

THE FREE OFFER ISSUE (7)

H. L. Williams

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
Seminary 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 the last article in this series, we discussed how Berkhof published a booklet entitled “The Three Points in all Parts Reformed” (3PR) as a back-up and exposition of the “Three Points of Common Grace” (3CG) introduced by the CRC Synod of Kalamazoo in 1924, and how Berkhof’s work in this booklet is seriously marred by certain ambiguities of terminology leading to imprecision of argument and logical errors (i.e., the “call”/“offer” conflation and its resultant distortions of Scripture and the confessions). We noted moreover that the *Canons of Dordt* explain the gospel as a “serious call” (*serio vocantur*) and not as an “offer” or “free offer.” As CRC scholar-theologian Raymond Blacketer rightly says, the call of the gospel is “a promise of salvation” for all who do repent and believe, namely, the elect.¹ This, we noted, is in distinction to the assertions of the “Free Offer” school, as per Rev. De Wolf and DS, who assert that “God promises every [hearer of the gospel] that *if* they believe, they will be saved.”²

¹ Blacketer, *CTJ*, vol. 35, no. 1 (April, 2000), p. 43.

² Cf. David Silversides, *The Free Offer: Biblical And Reformed*, pp. 57-58, where DS refers to De Wolf with approval.

The position taken by Berkhof et al. in this argument leads to others. A gracious saving desire in God to save the reprobate soon emerges, and a doctrine of “common grace” which expresses this supposed desire of God for every sinner to be saved, and which in some circles has evolved into some kind of “preparation for saving grace,” then the “sufficient saving grace” endowed to every man that characterized John Wesley’s aberration.³

This all leads to the assertion of the “free offer” school that the promises of God are made to all men without exception and not just to those who believe. Finally, of course, comes the “paradox,” that there is a contradiction (but only an apparent contradiction, mind you) in the mind of God. That is, God sincerely desires to save those whom He has already predestined to destruction.

In pursuing his case via his booklet 3PR, Berkhof went on to bolster his position, as he thought, by quoting from various Reformed theologians. After all, the Synod of Kalamazoo had, in 1924, in its 3CG claimed that the three points of common grace were supported by Reformed writers “belonging to the most flourishing period of Reformed theology” showing that “our fathers from of old maintained this view.” DS also gives a concatenation of quotations extending from page 87 to page 122 of his book.

The question arises: seeing that Berkhof is so completely off the rails in his assertions regarding the *Canons*, how far can he be trusted with respect to his quotes in 3PR taken from those of “the most flourishing period of Reformed theology”? And how will this bear on DS’s own catalogue of quotations?

First, it is apposite to examine Berkhof in this respect. While the CRC Synod in 3CG cited Calvin twice (taking him out of context) and van Mastricht once, Berkhof cites the latter and adds quotations from Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel in support of the well-meant offer.⁴

Blacketer explained that Van Mastricht had a quite peculiar and distinctive view of grace altogether, one which categorized grace as being of three distinct types, i.e., universal, common and particular. Van Mastricht was indeed somewhat befuddled in his exposition here, and Blacketer sums him up by saying

³Cf. Herbert Boyd McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (Paternoster, 2001), for an able and comprehensive exposition of John Wesley’s Arminian theology, and how it appeared to come to “the very edge of Calvinism.”

⁴Cf. Blacketer, *CTJ*, p. 45.

The Free Offer Issue

that “it is not entirely clear whether the external call itself is a manifestation of common grace.” But what is quite clear here, and later in his chapter on the “Calling of the Gospel,” is that Van Mastricht carefully avoids any statement suggesting that the gospel call represents in any way a desire in God to save the reprobate. In his chapter on the calling, Van Mastricht emphasises that,

the universal end to external calling is to oblige all persons to come to God. The principal end is the salvation of the elect; and the accidental end, the intention with respect to the reprobate, is to silence them, to take away all their excuses, and to add more weight to their condemnation.⁵

This is a long, long way from having Van Mastricht support the “free offer” and its concomittant notion that God desires to save the reprobate. It is significant that Berkhof fails to draw out this important fact.

