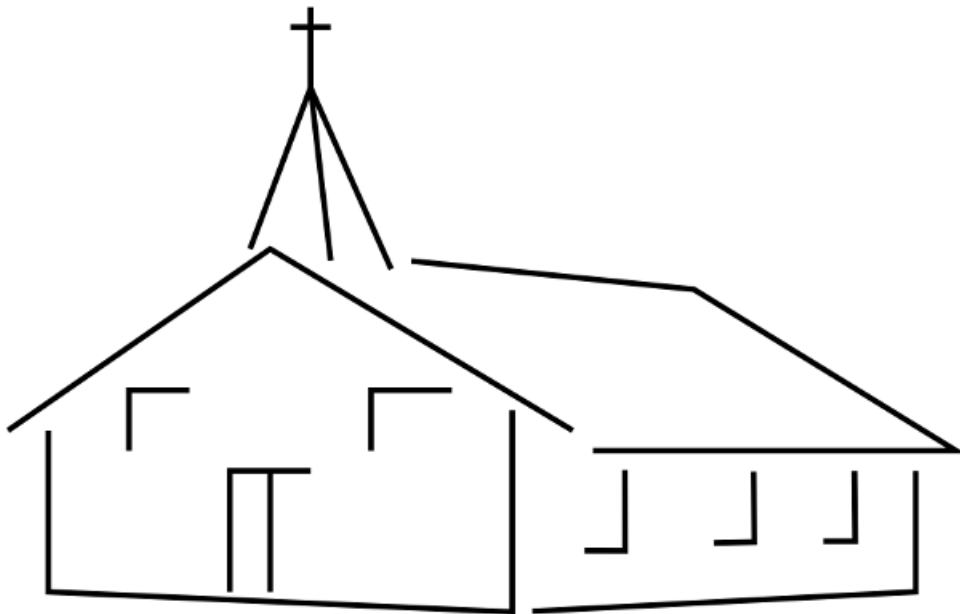


# **The *Biblical* Offer of the Gospel**

**Analysis and Answer to Rev. K. W.  
Stebbins' book, *Christ Freely Offered*, in  
the Light of Scripture and the Confessions**



**Rev. Christopher J. Connors**



**The *Biblical***  
**Offer of the**  
**Gospel**

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## Preface

“Which gospel?” is an urgent question facing the Reformed Churches today, for the truth is under fierce attack from the lie of universalism.

The student of Church History soon learns that the lie which preaches a universal love of God, sovereign-man and self-salvation is a chameleon, constantly changing its appearance in order to infiltrate the church and gain control of the content and preaching of the gospel.

Augustine engaged this foe when he defended the sovereignty of God’s grace against the rank universalism of Pelagius. The Reformers dealt it a mighty blow when they demolished Rome’s stronghold of Semi-Pelagianism. The Synod of Dordt, when it condemned Arminianism, attained a glorious victory over it. Undaunted however, it assumed the even more plausible guise of Amyraldianism, but was again driven back by the Church of Scotland in the 18th century “Marrow” controversy.

The old enemy has not abandoned the field, nor has it been idle. Having transformed itself yet again, it now marches under the banner of “common grace” and a “well-meant” offer. Its battle cry is that God loves and desires the salvation of all men in the preaching of the gospel. It has finally gained the ascendancy and now vaunts itself in the Reformed churches as Reformed orthodoxy. The battlefield which witnessed such great feats of courage is now ominously—even deathly—quiet.

It becomes absolutely necessary, therefore, that those who are still holding out against the enemy rise up and rally to the defence of the doctrines of God’s sovereign grace.

To this end, we present the following analysis and answer to Rev. K. W. Stebbins’ doctrine of the “well-meant” offer. It is our prayer that God might

be pleased to take our humble and imperfect efforts in defence of His truth, and use them to maintain and defend the doctrines of sovereign grace in the *biblical* offer over against the fatal compromise with universalism that is evident in the “well-meant” offer.

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# *Chapter 1*

## **The Occasion and Issues**

Rev. K. W. Stebbins of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia has attempted to give an answer to three questions put by Prof. David J. Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America to the proponents of the “well-meant” offer. To this end he wrote the book, *Christ Freely Offered*. The implications of the “free offer” or “well-meant” offer, acknowledges Rev. Stebbins, are summed up in the following three questions:

1. Does God desire the salvation of everyone?
2. Does God offer the gospel to all because He loves all men? *Does God love all men?*
3. Does God offer Christ and salvation to everyone in the preaching of the gospel?<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Stebbins gives an affirmative answer to each of the above questions. He in effect says:

1. Yes, God desires (i.e. delights in and pursues) the salvation of every man.
2. Yes, God loves everyone and His grace is for all.

