

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 2, Number 4 • Fall 1993

The pendulums of theological history often tend to swing back and forth as alternately this system and that holds the field in the arena of doctrinal debate. As the nineteenth century drew to a close the triumph of rationalistic theology was celebrated across the religious world and it was conceded by most that Arminianism was the only form of evangelical theology which had survived. The *disintegration* of Calvinism was acknowledged as a historical fact, and scholars spoke with a kind of benign deference, if not with any real affection, toward this moribund system as they prepared to pay respects at its last rites.¹ In his essay, *Evangelical Revival*, R.W. Dale pronounced Charles Spurgeon the last Calvinist.²

The funeral arrangements for Reformed theology have proven over the ensuing years to be premature. There certainly has been a remarkable revival of the doctrines of grace in the past thirty or forty years and we can declare now that Calvinism, if not the predominant theological view in Christendom, is at least a viable alternative to the Arminian theology of the past century. At almost all levels in the contemporary church, academic, ecclesiastical, and literary, we can see a respectable sprinkling of Calvinistic influence.

When emphasis on the authority of Scripture and its inevitable corollary, the sovereignty of God, reasserts itself there is always a tendency for the pendulum to swing too far. In their zeal to repudiate Pelagianism and Arminianism some in the Reformed community take theological positions which are not only contrary to Scriptures, which is the most important point, but are outside the mainstream of Calvinistic thought as well.

The Bible teaches that God, for reasons known only to Himself, has selected only a portion of the human race to be the ultimate beneficiaries of His redeeming mercy. The Bible also teaches just as clearly that God issues a general

or universal summons to all men to come to Him for salvation. This has sometimes been called the *general call* or the *free offer of the gospel*. Louis Berkhof is not atypical when he says, "We believe that God *unfeignedly*, that is, sincerely or in good faith, calls all those who are living under the gospel to believe, and offers them salvation in the way of faith and repentance."³

The concept of such an offer of mercy on the part of God, however, is frequently met with fierce resistance on the part of some within the Reformed community. For example, in a pamphlet printed by the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, the question is raised: "What is this *Free Offer of Salvation*?" "The Gospel of God's grace," the author confidently asserts, "does not *offer* anything to anybody."⁴ "Forgiveness is not offered in the Gospel—it is announced as glad tidings to sinful men, setting them free from the bondage of sin."⁵ The gospel invitation is, according to this view, not to all but to those who are *qualified*, or are spiritually thirsty.

This view seems to be putting an unnecessary restriction on the gospel message to sinners. The time has come, perhaps, not only to defend the Calvinistic system from its avowed enemies but to clear away some of the unnecessary excesses of its sincere friends.

The Biblical Basis for the Universal Call

Notwithstanding the objections of some writers, such as Payne, the Scriptures teem with texts asserting God's calls and invitations are to all people who hear His message. Wisdom is represented in Proverbs as pleading with men to turn to their maker: "To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind" (Prov. 8:4). Wisdom, obviously a personification of God Himself, is represented in this book as lamenting the rejection of this sincere plea. "But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when

I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster" (Prov. 1:24-26).

In the evangelical prophet Isaiah, God, with tender compassion, extends His invitations to sinful, erring people to be reconciled to Him. "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). In Isaiah 55 the wicked are called upon to "seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while he is near" (v. 6). "Come, all you who are thirsty," the prophet pleads, "and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (v.1).

The ministry of Jesus Christ illustrates in dramatic fashion this indiscriminate offer of God to men to come to Him for salvation. He upbraided the Pharisees for their scornful refusal to come to Him for eternal life. "Yet you refuse to come to Me to have life" (John 5: 40).

Just before His prophecy of the destruction which was to come upon the city of Jerusalem under the Roman armies Jesus expressed with great pathos His desire that its children come to Him. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt. 23:37). In the same spirit Christ commanded His disciples before His ascension into heaven to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).

All men are called upon in the New Testament to repent and to believe, not just people with certain qualifications or pious attitudes. John's message, "Repent and believe the good news," was to people indiscriminately (Mark 1:15). Paul told the inquirers at Mars Hill that the gracious manifestations of God's providence toward His creatures is for the explicit design that they seek and find Him (Acts 17:27),

and in verse 30 we read, "He (God) commands all people everywhere to repent."

God's universal call is seen in 2 Corinthians 5:20 where the commission of evangelical ambassadors is described as part of the great theme of reconciliation. Its plea is, "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." The Bible ends with an invitation as wide as the world itself. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17).

