

THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL IN THE LIGHT OF DIVINE ELECTION

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Introduction

The Bible is clear—the salvation of God comes with no strings attached. The elect are saved by God’s free gift of life in Christ. This is the Reformation doctrine of “salvation by grace alone.

As early as St. Augustine’s battle with the heretic Pelagius, a debate has simmered in church history over whether God’s gift of salvation is given to every soul or just to an elect group of God’s choosing. In more recent times the Calvinist-Arminian debate has framed the debate in terms of “unconditional election” and “limited atonement.”

The Problem

Occasionally there is confusion whether God’s free salvation for some (the elect) is freely offered to all. The outward call of the gospel falls upon the ears of both elect and non-elect, but the non-elect spurn the good news. Only the elect ultimately respond because, in their case, the inward call of God’s Spirit attends the audible proclamation.¹

Charles Spurgeon illustrated the revelation of the gospel this way. “The general call of the gospel is like the sheet lightning we sometimes see on a summer’s evening—beautiful, grand—but whoever heard of anything struck by it? But the special call is the forked flash from heaven; it strikes somewhere. It is the arrow shot in between the joints of the harness.”²

God has ordained the preaching of the gospel to every creature as the means of calling His elect. But what of the many who are called but not chosen?³ Is it hypocritical for God and His messengers to give the gospel to the non-elect who will not come to Christ?

Misunderstandings of the Free Offer

Two aberrant views misunderstand the free offer of the gospel. Hyper-Calvinism recognizes God’s sovereign grace in salvation, but it is imbalance. Focusing particularly on the elect, hyper-Calvinism diminishes God’s compassion for all of mankind. It emphasizes the beginning and end of election so much that it neglects God’s ordained means in the middle—the Great Commission. The hyper-Calvinist view cuts the nerve of evangelism.

A hyper-Calvinist believes that the gospel is meant only for the elect and is not legitimately offered to the non-elect. When Jesus bade His audience, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden..." a hyper-Calvinist maintains that this invitation is proffered only to the elect.

On the other hand, the Arminian, who has a difficulty with the biblical doctrine of predestination, believes that God would not be fair or sincere to broadcast a gospel only for the elect's sake. Just the same, the Bible talks about the elect. Therefore the Arminian supposes that God does not ground election on His own initiative, but rather in man's choosing God. In his scheme election is not an eternal decree but is incidental to a sinner's conversion.

The popular Arminian view of election is that God chooses those whom He foresees will choose Him. This is a misunderstanding of the biblical doctrine of God's foreknowledge.

Even in the Arminian's misconception of foreknowledge there is no escaping what appears to be an insincere offer of the gospel. Why should God design a universal gospel appeal when He knows beforehand that certain souls will reject the good news? This belief in God's foresight does not keep the Arminian from sincerely offering the gospel to all.

We Cannot Indict the Universal Gospel

The gospel is designed for every soul in every condition. It is God's primary means of applying an atonement sufficient for all yet efficient only for the elect.

God is not unjust when He commands all to repent, although some will not and cannot turn to Him. Despite his total inability, the non-elect soul is still subject to the laws of his Maker.

Should God give up the claims of His law upon the reprobate because sinners choose to live apart from Him? No, they are still responsible to obey His revealed will. As Lorraine Boettner explains, "If inability canceled obligation, then Satan with his inherent depravity would be under no obligation to do right, and his fiendish enmity toward God and men would be no sin. Sinners in general would then be lifted above the moral law."⁴

A soul's inability to respond to the gospel is a "self-acquired inability" resulting from the fall of mankind. Inability does not negate responsibility.

Analogies of the Free Offer

Boettner marshals several analogies to illustrate God's claims on the non-elect. Consider the following.

A draft dodger may shoot himself in the foot to escape military service, but he is still responsible to his government. He suffers twice. He must live with the miseries of his own rash judgment for this self-imposed disqualification, and he also must pay the penalty of the law.

After an attempted coup, a leader may offer general amnesty to his foes. The only condition is that they lay down their arms and live peaceably. Is God insincere in His offer of peace when sinners insist on continuing the battle? God offers favorable terms in good faith, yet He does not constrain all resisters.

A ship is in danger of sinking offshore. A man brings a rescue ship to take his family off their doomed craft. He invites the rest of the passengers to safety because his own ship is large enough for all. Still, many passengers refuse safe passage because of their failure to appreciate their danger, or else because of personal enmity to the man. Their insufficient reasons do not make the offer any less sincere.

Biblical Examples

There are many biblical examples that show that God's warnings and pleadings are sincere. The real problem lies in the willful inability of sinners to respond.

God sent Ezekiel to rebellious Israel to plead the covenant, even though God tells him beforehand that they will not turn.⁵ Isaiah beseeches sinners in God's name, yet this very pleading only hardens their hearts.⁶ God tells Moses to go through normal channels of communication with Pharaoh despite the word from God that Pharaoh will not give heed.⁷

One of the clearest examples that shows God's sincere call to the wicked is Jesus' final appeal to Jerusalem.⁸ He plainly declares His desire to gather them to Himself as a hen does her chicks, yet they "would" not. Key to understanding this passage is the English word, "would." In Greek it is the word "desire." This verse uses the word twice in juxtaposition between its two subjects. In line with His invitation to "all ye that labor and are heavy burdened," Jesus desired them to come. However, they did not desire to come.

The true Calvinist admits that limited atonement does not erect a fence around proclamation of the gospel. God freely offers the gospel to all, but all do not come. The problem lies with the hearers, not with the offer.

The Gospel Is Freely Offered to All

While the universal offer of the gospel is God's means of gathering the elect, it still is freely offered to all mankind. God makes the gospel proclamation a genuine offer to all because 1) God takes no delight in the death of the wicked, but that they should turn and be healed,⁹ and 2) it addresses the universal need of sinners. The non-elect does not reject Christ under duress, but of his own will.

"According to the Calvinistic scheme the non-elect have all the advantages and opportunities of securing their salvation, that, according to any other scheme, are granted to mankind indiscriminately. Calvinism teaches that a plan of salvation adapted to all

men and adequate for the salvation of all, is freely offered to the acceptance of all, although in the secret purpose of God He intended that it should have precisely the effect which in experience it is found to have. He deigned in its adoption to save His own people, but consistently offers its benefits to all who are willing to receive them. More than this no anti-Calvinist can demand.”¹⁰

Conclusion

Sinners do not come to Christ because they are convinced of their divine election. They come because they have sensed their own need and found the solution in Christ. They trust Him because of “the all-sufficiency and suitability of the Savior and the Savior’s own word in the free overture of his grace.”¹¹

By the same token, the witnessing Christian need not ascertain God’s secret counsel of who may be the elect. Though some may scoff at the heavenly message, he remembers the word of God through the missionary Paul, “But thanks be to God, who...through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing; . . .in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.”¹²

¹Only the Good Shepherd’s sheep know and follow His voice; also see John 6:63-66.

²Cited from *Charles Spurgeon: The Early Years, 1834-1859*, p. 72.

³Matthew 22:14.

⁴*The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 286.

⁵Ezekiel 3:4-11.

⁶Isaiah 1:16-18; 6:9, 10.

⁷Exodus 3:18, 19.

⁸Matthew 23:37.

⁹Ezekiel 18:23.

¹⁰Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 644.

¹¹John Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. I, p. 84.

¹²II Corinthians 2:14-17.