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<sup>1</sup> K. W. Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, (Strathpine, Australia: Covenanter Press, 1978).

3. Yes, God offers (i.e. desires to give) Christ to every one in the preaching of the gospel.

Though Rev. Stebbins teaches that God loves all men, he also insists that God has decreed and immutably determined to save only the elect, that Christ and saving grace is only for the elect, and that God effects the salvation of only the elect through the “well-meant” offer of the gospel. We should be aware that certain contradictory “truths” are an essential part of Rev. Stebbins’ theology. Rev. Stebbins is in effect saying “yes” *and* “no” to each of the above questions. The “well-meant” offer he thinks is grounded in the “yes” while the contradiction created by the “no” is left to God to resolve within His own being. According to Rev. Stebbins, just how God can say “yes” and “no” and be one, simple, eternally unchangeable God is “the mystery!”

Rev. Stebbins, in effect, sets himself to defend a *conditional* will (i.e. delight) of God to save all, universal love and grace, and the “well-meant” offer as an expression of God’s will to universal salvation. By so doing, Rev. Stebbins has embraced the universal grace of the Arminians while seeking to hold to the particular grace of Calvinism. He holds these two in irreconcilable tension.

Over against Rev. Stebbins, we believe that the Reformed faith must answer these three questions *negatively*. God desires to save only the elect. God’s love and grace are particular to only the elect in Christ. God does not desire the salvation of all in the preaching of the gospel, nor does God make conditional promises to the reprobate.

In this chapter we must consider in more detail how Rev. Stebbins arrives at the point that he believes he can answer “yes” to the above questions.

### **Rev. Stebbins’ Answer to the First Question**

How does Rev. Stebbins arrive at the conclusion that the God of sovereign predestination delights or desires to save all men, including the reprobate?

Rev. Stebbins finds an active “principle of God’s nature” that requires that one give an affirmative answer to this question.<sup>2</sup> This “principle of God’s

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-20

nature” is revealed not in God’s *decretive* will, but by God’s *preceptive* will.<sup>3</sup> This will of precept indicates, supposedly, that God according to His natural goodness “delights” in the salvation of all. We have, he says,

two basic principles of God’s nature. The first is that whereby He delights that men would turn to Him; the second is that whereby He delights in sovereign love. God expresses both of these in His dealings with men generally. Because He delights in sovereign love He manifests sovereign *benevolence* which includes provision of the means intrinsically useful for finding salvation.<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Stebbins does not find a basis for his “well-meant” offer in the will of God. He does not find it in a vicarious and limited atonement either. He does not even find his basis in the command of God that all men repent and believe. Rather, he finds his basis in an “active principle of God’s nature” that stands back of the God’s revealed will. Let the reader be fully aware that although Rev. Stebbins says God “sovereignly” loves all men, he insists that this principle of “delight is not a free act of will but a *necessary principle* in God.”<sup>5</sup> This means God *must* love and pursue the salvation of all men through the gospel offer, even while according to His decree God actively wills *not* to love and favour the reprobate.

Rev. Stebbins’ seems to be aware that his argument cannot stand close scrutiny at this point, therefore he insists that his principle of God’s nature revealed by the precept *must* govern one’s understanding of the offer of the gospel. We must *not* have our understanding of the gospel governed by what God reveals in His word concerning His *eternal purpose* and *decree*.<sup>6</sup> Rev. Stebbins continues, having removed the barrier of God’s decree out of the way, to the next step of his argument—that is, the “necessary principle” of God’s nature requires that God’s delight is that sinners turn and live (Ezek. 18:23, 31-32; 33:11). God, therefore, delights to save all men *because of an active principle of His very nature*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The terms “preceptive will” and “precept” in this discussion of the free offer primarily refer to *the command of God to repent and believe*.

<sup>4</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21, emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Rev. Stebbins prefers not to say that God “desires” all men to be saved, but that God “delights” that all be saved. He does not feel comfortable with the word “desire” which sounds a bit too volitional, so he substitutes what he imagines is the more passive term “delight.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, God *out of a principle of His very nature* is said to delight in what He has decreed not to do—namely, save the non-elect through the preaching of the gospel.

Thus, Rev. Stebbins finds the basis for the “well-meant” offer to be *a necessary principle in the nature of God*. God, according to Rev. Stebbins, just can’t help loving and delighting in the salvation of all men head for head. This remains the case, he thinks, while God wills to save only His elect through the means of grace.