God's Desires and God's Decrees

Of course those who are of an Arminian persuasion have no problem with these verses which teach so clearly that the invitation to salvation is indiscriminate. After all, their redemptive scheme is universal in the *absolute* sense. They teach that it is God's solitary and ultimate design to make salvation available equally to all of Adam's race. With this, of course, the Calvinist disagrees. But if, as the Calvinist teaches, there is a special decree of election, what is the purpose of a universal call? If God has not determined to change the hearts of all is He merely taunting people with a plea to come for forgiveness? How can such a call be sincere? Indeed, would not such a call represent God as frustrated and defeated, just as the Arminians teach?

Calvinists answer this objection by distinguishing between God's will of desire and His will of decree. Unless this clarification between God's two wills is made it is impossible to incorporate all the teachings of Scripture into a balanced and harmonious scheme. God, undoubtedly, *wishes* all to turn to Him while reserving the right to *determine* that some will actually turn to Him. There is of course some difficulty in harmonizing such seemingly antagonizing concepts, just as it is hard for the human mind to conceive how

God can be one substance, yet existing in three persons. The difficulty is in the finitude of our minds. It is not in the clarity of the teachings of Scripture or in the dictates of logic.

Typical of doctrines of grace preachers who ground the universality of the gospel invitation in God's desire that all turn to Him is the well-known Charles Spurgeon. In the sermon, "Salvation by Knowing the Truth," he seeks to honestly interpret 1 Timothy 2:4 which states that God wishes all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Spurgeon, with not a little sarcasm, upbraids those who seek to twist this text to mean that God wishes *some* to be saved. He passes this view off as little better than exploding the text by using grammatical gunpowder. The true meaning he explains in a sermon, "Salvation by Knowing the Truth":

It is quite certain that when we read that God will have all men to be saved it does not mean that He wills it with the force of a decree or a divine purpose, for if He did, then all men would be saved . . . Does not the text mean that it is the wish of God that men should be saved? The word "wish" gives as much force to the original as it really requires, and the passage should run thus—"whose wish it is that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. As it is My wish that it would be so, as it is your wish that it might be so, so it is God's wish that all men should be saved; for, assuredly, He is not less benevolent than we are."⁶

Of course Spurgeon anticipates that some will query, "If God be infinitely good and powerful, why does not His power carry out to the full all His beneficence?" In other words, why does not infinite divine omnipotence accomplish that which infinite divine benevolence wishes? Spurgeon simply answers, "I cannot tell. I have never set up to be an explainer of all difficulties, and I have no desire to do so."⁷

Those in both the Arminian and Calvinistic camps who fail to distinguish between the two aspects of God's will have the greater problem because they must inevitably resort to exegetical gymnastics to get rid of the texts that do not immediately suit their particular system. The balanced Calvinist, such as Spurgeon, has a philosophical problem in reconciling different aspects of God's nature, but after all why should we be too troubled by the mysteries of God's being? The twin truths of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility stand, admittedly, in dynamic *tension* to each other. But they are *not* contradictory.

One of the most thorough and incisive discussions of the two aspects of the divine will can be found in Robert Dabney's essay titled, "God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy, As Related to His Power, Wisdom, and Sincerity," which was printed in his *Evangelical and Theological Discussions*. He defends with great candor and integrity the biblical teachings of a free offer of salvation to all. He continually refers to those who see only one saving disposition of God, and that is His sovereign love to the elect, as *extremists*. His philosophical and psychological case that a person, even God, can have connotative propensions (propensities), which are not necessarily carried out in elective decisions, is, at least to my mind, quite convincing.⁸

To make the matter simple, suppose that a parent has repeatedly commanded a child, for purposes of safety, never to play with the box of matches in the kitchen cabinet. The child, fascinated by fire and driven by a natural desire to resist authority, insists on getting the matches and setting little fires in the yard. One day the parent looks from his window and sees the youngster engaged in this mischievous practice. It would be possible for the parent to rush outside and deal with the danger by taking the matches from the child. Thinking, however, that it might be a good punishment for the child to burn his hands he simply

watches him carry out his own wishes. In such a case the parent genuinely wants the child to leave the matchbox alone, yet he chooses, for a higher or ultimate end, to allow him to do it.

Such illustrations, of course, in the end prove nothing as far as theology is concerned. But they do point out the fact that a person can have complex emotions that can on the surface seem to be antithetical to one another. The parent has the ability by a sheer act of intervention to carry out his wish that the child leave the matches alone, yet he chooses not to use this power. Even so there is no reason to doubt that God desires people to do things which is a desire accompanied by commands and promises of reward or punishment, and yet He has also chosen not to put forth the sovereign power to induce people to carry out such commands.

