Dordt*, of course, and interpreted in the light of *Canons III/IV:8* and *I:6* and

²⁹Cf. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961; England: SCM Press, repr. 1983).

15, we must agree with Blacketer that the meaning “present” or “confront,” which is the primary meaning of *offero*, is the most plausible meaning.

DS represents Prof. Hanko as a “revisionist.” I represent him as a “corrector” for etymological drift. I believe I have sound linguistic reasons for so doing. And I have a strong suspicion that Berkhof and the 1924 Synod Committee knew a bit about this as well. There must have been some strong reason why they failed to advance *Canons III/IV:9* as a testimony to bolster their cause. *Prima facie*, it might have looked a gift, but underneath, to a discerning scholarly eye, it would have appeared distinctly fraught with liabilities to the “free offer” cause. They definitely considered it at the committee stage, according to Blacketer, but just as definitely dropped it. In that respect at least, they were wise men. With respect, Rev. DS would be wise to follow their example.

In short, the primary meanings of *oblato/offero* in Latin (“confront,” “exhibit” and “present”) fit well into the semantic field of the language of “call,” because as we have seen above the language of “call” contains intrinsically an imperative of ultimatum. And we have seen that Scripture language describes the gospel as a “call,” indeed a “command.” Such language is ideal for laying upon all sinners without exception the *preceptive* will of God, which is what they *ought* to do. No problems of inter-dogmatical tension are generated by the use of such terms.

In contrast, the notion that the gospel is a simple “offer” in the modern sense of that word must require an equity of choice for the offeree that is untrammelled by the weight of threatened sanctions should the offerees eventual choice not concord with the will of God. And the modern notion of “offer” will not sit in continuity with the meaning of the Latin *offero* as used by the men of Dordt, and by the theologians of that flourishing period of Reformed theology. Any interpretation of the text of the *Canons* must be made under the controlling aegis of their original Latin drafts.

It is to be concluded, therefore, that, indubitably, the *Canons* nowhere support the modern notion of a “free offer” as descriptive of gospel preaching.

to be continued (DV)