### **Rev. Stebbins’ Answer to the Second Question**

How does Rev. Stebbins arrive at the conclusion that God loves all and His grace is for all? Again, God’s love flows to all men *out of a necessary principle of His nature*.

Rev. Stebbins finds the same “principle of God’s nature” that moved Him to delight in universal salvation to be the source of a species of universal love. This love that is manifest as “common” grace and mercy, flows to all men from the necessary principle of God’s natural goodness. Goodness, he says, is that “attribute of God by which He delights to deal bountifully and kindly with all His creatures.”<sup>9</sup> To remove the sovereign will of God in reprobation, which is the biblical barrier to such reasoning, Rev. Stebbins argues that God’s decree of reprobation (“Esau have I hated”), “says nothing about God’s *attitude* toward the reprobate ... nor about their *destiny*.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, says Rev. Stebbins, “All acts of God’s goodness toward men are acts of love or benevolence and flow from *a nature inclined towards benevolence*.”<sup>11</sup> If God

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<sup>8</sup> Note that Stebbins says “delight”—not “desire.” He seeks to distance himself from the glaring weakness of Murray and Stonehouse who taught that God “desired” the salvation of all and yet did not fulfill that desire. Stebbins, as we shall see, changes the word “desire” to “delight.” The word “desire,” he thinks, has volitional active force, whereas “delight implies no such active connotation but refers to the character of God” (*Ibid.*, p. 20). In essence, Stebbins’ argument is simply that of Murray and Stonehouse with the word “delight” substituted for “desire.” This sleight of hand fails to extricate him from his dilemma, but is, as we shall see, a distinction without a difference.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60, emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58, emphasis added.

communicates His goodness to all, He must be graciously and kindly disposed to all.<sup>12</sup> This principle of goodness is “common” grace. This is grace for all in the good things bestowed upon all men.<sup>13</sup> Rev. Stebbins defines God’s grace as *undeserved favour*, but he *insists* that grace is in God as the giver *and* in the gift that proceeds from God’s nature.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, all God’s good gifts are *grace*, to both elect and reprobate alike.

The next step in Rev. Stebbins’ argument is to join his first two necessary principles (delight to save all, and to bestow love and grace to all) to the further notion that God is “pursuing” all men with salvation.<sup>15</sup> God, he says, pursues all men’s physical well-being through temporal blessings and pursues all men’s eternal salvation through the means of grace.<sup>16</sup> At this point the reader must clearly understand that the “necessary principle of God’s nature” is no longer confined to action within the divine mind (*ad infra*). It is now *volitional* and active outside the being of God (*ad extra*) toward and in the creation. It is pursuing the salvation of all men. Note carefully that Rev. Stebbins’ “common grace” has, as its intended end, the salvation of sinners in Christ Jesus.

At this point, Rev. Stebbins’ view is all but indistinguishable from Arminianism’s “general grace” in the conditional offer of salvation. Rev. Stebbins, however, seeks to stop short of this heresy. He recognises that “common” grace and God’s “necessary principle of delight” cannot possibly achieve the desired end—God’s eternal, immutable decree stands in its way as an insurmountable barrier. Therefore, he draws a distinction between “common” grace and “special” grace. God loves mankind as a class with “benevolent” love, and loves the elect as a class with “electing” love.<sup>17</sup> “God therefore pursues man’s preservation, including its highest form in salvation but in the elect alone He has determined to pursue it to the end.”<sup>18</sup> God’s love and hatred, it follows, are common to the reprobate and elect alike.<sup>19</sup> God

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<sup>12</sup> This is of course to confuse the issue by failing to recognize the distinction between God’s *goodness* and God’s *grace*. It is argued by Stebbins’ opponents that God who is perfectly good, good in all His works, and never evil, brings all things to pass and is kindly disposed to every man upon whom He has sovereignly set His love in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-10).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

embraces elect and reprobate alike with a species of love called “sovereign benevolent love” for a time. After a brief time under God’s love while in this world, God withdraws His love from the wicked because they resisted it, and they are eternally damned. God goes on from “common love and grace” to love the regenerated, sanctified elect with a love of greater magnitude and abiding virtue called “pleasurable love.”<sup>20</sup>

To summarize Rev. Stebbins’ argument thus far, we must say that God delights to save all, loves all, is gracious toward all, and therefore, pursues all men with salvation in the “well-meant” offer of the gospel—BUT—God will never to achieve this end. God’s love fails to save. God’s delight is not realized.

### **Rev. Stebbins’ Answer to the Third Question**

The question is: Does God “offer” Christ to all in the preaching of the gospel? That is, does God *desire to give* Christ to all who will take Him in the offer of the gospel?