The late John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse of Westminster Theological Seminary, in a pamphlet titled *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, see, as do Dabney and Spurgeon, the universal call based on God's compassion for human beings. Their exposition of the troublesome text, 2 Peter 3: 9, is interesting. The verse says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

This text has been the format for many a match of wits between Calvinists and Arminians. A typical approach of the former is to establish that the "you" of the verse are the elect spoken of in chapter 1, verse 2. What the verse means, so the Calvinist often argues, is that God is merciful and longsuffering toward His chosen people and that He is not willing that any of *them* be lost.

Murray and Stonehouse, in the aforementioned pamphlet, challenge this exposition. In their view there is no reason in the analogy of Scripture why we should not regard

this passage as teaching that God in the exercise of His benevolent longsuffering and lovingkindness wills that none should perish but that all should come to repentance.⁹

The longsuffering spoken of, say Murray and Stonehouse, is not the sovereign and efficacious purpose toward the chosen but His merciful and kind disposition to men in general. "We do not believe that the restriction of the reference to the elect is well-established."¹⁰

The authors of *The Free Offer*, both well-known defenders of Reformed theology, feel no constraint in affirming God's good will toward sinners generally.

Does not, as a matter of fact, the language "not wishing that any should perish," mean that "all should come to repentance"? Does this not set before us a basic antithesis between the *death* or destruction that awaits impenitent sinners and by implication, the *life* eternal which men may enter upon thorough repentance? God does not wish that any men should perish. His wish is rather that all should enter upon life eternal by coming to repentance. . . . The language of the clauses, then, most naturally refers to mankind as a whole as men are faced with the issues of death or life before the day of judgment comes. It does not view men either as elect or as reprobate, and so allows that both elect and reprobate make up the totality in view.¹¹

The Cross and the Free Offer

Even if we concede that there is something in the heart of God which lays the foundation for a universal call, how can God's indiscriminate invitations be reconciled with what is known as *particular redemption*? After all, it is to the *cross* that sinners are invited in order to obtain forgiveness. Passages such as John 3:14-18 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 make it abundantly clear that the object of the faith which the gospel demands is Jesus Christ, particularly Jesus Christ as a dying substitute. Yet, according to Calvinism,

Christ died only for the elect. This presents, perhaps, a problem even more difficult than the question of God's own intentions or desires.

At this point it might be well to review the concept of a particular or definite atonement as it has generally been taught by Calvinists. Actually there are three separate forms in which this view has been packed. Here is a brief summary of them.

The Bible abounds in texts that demonstrate the special reference of Christ's redeeming work to those who are finally saved. Jesus taught that it was the sheep for whom He intended to die (John 10:11). Paul taught it was the church, the whole assembly of God's chosen who were loved and redeemed by Christ (Eph. 5:25). Such passages certainly harmonize with Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would see the travail of His soul and be satisfied (Isa. 53:11). No Calvinist could entertain the idea that Jesus Christ's death failed to accomplish its intention.

However, Calvinists have themselves disagreed as to the exact *nature of the limitation* of the atonement. Here are some of the various positions.

1) **The atonement is limited quantitatively.** Some advocates of a high view of limited atonement have argued from the descriptions of the atonement as the payment of a debt, which is so frequently found in the Scriptures. In human commercial transactions the price paid for a commodity is sufficient for that transaction alone. If a loaf of bread costs \$1.50, then that amount is demanded and that amount secures the loaf and nothing else. So, some believe, sin has a price, speaking computatively. God exacted of His Son the measure due to the sins of the elect and no more. This view implies that Christ suffered so much for each sin. The elect were purchased on the cross of Calvary and justice demands their release from the guilt of sin. J. L. Dagg, one of the best Baptist theologians of the last century,

seems to argue *particular redemption* from this premise, as can be seen in his *Manual of Theology*, "Everything of which we have knowledge in the divine administration, instead of exploding the notion of so much suffering for so much sin, tends rather to establish it."¹²

2) The atonement is limited in its design. Most Calvinistic theologians and preachers recognize the danger of seeking to draw too strict an analogy between a commercial transaction on earth and God's infinite wrath against sin. They recognize that sin is an infinite crime against an infinite God, and thus it deserves an infinite penalty. Consequently the particularity of the atonement is seen not in its inherent nature but in God's purpose. The satisfaction of Christ, considered intrinsically, is of infinite sufficiency, but God *intended* it to redeem only the elect. Such is the ground taken by Spurgeon in his *Defense of Calvinism*. Although he vehemently repudiates universal redemption, Spurgeon makes the following concession:

