

Thoughts on the ‘Free Offer’ Debate

Introduction

The Free Offer is a phrase normally used to describe the most common form of presenting the Gospel today. Although not a Biblical phrase, the basic form of it is Biblical when it is used to mean, ‘a proclamation that whoever believes in Christ will be saved; a serious call to repentance’. Even so, it is not a helpful term since ‘offer’ no longer conjures up the chief idea of ‘presentation’, but a ‘bargain purchase’. However, most Free Offer preachers go much further than this and say that anyone can believe and anyone can repent (when the reprobate certainly cannot – this is an error regarding man’s ability). Worse, they state that the offer is free because God loves everyone and desires the salvation of all men; to this end he sent Christ to die for all men (this is an error regarding God and his decree).

Thus the Free Offer, even though preached by supposed Calvinists, is usually associated with a universal atonement and a benevolent will of God to all. These are unbiblical concepts and imply contradiction in God as well as denial of his word. The key error is to teach that God desires the salvation of reprobates (those he did not elect to salvation).

In history the Free Offer has been associated with Arminianism and other heresies, but today the majority of Reformed teachers hold this position which is based upon a common grace to all, famously John Murray and Ned Stonehouse. It was adopted by The Christian Reformed and The Orthodox Presbyterian churches in America, who could say,

There is in God a benevolent lovingkindness towards the repentance and salvation of even those he has not decreed to save. ... The full and free offer of the gospel is a grace bestowed upon all. Such grace is necessarily a manifestation of love.¹

This erroneous position arises from the tension between certain Biblical statements and how to interpret them. The main difficulty is in interpreting the supposed universal texts (such as 1 Tim 2:4), but there is also a theological problem.

The historical problem of theological interpretation

The debate on the theology behind Gospel preaching is how to square a seeming contradiction in scripture. Two things are clearly asserted in the Bible:

1. Redemption is particular (for selected people).
2. The Gospel is to be proclaimed to all indiscriminately.

Those who view this as an apparent contradiction have fostered two theological extremes, each of which denies one or the other Biblical statement.

Hyper-Calvinists deny that the Gospel is to be proclaimed to all, affirming that it can only be shared with those who show signs of already being regenerate. This is to avoid offering Gospel promises to reprobates. The many commands to preach the Gospel to all and sundry destroy this position outright.² It is an unbiblical teaching.

The other error is that of Arminians who deny that redemption is particular, or limited to those chosen by God in eternity. They say that the atonement of Christ was universal; that he died for every single human being. The foolishness of this is seen in many ways:

¹ Murray & Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, p27. Minutes of the 15th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948, App, p51-63. [Emphasis PF.]

² For example Mk 1:15.

1. If election is true, then atonement must be limited or God would do something imperfect and incomplete³ – Christ’s blood would be wasted and God would begin a work that was not fulfilled. That election is true is very clear.⁴
2. It would also posit a contradiction in the Godhead; Christ’s work was universal in scope but God’s initiation of salvation in election was particular.
3. Clear scriptures show that redemption is limited, or definite to the elect, and there is no statement declaring that it is universal. [If the so-called universalistic texts are twisted to mean this, the result is not Arminianism but universalism; they would teach that all are saved and there are no men in hell.]
4. It would mean that Christ died for those he cursed and said were sons of the devil (e.g. Pharisees).⁵
5. It would mean that Christ died for those in the Old Testament who were said to be condemned and cursed by God through the prophets.
6. It would mean Christ died for the nations that God stated through his prophets were condemned and did not receive grace in his purposes, which was reserved for the faithful in Israel. (For example, Babylon.)
7. It would mean that Christ died for those he refused to pray for in Jn 17.⁶
8. It would mean that Christ died for the world that God is clearly opposed to and has no benevolent purposes for.⁷ Those whom God chooses are not part of the world.⁸

We could continue to give reasons, but the point has been made.

So this leaves us with what many feel is a problem; how do we square the fact that God only loves, chooses and saves some in Christ’s atonement and yet proclaims the Gospel freely to all? This is what spurs the debate on the Free Offer.

The current situation – forms of the Free Offer

Realising the foolishness of denying one or the other Biblical statements above, some Reformed folk believe that they can balance this by a form of compromise. In fact, all such compromises merely bring confusion and foolishness. The most common forms of this are variations of Amyraldism, a system of theology designed to accommodate both positions. It is also called Hypothetical Universalism because it teaches that Christ’s death was universal in scope and purpose, but salvation is actually only particular in practice. In other words, God loves everyone and sent his Son to die for everyone so that salvation was conditional on faith, but in the end only gave that faith to the elect.