Having provided a basis in a “principle of God’s nature” whereby He loves all, delights to save all, and graciously pursues the salvation of all, Rev. Stebbins next attempts to show how the universal offer of salvation is the expression of His love and gracious pursuit.

Rev. Stebbins does not define the term “offer.” The closest he comes is: “The gospel is a gracious offer of salvation to man if he will perform his duty.”<sup>21</sup> Rev. Stebbins, in effect, has God making a *conditional promise* to save the reprobate if he will fulfil the conditions.<sup>22</sup>

The question, Rev. Stebbins rightly says, is this:

... whether God merely commands all men to repent and believe or whether He earnestly and seriously

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> He assumes that for God to reveal Christ as Saviour, to require faith and to make particular promises to all who believe IS God *delighting in, loving and pursuing all men’s salvation conditioned upon man’s choice*. He assumes what he and the Arminians must prove.

calls upon all men to receive salvation by repenting and believing.<sup>23</sup>

This raises the *crucial* question, as Rev. Stebbins acknowledges: What is God's warrant for making a universal well-meant offer? "How can God offer salvation to those for whom it was neither ordained nor purchased?"<sup>24</sup>

The whole position of Rev. Stebbins stands or falls on this point. If he cannot demonstrate a true basis for a well-meant offer from Scripture, then, Rev. Stebbins' view must be rejected. Rev. Stebbins provides no basis! His "necessary principle in God" is no help to him here. That principle was supposed to provide a basis for "non-saving" love and grace. Rev. Stebbins is unable to give any basis for his universally well-meant offer in God's sovereign decree of election and reprobation; nor, as he acknowledges, can he show any basis for it in Christ's limited atonement. He stands before a glaring contradiction at the very heart of his argument and declares:

There is no more I can say as to God's warrant for offering the gospel to all. Endeavouring to explain further what is essentially mysterious, can only result in darkening counsel by words without knowledge ... Such endeavours, where we have nothing to draw with and the well is deep, betray a shallow apprehension of the limits of our faculties.<sup>25</sup>

This avoiding of the issue is totally unacceptable. Rev. Stebbins, after all, cannot produce any revealed basis for a "well-meant" offer. We are told clearly in Scripture that God our Saviour sent Christ only for His elect, but now Rev. Stebbins has God delighting and promising to give Christ to all men! How can this be sincere? Rev. Stebbins instructs us to stand with our hands upon our mouths before a divine mystery!

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94. Rev. Stebbins side steps the issue. Stebbins must prove that in the preaching of the gospel God makes a universal conditional promise to all hearers of the external call. If this latter is to be maintained it must be shown that God is "sincere" in promising the blood of Christ, shed for the elect, to all men conditionally. This is the issue. For such an offer to be sincere it must have a basis in Christ's atonement. It would also be necessary for Rev. Stebbins to demonstrate with more than asserting contradictions how he has differed from the Arminianism condemned at Dordt.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

This contradiction, or “mystery” as Rev. Stebbins calls it, is the direct result of trying to wed the particularity of the covenant of grace to a view of the offer. This is a fundamental compromise with Arminianism. Rev. Stebbins has concocted a species of hypothetical universalism that shrouds itself in the cloak of the “mystery.”

The elaborate basis Rev. Stebbins built out of the “necessary principles of God’s nature” does not help him here. In fact, Rev. Stebbins’ “necessary principles” create a further problem: How can God’s necessary delight to give, stand in flat contradiction to His free and sovereign will to withhold? Is this not a “necessary contradiction?” The problem is that Rev. Stebbins makes this contradiction to exist *in the very nature of God*. His argument begs this question: How can God be so contradictory and still be God? We do not, however, believe that the problems inherent in Rev. Stebbins’ views exist. His “mystery” is imaginary. It rises out of his erroneous view of the “offer” and of the nature and will of God.

Thus far we have sought to set forth Rev. Stebbins’ position and drawn the lines for this discussion. We can now proceed in more detail to demonstrate the erroneous nature of Rev. Stebbins’ views, and set forth what we believe is the truth of Scripture and the *Westminster Confession* regarding the sincere and non-contradictory offer of God in the preaching of the gospel.



# *Chapter 2*

## **The Offer of the Gospel**

### **The Term “Offer” Clarified**

Before we enter into a treatment of Rev. Stebbins’ argument, the term “offer” must be clarified.

The *Westminster Confession* defines the offer, and God’s purpose in the offer, in this way:

Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: whereby He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe (*WCF*, 7:3).

How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that He freely provided and offereth to

sinners a Mediator and life and salvation by Him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in Him, and promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all His elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which He hath appointed them to salvation (*Larger Catechism*, A. 32).

Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ?

Redemption is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those for whom Christ hath purchased it; who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel (*Larger Catechism*, A. 59).

Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

God having, out of His mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer (*Shorter Catechism*, A. 20).

With these statements of our Reformed confession we are in complete agreement. We understand them, however, to exclude Rev. Stebbins' "*well meant*" offer.

There are several points that need to be made at the outset. Firstly, our dispute with Rev. Stebbins' presentation of the "free offer" is primarily with the notion that in the offer God actively delights or desires to save all sinners. This notion in respect to the reprobate, requires a conditional will to their salvation, Christ dying for them conditionally, and common (general?) grace for all. These are the basic premises of Arminianism. They stand in flat contradiction to the statements of the confession as quoted above.

Secondly, we believe that the “offer” of the gospel must be viewed *Theologically* and *Christologically* before its purpose and content can be rightly understood. It is emphatically the sovereign *God’s* gospel of salvation *in Christ*.<sup>26</sup> Only as such can it be that power of God unto salvation of which we need never be ashamed.<sup>27</sup> We believe, that Rev. Stebbins’ “well-meant” offer can be grounded only in a *conditional will to the salvation of all*, and the subsequent *offer of Christ’s blood shed for all*. Therefore, the discussion must grapple with what Scripture reveals concerning the sovereign purpose, will and work of God in Christ at every point. This means also that the discussion must be *covenantal* and have God’s one saving purpose in Christ Jesus at its center. It is after all, the offer of the *covenant God*, concerning Christ, the Surety and Head of the elect, the Mediator of the covenant of grace with which we are concerned.

This covenantal approach is possible, and indeed necessary, because God’s purpose concerning the salvation of sinners in Christ through the preaching of the gospel is clearly revealed in Scripture. It is true that God does not reveal the names of those individuals who are His elect; however He does reveal that He has a chosen people, that He intends only their salvation, and that they alone are saved by grace in Christ Jesus their Mediator. God also reveals the means by which He “pursues” His elect’s salvation, namely, the gospel proclaimed to all men to whom God sends it in His providence.

Thirdly, it is our judgment that *Rev. Stebbins’* use of the confessional term “offer” can more accurately be described as a “well-meant” offer. The term “offer” does not imply “desire” in God to save as Rev. Stebbins would have us understand.<sup>28</sup> “Offer” in the Reformed confessions is the Latin term *offero*, meaning *to present, exhibit, or set forth*.<sup>29</sup> It is in this sense that the term “offer” is used by the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)* and associated documents. The *Sum of Saving Knowledge*, in accord with the Latin *offero* and biblical teaching, defines “offer” in relation to the means of grace as “to clearly hold forth Christ already crucified before our eyes.” Or again, as *Larger Catechism* Q. 72 says: “[Faith] rests upon Christ and His righteousness, therein *held forth*.” The apostle Paul sets the biblical pattern.

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<sup>26</sup> Rom. 1:1, 15-16; I Tim. 1:11.

<sup>27</sup> Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:17ff.

<sup>28</sup> The confessional term “offer” does not carry the weight that Rev. Stebbins wants to give it. It does not imply a *conditional will or delight of God toward the salvation of all*, nor does it imply any ability in the sinner to receive it, both of which are at the very least implied in Stebbins’ offer.

<sup>29</sup> David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), p. 36.

The gospel must be preached so that men are obliged to “obey the truth, [as those] before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently *set forth*, crucified among you”<sup>30</sup> “Offer” means that “the Gospel is *externally proposed ...*”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, although it is not Rev. Stebbins’ terminology, for the sake of clarity, and to distinguish the confessional usage, we use the term “offer” in the *confessional* sense of “hold forth before the mind,” and the term “well-meant” offer with reference to Rev. Stebbins’ position.

## The Biblical Offer Described

As to its content, the *confessional* offer includes both the clear setting forth of Christ crucified and God’s way of salvation in Him.<sup>32</sup> The offer presupposes the setting forth of God’s exalted holiness and the law to convince and convict men of sin and to show them their urgent need of Christ.<sup>33</sup> It sets forth and displays Christ crucified as the blessed and only Saviour in all His glory, beauty, suitability and sufficiency for the chief of sinners.<sup>34</sup> It authoritatively declares the command and call of God to all men, without exception, to repent and believe as the only way to life.<sup>35</sup> It beseeches and with the cords of love and grace, tenderly draws the *labouring, heavy-laden* sinner to Christ and salvation in Him. It promises the Spirit to the elect to make them able and willing to come,<sup>36</sup> and it proclaims the particular promise of God, that all who come will surely find mercy.<sup>37</sup> In short, it must herald the good news of the gospel to sinners—nothing more, and nothing less.