There must be sufficient efficacy in the blood of Christ, if God had so willed it, to have saved not only all in this world, but all in ten thousand worlds, had they transgressed their Maker's law. Having a Divine Person for an offering, it is not consistent to conceive of limited value: bound and measure are terms inapplicable to the Divine sacrifice. The intention of the divine purpose fixes the application of the infinite offering, but does not change it into a finite work.¹³

It is, I believe, quite obvious that the second of these positions lends itself much more readily to a universal call than the first. The latter simply raises the perennial problem of reconciling God's commands with His foreknowledge and sovereignty. God may have sovereignly determined to save only the elect through the atonement, but if the work of Christ on Calvary is itself adequate for any and all sinners, then we can easily call upon people everywhere to repair to

its provisions for a remedy for guilt. But if the former view is true the witness for Christ finds himself giving an invitation to all sinners to something entirely insubstantial. I think most candid men would have to concede that we are mentally muddled by the idea of an invitation to all sinners to receive a provision that is sufficient only for some.

3) The atonement is limited in its ultimate but not in its solitary design. A third concept of particular redemption has been adhered to by only a minority within the Calvinistic community, which is unfortunately seldom featured in discussions of this type. There are some who recognize the force of the texts which attribute particular design to the redeeming work of Christ but raise the question of whether the salvation of the elect is the only purpose of Calvary. Robert Dabney, in the work referred to earlier, gives a perspicacious exposition of the ends of the cross of Christ, as outlined in Holy Scripture. He contends for a complex, not merely a simple, design of God in giving His Son. Writes Dabney:

Let us begin by laying down a simple basis, which all Calvinists will and must accept. The sacrifice of Christ *was designed by the Trinity to effect precisely what it does effect— all this, and no more. . . .* What, then, are the results which Scripture shows to be effected by Christ's sacrifice? 1) The manifestation of God's supreme glory, and especially that of His love (Luke 2:14; Eph. 2:10,11). 2) To ransom, effectually call, and glorify an elect people infallibly given to Christ (John 17:6-11). 3) To procure for the whole race a temporary suspension of doom, with earthly mercies, so as to manifest the placability and infinite compassion of God towards all sinners, leave those who are finally impenitent under the gospel without excuse, and establish an everlasting concrete proof of the deadly malignity of sin in that it infallibly rejects not only duty and obligation, but the most tender and sincere mercy, wherever it is not conquered by efficacious grace (Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:15).¹⁴

There is, according to this view expressed by Dabney, undoubtedly a sense in which the atonement of Christ is for, or on behalf of, all. This is not universal redemption, to be sure. The view set forth by Dabney simply recognizes the cosmic dimension to the cross of Christ. If, as most Calvinists concede, all are invited to the cross of Jesus for salvation, then it certainly must have been God's intention that the provision be adequate for the invitation.

This third view is summed up concisely by one of its advocates, Robert Frew. He reasons

that the atonement, indeed, has a certain benign aspect towards all men, which appears from its very nature. The exact equivalent view, as it has been not inappropriately termed, is now nearly abandoned. Rarely do we find any one affirming that Christ endured exactly what the elect would have suffered and deserved, and that, therefore, there can be sufficiency in His death for that favored number and for none besides. What then is the light in which the atonement of Christ ought to be viewed? We think the only rational and scriptural account of it is that which regards it as a great remedial scheme, which renders it consistent with the divine honor and all the interests of the divine administration, to extend mercy to *guilty men at large*, and which would have been equally requisite, had there been an intention to save only one, or millions; numbers indeed not forming any part of the question. Here then is something done, which removes legal obstructions and thereby opens the way to heaven for all. And if any do not enter in, their inability is moral, and lies not in any insufficiency of the divine provision. This view, however, seems to furnish a just foundation for the universality of gospel invitations, while it fastens the guilt of rejecting gospel provision on the sinner himself.¹⁵

If the latter view is the correct one it throws light on the important passage, John 3:14-18, to which all Christians love to turn when witnessing to a lost world. As Dabney points out the world is not an elect world but simply

mankind. The text does not teach, as the Arminians contend, that God intends to save the entire race but has been frustrated in the attempt. Neither, as some Reformed people have surmised, is this passage dealing with God's decree of election. God's sovereign purpose toward the elect is not the theme of this passage. It is simply explaining that God's gift of His Son, whatever His ultimate sovereign plan may envision, is an expression of His infinite and boundless good will toward the sinners of Adam's race. Dabney says:

The solution, then, must be in this direction, that the words . . . "so loved the world" were not designed to mean the gracious decree of election, though other Scriptures abundantly teach there is such a decree, but a propension of benevolence not matured into the volition to redeem, of which Christ's mission is a sincere manifestation to all sinners.¹⁶

Practical Importance of the Free Offer

The restrictions of this essay do not permit a lengthy discussion of the various practical ramifications of the biblical truth of God's universal call, but a few concluding remarks are in order.