The purpose of this scheme is to avoid teaching that God does not love everyone and that Christ does not die for everyone. Clearly the scheme is useless because it is not only unbiblical, but nonsensical. Why would Christ die for those who he knew would not have faith? It posits inconsistent and illogical actions in God, thus demeaning his attributes. Furthermore, what is the point of a universal potential redemption that does not have universal power to save all?

The various groups of four-point Calvinists fall into this broad scheme somewhere along the line. They claim that God only chooses some, and yet Christ dies for all. At the very

³ I.e. if the cross was for everyone, but many go to hell, then God failed in providing a universal atonement and is frustrated in his desire to see everyone saved.

⁴ Eph 1:4; Deut 7:6-7; Ps 135:4; Matt 11:25; Rm 8:30 etc.

⁵ Matt 23:33, *Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell.*

⁶ Jn 17:9, *I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.*

⁷ I Jn 2:15-16, *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world.*

⁸ Jn 15:19, *If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*

least this dishonours God since it has Christ dying for reprobates and God loving the wicked in hell, or changing his love to hate at some point. Worse, Christ fails to save those he died for and loses those he loves. Further this posits two contradictory wills in God: he desires to save all but only purposes to save some. How can God desire something in time that he has decreed will not happen in eternity? Can these folk not see the seriousness of the destructive effect these ideas have on their doctrine of God?

The key reason folk dream up these blasphemous ideas is in order to be able to preach to sinners that God loves them and that Christ died for all. It makes their preaching easier and makes their audiences feel more secure. Can they not see that telling sinners that God already loves them removes any urgency for repentance? The Gospel hinges on God's anger at sin, which is only taken away through the propitiation of Christ to those who come to him in faith. God commands repentance; he does not tiptoe trying not to hurt man's feelings, but as Peter says in preaching the first Gospel sermon, 'Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death' (Acts 2:23). Peter, far from being lovey-dovey to his hearers tells them that they helped to murder their own Messiah. The result was, 'Now when they heard *this*, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?"' (Acts 2:37). Modern preachers should note that the word 'love' never appears in the book of Acts, let alone apostolic sermons in Acts; however Acts 17:30 tells us that God commands repentance.

The modern wishy-washy message has clearly not worked since church membership is at an all-time low in the UK. A hundred years of preaching a humanistic Gospel based on a universal love of God to all has devastated the churches, filling what's left of it with professing Christians riddled with confusion and problems. Only a small remnant holds on to the truth.

Other Reformed folk merely add a whitewash of unbiblical terminology by emphasising certain phrases that don't actually explain anything to resolve the problem. An example of this are those who say that Christ's death was *sufficient for all* because he is infinite in value, but only *efficient for some* in reality.⁹ Now this is fundamentally true from one angle but it doesn't change anything. These folk (such as John Owen, many Puritans and some standards) agree that Christ's redemption is still particular and that the Gospel proclamation is still universal. Christ's death is infinite in value since he is the Son of God, but its scope is limited to the definite value of the elect by God.¹⁰ Thus the atonement is not really 'sufficient for all' when viewed as to potential objects because it was never intended for all men. The very word 'sufficient' brings problems unless defined carefully.

Others then hijack this phrase (such as Andrew Fuller) and use it to affirm Amyraldian or worse teachings. With these the 'sufficiency' becomes an abstract, provisional, universal

⁹ The Canons of the Synod of Dort mention this in the second head of doctrine (*Of the Death of Christ, and the Redemption of Men Thereby*), Article 3. 'The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin; and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.' This statement was made to honour Christ's infinite glory as the Son, not to develop any framework of Gospel preaching based on God's benevolence to all. The value of Christ's life is infinite but the intent of the scope of his death is limited to the elect. God only has 'everlasting love towards the elect' (Article 9). In fact, the canons condemn those who teach that Christ death was not intended to save any particular person but was a complete solution to sin available to all.

¹⁰ The value of Christ's life given up in death is infinite because his person is divine, but the design and purpose of the cross was limited to provide a definite redemption to those he represented who died in him; to those he was a penal substitute for and to those who's sins he bore. In terms of the sufficiency of Christ's death to the elect, it is fully sufficient, able to deal with every sin and failing.

value available to any who call upon its merit. Loose theological phraseology is often used to undergird later errors.