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<sup>30</sup> Galatians 3:1. The Greek word *prographoo* is used here and means firstly, “to write beforehand,” as in respect to time; then “to depict or portray openly,” as in respect to place and sight. Thayer understands Galatians 3:1 to mean: “*taught most definitely and plainly concerning the meritorious efficacy of the death of Christ.*” The term is figurative and means “*to write before the eyes of all who believe.*” This passage gives the biblical meaning of the term *offer* as used in the Reformed confessions.

<sup>31</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, vol. I (Escondido: The Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), p. 354.

<sup>32</sup> This is the meaning of *Larger Catechism* 32. The grace of God is manifest in the new covenant in that: “[God] freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by Him, and requireth faith as the condition (i.e. means) to interest them in Him, promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all the elect, to work in them that faith ...”

<sup>33</sup> Romans 3:19. See also *WCF*, 15:1; *Larger Cat.* 95-96, and *The Practical Use of Saving Knowledge*.

<sup>34</sup> I Cor. 1:23-24; I Tim. 1:15.

<sup>35</sup> Acts 2:38, 3:19; Ezek. 33:11.

<sup>36</sup> Ezek. 36:26-27; John 6:44-45; *WCF*, 7:3.

<sup>37</sup> Matt. 11:28; Isa. 55:1-8.

The presentation of the gospel—the “offer”—in its totality does not constitute, or even imply, a “well-meant” offer to all. The presentation of the gospel implies no active delight, desire or longing within God toward the salvation of all in the preaching. All that can be rightfully implied from the gospel offer is that God is pleased to save *repentant, believing* sinners—nothing more. The “well-meant” offer, however, cannot stand without first presupposing a conditional will of God to the salvation of the reprobate, Christ being dead for all, and general grace. These are, of course the most basic premises of Arminianism.<sup>38</sup> They, and the offer they create, must be rejected.

Furthermore, God’s purpose in the “offer” is to accomplish the salvation of the elect, and leave the reprobate without excuse in their sin. The reprobate “stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.”<sup>39</sup> This is God’s sovereign appointment and purpose which is realized through the preaching of the gospel. Thus the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* declares: “By these outward ordinances, as our Lord makes the reprobate inexcusable, so, by the power of His Spirit, He applies unto the elect effectually all saving graces purchased to them ...”<sup>40</sup> The *biblical* offer is the means, therefore, through which God calls all men with an outward call to faith and repentance, and through which outward call He executes His purpose according to predestination, namely, to leave the reprobate as a responsible creature without excuse for his despising Christ; while at the same time, through those same means, but now graciously in the hands of the Spirit of Christ, inwardly, irresistibly and effectually to call His elect to saving faith and repentance unto life.

This understanding of the “offer” gives the framework for our discussion and reply to Rev. Stebbins.

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<sup>38</sup> We believe it can be demonstrated that the “well-meant” offer is an implicit denial of the five points of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and preservation (or perseverance) of the saints. Rev. Stebbins clearly says he holds to these truths and for this we are thankful. That he can say he actually holds to both the universalistic principles of the “well-meant” offer *and* to particular grace flowing from double predestination can only be attributed to the “necessary principle of contradiction” inherent in modern-modified Calvinism. This principle has come to be known as the “divine paradox” and functions like a carpet under which these embarrassing necessary-contradictions are swept.

<sup>39</sup> I Peter 2:8.

<sup>40</sup> *Sum of Saving Knowledge*, Head IV.

We turn our attention now to the three questions Rev. Stebbins has answered in the affirmative.

## *Chapter 3*

### **Does God Desire to Save the Reprobate?**

#### **Rev. Stebbins’ “Principle of Delight in God”**

Rev. Stebbins’ most basic proposition is that the basis for his “well-meant” offer can be found in the very nature of God. The reader must understand that Rev. Stebbins is answering the question: *Does God desire to save all men?* Rev. Stebbins replies: Yes!—God definitely desires (delights in and pursues) the salvation of *everyone* in the preaching of the gospel.<sup>41</sup> Rev. Stebbins’ own words in this regard are as follows:

God delights that men would turn to Him *because of His very nature*. His delight is not a free act of will but a *necessary principle in God*.<sup>42</sup>

In this chapter, Rev. Stebbins’ “necessary principle within God” as the basis for common grace and the “well-meant” offer will be examined.

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<sup>41</sup> His attempt to blur the lines by substituting “delight” for “desire” does not alter this fact as will be shown in due course.

<sup>42</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 20, emphasis added.