A similar error in dealing with the evidence occurs in Berkhof’s citation of Witsius. He quotes Witsius’ observation that “Christ’s satisfaction and covenantal sponsorship” have been “an occasion of much good even to the reprobate.” Witsius actually explains this in the sense that via the gospel much good has even come to unbelievers because of the restraints thereby imposed on idolatry and “hellish impiety.” Berkhof did not seem to notice that Messrs. Hoeksema et al. would have been nodding their heads in approval here. One of the “by-products” of “saving grace” operating amongst the elect is that a restraining influence often reverberates right through to the ungodly. Under such circumstances, sin, instead of parading itself brazenly, only “slinks” along. But to call this effect “grace” is to make a logical jump the nature of the premises will not afford. Suppression of natural propensities would be a better description. Even the mafia “watch their step” when the police are around. In a social climate deeply affected by the Christian ethos, many of the godless ape the Christian ethic in many ways out of various and complex motives, mainly because of perceived self-advantage in so doing. But, true to Scripture, Witsius goes on where Berkhof conveniently decides to stop. Witsius actually says a lot more that Berkhof either did not know about or wittingly decided to “forget.” “God,” says Witsius, did not call the reprobate “with the purpose and design of saving them ... but for the purpose of demonstrating his patience toward the vessels of wrath.” Reconciliation and peace with God

⁵Blacketer, *CTJ*, pp. 45-46.

are not offered to the reprobate, because they are “perpetual enemies to God, on whom the wrath of God abides.” Witsius goes on to argue that God cannot will the salvation of the reprobate, since “it would be unworthy of the divine majesty to imagine that there is an incomplete, unresolved, and ineffectual volition in God.”⁶

Messrs. Hoeksema et al. would agree with Witsius on this matter. They would not have dodged the full and proper representation of Witsius’ teachings, as did Berkhof and those who follow him. Blacketer sums it up: “Witsius emphatically does not teach a well-meant offer of the gospel.”⁷

Berkhof goes on to cite two passages from the works of Wilhelmus à Brakel, whose works were originally first printed in Dutch about 300 years ago, and not available in English until the early 1990s. Wilhelmus à Brakel was a Dutch Reformed theologian deeply affected by English Puritan theology, and it is to be expected that he might betray some components of “free-offer” and “common grace” notions, as these ideas began to swirl around with ever-increasing vivacity amongst the divided Puritan remnants in late seventeenth-century England. Indeed, Berkhof in his 3PR is able to cite à Brakel apparently teaching a “common grace” via which comes not only temporal benefits but also “all the good which God bestows upon all who are called, by giving them the Word—the means of repentance and salvation.” Through this Word, à Brakel goes on, “God generally gives illumination, historical faith, convictions, and inner persuasion to almost become a Christian.”⁸

Blacketer aptly points out with respect to this citation from à Brakel, “Again, however, Berkhof fails to distinguish between call and offer. The fact that the reprobate are presented with the means of salvation and even receive gifts associated with the external call does not imply for à Brakel, that God offers them salvation and intends them to receive it.”⁹

Indeed, it seems that despite à Brakel’s distinctly Puritan tendencies, in which he teaches both a “common” and a “special” grace, this Dutch theologian

⁶Blacketer, *CTJ*, pp. 45-46, referring to Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, Book 2, Sect. IX:4ff.

⁷Blacketer, *CTJ*, p. 46.

⁸Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), vol. 2, p. 215.

⁹Blacketer, *CTJ*, p. 47.