Yet others seek to be more Biblical but also teach a variation of the Free Offer. They have no love for Amyraldism but they teach that there is a sincere offer of salvation to everyone in the Gospel message. It is clear, however, that if this is true then Christ must first die for all and God must love all or it is not sincere. In other words, this is just another form of Amyraldism after all.

Any Gospel presentation that is founded upon a) Christ dying for all and b) God loving all is essentially a form of Amyraldism or Arminianism and is an error. A sincere offer of salvation to everyone listening to the Gospel presentation must rest on these two things, and is thus false. True Gospel preaching must be based on the truth, no matter how uncomfortable.

So what is the answer?

When faced with apparent contradictory statements in scripture we have to affirm the truth in both of them and seek to understand the theology behind them without compromise to other clear teachings. Thus man is responsible for obeying the Gospel but God is sovereign in only enabling some to do this. There is no contradiction; both are true.

When Jesus commanded dead men to rise up and walk he was not uttering confused, nonsensical statements but invoking a power that lies beyond man's ability and understanding. To worldly wisdom it was an insane thing to do – but dead men did walk; just as crippled men rose up and ran, the blind saw and the deaf heard. God's logic is based upon his glory and not our understanding. Our job is simply to obey what is his clear command – understand that salvation is particular but preach his command to 'repent and believe' to all. Any human attempt to try to compromise these by patching up a system of theological compromise is contempt of God.

There is no confusion or contradiction in the two fundamental theological statements; God has chosen only some but commands Gospel preaching to everyone. They make modern folk uncomfortable, but there is no contradiction.

The message of the Gospel has two functions: a) it captures the elect like a fisherman catching a shoal of fish and, b) it hardens the reprobate, confirming them in their sin and preparing them for condemnation. Thus the Gospel must be preached to everyone to get the message of salvation to the elect everywhere. Since the Gospel preached is the prime means God uses to draw his elect,¹¹ and since we do not know who the elect are and where they live, the Gospel must go out to everyone, everywhere. Thus indiscriminate preaching of the Gospel will secure the elect in time.

None of this is difficult to understand, though it is resisted by humanistic thinking. However, some of the so-called universalistic passages do cause problems to some but these must follow the logic of sound theological thinking and not drive it. The interpretation of these passages must not be allowed to overturn clear Biblical teaching. In fact, when these are looked at carefully and in their context they are all explicable within the framework of historic Reformed theology. The refusal of men to do this properly is what leads to theological confusion and contradiction.

¹¹ There are cases where the elect are converted through reading scripture without hearing the Gospel preached by anyone.

Conclusion

Men are free to come to Christ and respond to the universal Gospel call;¹² the Gospel invites men to come to Christ for salvation. However only those who are empowered by God will actually do so because the depravity of man's nature drags him down and prevents him from doing any good at all.¹³ Believing in Christ is a good and spiritual work and this work cannot be done without a new heart given by God. Only those empowered by God will have the desire to come. There is no impediment in the coming, no merit required of man, no special discipline or years of training in knowledge; the problem is in the will to come – and this is what God supplies. The invitation to come is free; the ability to accept that invitation is divine. However the invitation is also an imperative; God commands repentance and the rejection of that command confirms and hardens reprobates in their sin.

But the Free Offer is more than this; it is a sincere offer or a well-meant offer to all. That is, it is a promise on God's behalf that absolutely any man listening to the Gospel message is able to be saved because God loves him and Christ has died for him as an individual. This goes far beyond Biblical theology by stating that God loves those he hates,¹⁴ that Christ died for those who are already condemned¹⁵ and that God contradicts his own decrees. Since we cannot see into men's hearts and cannot know who are elect, we cannot preach that God loves all or that Christ died for all we preach to. Such preaching dishonours God, speaks lies, and deceives men with false promises. It is to be abhorred since it promises eternal life to those God has denied it.

Only the truth sets men free and the truth is that God has elected only some to salvation. The means of their salvation is the atonement made by Christ and the good news of this redemption must be preached universally to ensure that all the elect hear it. There is no contradiction in this.

Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*
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¹² Rev 21:6, I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. Rev 22:17, Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

¹³ Rm 3:10-12, As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.'

¹⁴ Ps 11:5, The LORD tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Ps 5:5-6, You hate all workers of iniquity ... The LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. Rev 2:6, You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

¹⁵ Jn 3:36, he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.