## God's Single Will: Decree and Precept

The first thing that needs to be established is the *real unity*, or *singularity* of God's will. Rev. Stebbins agrees that "the simplicity of will and singleness of purpose of God is axiomatic in ... all reputable theologies."<sup>43</sup> True as this is, we find that this axiom is not at all evident in Rev. Stebbins' theology. Rev. Stebbins builds his theology on a faulty view of the relationship of the preceptive will to the nature of God. He posits an active volitional quality (i.e. a desire) in the preceptive will of God that results in a division of God's will.

The starting point for a Reformed discussion on the will of God is the truth that God is one,<sup>44</sup> absolutely sovereign, independent,<sup>45</sup> and unchangeable God.<sup>46</sup> God's will is the infinitely wise, eternal, powerful, immutable and righteous essence of God actively willing.<sup>47</sup> This truth determines that the will of God cannot be more than one, nor can it be in any way contradictory. John Owen rightly says:

The essence of God, being a most absolute, pure, simple act or substance, His will consequently can be but simply one: whereof we ought to make neither division nor distinction.<sup>48</sup>

To divide God's will is to divide God's being.<sup>49</sup>

God's infinite will, unlike ours, comprehends all things by a single and most comprehensive act.<sup>50</sup> Francis Turretin is helpful here, when he points out that

Although the will of God is only one and most simple, by which He comprehends all things by a single and most simple act so that He sees and understands all

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; Ps. 18:31; Isa. 43:10-13; 45:5-8, 18, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Deut. 32:39; Dan. 4:35; Ps. 33:11; Prov. 16:4; Isa. 46:10; Rom. 9:18; 11:34-36, Eph. 1:11.

<sup>46</sup> Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29; Isa. 46:10; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17.

<sup>47</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers), p. 150.

<sup>48</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), vol. X, p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> H. C. Hoeksema, whose arguments against William Heyns of the Christian Reformed Church are yet to be adequately refuted, maintains that this is a recipe for two Gods. This, he rightly argues, is because God's will and His very being cannot be separated. God's will is the being of God willing. See the [Protestant Reformed Theological Journal](#), vol. 9, no. 2 (April 1976).

<sup>50</sup> Deut. 6:4; Eph. 1:11.



things at one glance, yet because that one will is occupied differently about various objects, it thus happens in our manner of conception, it may be apprehended as manifold ...<sup>51</sup>

What may appear manifold to our finite minds is in reality a perfect oneness, unity and simplicity of will within the being of the infinite God. It is surely to be expected that we finite creatures will not be able to wrap our puny minds around the wisdom and will of the infinite God. But one thing we can and *must* wrap our minds around is the fact that within the being and will of God there can be *no division*, and therefore *no hint of contradiction*.

Certainly then, Rev. Stebbins may not so distinguish God's will of precept and decree as to, in effect, divide God's simple being into contradictory wills. This, however, is the result of teaching that the divine nature is by necessity eternally and actively delighting in the salvation of all men *at the same time as* God actively willing the decree of election and reprobation.

How does Rev. Stebbins arrive at the place where, in effect he compromises the truth of the perfect simplicity of God's will?

Rev. Stebbins rightly says that both God's will of decree and His preceptive will flow from God's divine nature and therefore both reveal what is pleasing to God. The mere *statement* of this truth, however, does not guarantee the unity of God's will in one's *theology*. In Rev. Stebbins' case the fact that the precept and decree emanate from the one divine nature simply serves to draw the confusion he creates back within the nature of God Himself, for he has dual wills emanating from God's one nature. Rev. Stebbins' argument begs this question: *How can the will of double predestination stand over against this necessary principle of active delight of the nature of the one God?* Rev. Stebbins has the divine being actively willing that in which He does not delight, and actively delighting in that which He does not will. This is his mystery.

This division comes about because Rev. Stebbins insists that the preceptive will is the expression of a necessary and active principle within the nature of God whereby "God delights that [all] men would turn to Him because of His very nature."<sup>52</sup> This "will of active delight" stands back of the preceptive will

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<sup>51</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 220.

<sup>52</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 20.

as the expression of the nature of God. It becomes the possibility of and basis for God's universally "well-meant" offer.