The Free Offer Issue

is far from giving Berkhof the kind of support he needs to bolster his “free offer” position. A brief examination of à Brakel’s treatment of these issues in chapter 30 of volume 2 of his four-volume *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* is necessary here, though (DV) we hope to deal with à Brakel in more detail in a later article. Here the Hollander in some 40 or more pages deals with the matter of “The External and Internal Call.” Blacketer draws attention to à Brakel’s exposition on pages 205-206 of the English translation, entitled “God’s Objective in Calling Men.” It is important to note that this section follows on from that entitled “The External Call of the Gospel Comes to All Who Hear the Gospel.” Several times in this earlier section, à Brakel refers to the gospel as being “offered” to all under the preaching, and this, he says, forms the ground for a heavier condemnation on such hearers of the gospel who reject its provisions. Thus far the Dutchman looks ostensibly close to the views of Messrs. Berkhof and DS. However, as the following section in this writing confirms, à Brakel has a somewhat severely qualified view as to what he means by “offer.” It ought to be noted carefully here that the word translated “offer” in the modern English editions of à Brakel is in the Dutch the verb *aanbieden*. By dictionary definition *aanbieden* means “to present,” and it carries this meaning both in the Dutch of à Brakel’s era and today.¹⁰ Blacketer points out that à Brakel means “presentation” here, and proves this by à Brakel’s citation of Acts 13:46 in that same section, which refers to Paul’s speaking the Word of God to the synagogue Jews first, and their subsequent rejection of that Word. Flowing from all this comes à Brakel’s next section, “God’s Objective in Calling Men.”

Here à Brakel considers a question that arises out of his immediately proceeding exposition:

In calling the sinner to Christ, does God aim for the salvation of all? In calling all who are under the ministry of the gospel, is it God’s objective that all would become partakers of salvation?

We let à Brakel answer for himself:

No, for God cannot fail to achieve His objective. Then all who are

¹⁰Private communication from Dutch-speaking Prof. David J. Engelsma, who informs me that this is the primary definition of the word, especially in theological works. In à Brakel at this juncture, the Hollander also uses the verb in its past participial form: *aangeboden*.

called would, of necessity, have to be saved.¹¹

That's plain enough, and in the pages that follow à Brakel goes into more detail. We may summarise here in Blacketer's words:

À Brakel proceeds to demonstrate how God is really sincere in his calling, even though he does not intend the salvation of the reprobate. God calls all to salvation and he intends to give salvation to all who believe. But faith and repentance are divine gifts that He only bestows to those whom He wills to save. God leaves the rest to themselves, these are unwilling, and, by their own fault, unable to fulfill the condition of faith. Because God has foreknowledge of this, and since He has not decreed to give them faith, "he therefore also *cannot* have their salvation in view" ... Nor could à Brakel be any clearer when he says "He *did not* purpose to save them." It should be quite clear that à Brakel does not believe that the external call of God constitutes an offer of salvation to the reprobate.¹²

Summary

In the last five articles, we have considered the assertions made by DS in only the first chapter of his book, *The Free Offer*, entitled "Statement of the Question." In his first chapter, we have seen that while DS begins by making some valid and accurate distinctions and definitions concerning gospel preaching with which we agree, nonetheless he has finished by making an uncritical reiteration of old accusations against Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches. Thereby he has aligned himself with the Van Til paradox school of theology, wittingly or unwittingly, and also with the modern "Calvinist" prejudice against the BRF/PRC/Hoeksema position, and has evidently not thoroughly researched the facts, relying, no doubt, on the fidelity of the modern "Calvinist" tradition which he has inherited and within which his theological outlook was formed. Research indicates that the "fidelity" of this modern Calvinist tradition is somewhat skewed and unreliable at best, and suffering widespread leavening from post-Wesleyan Arminianism and Amyraldian tendencies, together with the effects of pagan philosophical dialecticism

¹¹À Brakel, *Op. cit.*, p. 205.

¹²Blacketer, *CTJ*, pp. 47-48, citing à Brakel, *Op. cit.*, p. 207; italics mine.

The Free Offer Issue

acting on the very exegesis of Scripture. In short, this means that his chapter “Statement of the Question” is not reliably informed with respect to the main issues under discussion, and, logically and consequentially, what must be questioned from the outset is the validity of the rest of the claims in his book. After all, if an author writes a book addressing a problem, with the intent of correcting what he deems to be errant opinions, if he does not accurately and fully comprehend the real truth about the problem, how can he be relied on accurately and reliably to treat the matter?