It should be emphasized that *all* the truths of Scripture are beneficial and useful to the believer. The doctrines centering around God's discriminating mercy, such as man's depravity, God's gracious election, effectual redemption, and the special call of the Spirit, give the believer, and especially the preacher, great confidence and courage in evangelism. If God has chosen to save a people then the Christian witness knows that he or she has not embarked on an uncertain enterprise. Their labors, prayers, and patience in proclaiming the good news will not be in vain. God, in His own good time and way, will bless the word to the salvation of souls. History is not a runaway mule out of control. In the

end God will prevail. Some will be saved.

The believer should bear witness to God in all aspects of His character. The God of divine revelation is not a cruel and arbitrary despot who gets satisfaction in causing people to suffer. He is good to all and His tender mercies are over all the works of His hands. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and is not willing that any should perish. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a sincere and bona fide invitation to anyone and everyone to find peace and safety at the cross of Jesus Christ. The gospel is "good news" to all who will receive it. The angelic message at the birth of Jesus was not only "Glory to God in the highest" (the first and primary theme), but also "And on earth peace, to men on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14). To be sure this good news will not be received by all. To be sure only those "chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world" will embrace its gracious provisions. Still, the Christian evangelist dare not restrict his proclamation of "good will toward all."

I conclude with a personal testimony, which, while it proves nothing formally, does enforce my own conviction.

Early in my ministry I was a disciple of the school of theology of which Dr. John Gill is the best example. Dr. Gill, whose commentary, by the way, I still prize above all of its kind, taught that justification is an immanent act of God toward the elect from eternity, and that faith is simply the discovery of what is already a fact. Also in his famous *Cause of God and Truth* he labors mightily to explain away those passages which affirm a universal compassion and call of God.

When I was entrenched in this system I had great difficulty in preaching to sinners, particularly with any fervor or pathos. But in the providence of God I came upon a treatise of Andrew Fuller titled *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. In this Fuller shows that the gospel does not address people as elect and non-elect but simply as sinners. The gospel is

therefore a mandate to all indiscriminately to leave the paths of sin and lay hold on Christ. Hence it is the duty of all to seek forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus which is sufficient for all the world. Those who refuse to do so are guilty not only of rejecting a clear divine command but despising a most gracious divine invitation. Sinners who do not come to Christ have only themselves to blame. This treatise of Fuller liberated me from the shackles of the high Calvinism which restrict the gospel invitation. I now can look any sinner in the eye and tell him that the gospel is for him, and that there is no shortage of merit in the cross of Christ for his soul. I know that God's decree, while a source of immense comfort, is not my concern in preaching to the lost. My role as a preacher is to be an agent of God's great compassionate heart toward a lost world. Like the servants in the parable of the Great Supper, I am sent to invite people everywhere to the feast. I am able to say now to all, "Come, for everything is now ready" (Luke 14:17).

Author

Dr. John F. Thornbury is senior pastor of Winfield Baptist Church (ABC), Winfield, Pennsylvania. He is a conference speaker, writer and advisor to Reformation & Revival Ministries. He is the author of the important biography, *God Sent Revival, the Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*.

End Notes

1. See "Modern Theology," chapter 10 in *History of Christian Doctrine*, by George Park Fisher (New York: Charles Scribners, 1916). pp. 545-47.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 555.
 3. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 397.
 4. James Payne, *What Is This Free Offer of Salvation?* (Sussex, England: Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, n.d.), p.1.
 5. *Ibid.*, p., 2,
 6. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1880), XXV, pp. 49-50.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 8. Robert L. Dabney, "God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy," *Discussions Theological and Evangelical*, Vol. 1, (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1890), pp. 282-313).
 9. John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, n.d.), p. 21.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
 12. Dabney, p. 328
 13. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography* , 4 vols. (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897). 1:174.
 14. Dabney, p. 310.
 15. Robert Frew, D.D., in *Notes on the New Testament*, by Albert Barnes, Vol. VI, Second Corinthians and Galatians (London: Blackie and Son, 1868), pp. 119-20.
 16. Dabney, p. 313.
-