In response to DS’s first chapter, we have also noted our agreements and registered our surprise and delight when DS noted that the BRF/PRC/Hoeksema position on these matters is actually distinct from “hyper-Calvinism.” This admission appears to us to be something of a significant retrenchment by DS from his position in the 1990s, when he took occasion to berate us for manifesting what he portrayed as the cardinal characteristics of hyper-Calvinism. However, he has still maintained that the BRF/PRC/Hoeksema position falls short of proper Reformed orthodoxy, and that it stands somewhere between the latter and hyper-Calvinism. However, this is still a serious enough deviation from what he calls “orthodoxy” as to require all the effort of publishing a book about it, and lecturing at various meetings, even as far afield as Australia. He then paints a picture, so to speak, effectively isolating Hoeksema as a “heretic” subsequently “deposed from the CRC ministry” because his theology was less than properly Reformed in that he opposed “common grace” and the “free offer.” Even so great a theologian as Berkhof, DS tells us, defended the CRC position against Hoeksema on these matters.

We have seen, however, first, that the CRC case against Hoeksema was contrived, and forced illegally through the CRC governmental institutions, borne along by sheer gut feelings of revenge, and that the CRC never legally and officially made the 3CG institutional dogma to which all office-bearers had to swear assent. All of this proclaims that the *Three Forms of Unity* were deemed by the denominational authorities in the CRC, and those in opposition to Hoeksema, to be in and of themselves insufficient to condemn Hoeksema et al., else why put forth such *additional* creedal propositions? In this we have seen that Hoeksema et al. actually remained faithful to all the requirements of the *Three Forms of Unity*, which is all his denomination could require of him legally. But vituperating enemies of Hoeksema, via illegal machinations

(now exposed by CRC theologians of a later generation, and documented from the CRC's own *Acta der Synode* for the appropriate years), utilized the 3CG as *if* it were an institutionalized creedal requirement, and on those illegitimate grounds Hoeksema et al. were deposed by a classis, not by a synod. We have seen that DS appears totally ignorant of these facts and that, therefore, his representation of Hoeksema on page 10 of his chapter one is vitiated by its woeful lack of correct and reliable information. We doubt not that DS acted in all sincerity in this, trusting in what information was available to him via the "standard consensus" of modern "main-stream," so-called "Calvinism." Many others do the same.

Second, we have seen, via the learned articles produced in the *CTJ* by Dr. Bolt and Raymond Blacketer, that the documentation used to depose Hoeksema was superficial and inaccurate. The 3CG failed to ground the notion of a gospel "offer" in any part of the *Three Forms of Unity*, or in any of the "Reformed writers from the most flourishing period of Reformed theology." These same strictures also operate against the booklet 3PR supporting 3CG by Louis Berkhof. In all this, we also showed how the use of the word "offer" in *Canons* III/IV:9 must be conditioned by its use in the Latin originals of the seventeenth century, when the Latin verb *offero* in its primary and usual uses meant "to present." Such a consideration must be introduced in all understanding of theological documents of that period, in that all the learned treatises and discussions were initially in Latin, the academic *lingua franca* of the day. We also discovered how Berkhof, following the lead of his contemporaries, erroneously conflated the notions of "call" and "offer" to mean one and the same thing, i.e., "offer" in the modern sense of the word, and how this procedure was completely at variance with a proper use of language. The *Three Points of Unity* and Scripture propound the gospel as a "call," not an "offer."

Third, we noted how Berkhof in his pamphlet 3PR misquoted and misapplied certain "Reformed writers from the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology," thus turning them against Hoeksema et al. illegitimately.

Much more could be said. Raymond Blacketer gives further and most significant evidence in his article in the *CTJ*, but we forebear, at this point, to introduce these features, as they will be more appositely considered (DV) in connection with a critical analysis of DS's later chapters.

to be continued (DV)