We point out that Rev. Stebbins' necessary "principle of active delight" within the nature of God has *volitional* quality, for it is manifest *ad extra*, (outside the eternally self-sufficient being of God) to non-elect sinners as common grace and the "well-meant" offer. We deny that there is any such necessary volitional quality within the being of the sovereign God. Every act and revelation of the nature of God *ad extra* is a free act and is according to His sovereign will—*not* by necessity of His nature. John Owen faced the counterpart of Rev. Stebbins' argument from the universalists of his day and replied:

That God hath any *natural or necessary inclination, by His goodness, or any other property, to do good to us, or any of His creatures, we do deny.* Everything that concerns us is an act of His free will and good pleasure, and not a *natural, necessary* act of His Deity.<sup>53</sup>

The denial of any "necessary inclination" in the being of God to do good to sinful man is axiomatic to orthodox Reformed theology. Furthermore, this denial is necessary if we are to preserve the unity of God's will over against the attack of universalism.

No one denies that the preceptive will reveals what is pleasing or delightful to God, or that repentance and faith are things pleasing to God. But Reformed theology cannot accept the conclusion Rev. Stebbins draws from this—namely, that the precept indicates a delight, pleasure, wish, desire or any other volitional quality within God to the actual repentance of every man. That notion destroys the simplicity of God's will. The unity of God's will is found in the fact that the preceptive will reveals that God delights in the salvation of repentant sinners, while God's decretive will has sovereignly determined to *which* sinners in particular God is pleased to grant repentance.

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<sup>53</sup> John Owen, *Works*, vol. X, p. 227, emphasis added. If this high view of the majesty and independence of God governed the Reformed church world today as it governed Owen's soul, our present debate would not be necessary. God is *God*, let the earth be silent!

Between the delight of God's nature and the will of His decree there is a most perfect and consummate harmony. The universalism that Rev. Stebbins seeks to inject into Reformed theology destroys this unity.

There is and can be no contradiction within the will of God, or between God's will of delight and His decree. God's decree, after all, is God willing His "eternal good pleasure" or delight. Rev. Stebbins in pursuit of a "well-meant" offer, however, works hard to make God's will contradictory and thereby turn it into a complex will and a "profound mystery." He fails. God cannot be divided.

### **The Relationship of Decree to Precept**

The next question we must answer is this: If the decree and precept are in reality God's one will, how then are they related so as to be one?

God's decretive will is defined in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* as His "*eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His own will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.*"<sup>54</sup> The "preceptive will" on the other hand, is that revealed will of God which is set forth in Holy Scripture as *the rule God is pleased to make known for man's duty.*

Rev. Stebbins, we believe, has come to his erroneous conclusions regarding God's will because he fails to acknowledge that the preceptive will falls as a proposition *under* the simple will of God—the eternal decrees.

The first thing we need to establish is that the preceptive will can be called God's will only in a *metaphorical* sense. The preceptive will, is *not* God within Himself (*ad infra*) "willing" as a rule for His own actions, but what God "wills" to reveal outside Himself (*ad extra*) as *the rule for the creature's actions.* There is a clear difference between the two. The preceptive will terminates outside God's essence as that which He actively *wills, or decrees, to require of man,* while the decretive will abides within Himself as His living will in regard to His own actions. The preceptive will, therefore, falls as a proposition of God's decretive will with respect to *what man is required to do.* In this way the preceptive will is rightly said to be an aspect of God's all wise providence in respect to man.

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<sup>54</sup> *Shorter Catechism*, 7

The Biblical relationship as set forward in the *Westminster Confession* could be illustrated as follows:

God's Nature >>> God's Decrees >>> Providence & Preceptive Will

God freely chooses to reveal the goodness of His being. This revelation is not necessary but free, and it is always *by means of*, or, according to His sovereign will. God's sovereign will determines that the precept be revealed as a chief *means* whereby God accomplishes His eternal purposes among men.

Rev. Stebbins' view, on the other hand, would have to be illustrated as follows:

>>> Decree & Particular Grace >>> Providence  
God's Nature  
>>> Precept & Common Grace >>> Providence

Rev. Stebbins' order requires dual wills, one of precept—willing *universal* grace—and another of decree—willing *particular* grace. Both of these are emanating from the one divine nature. The former runs free of the particularity of God's decree of election and reprobation and enables grace to flow to the reprobate directly from God's nature. At the same time God's sovereign will causes saving grace to flow purposefully to others through election in Christ. Unavoidably, God has *two contradictory good pleasures* at work within Himself and within the world.

Francis Turretin is again helpful when he demonstrates how the precept falls as a proposition under the decree:

The will of sign (i.e. preceptive will, CJC) which is set forth as extrinsic (outside of God, CJC) ought to correspond with some internal (intrinsic, CJC) will (decree, CJC) in God that it may not be false and deceptive; but that internal will is not the decree concerning the gift of salvation to this or that one, but the decree concerning the command of faith and promise of salvation if the man does believe, (which is founded both upon the connection established by

God between faith and salvation and the internal disposition of God by which, as He loves Himself, He cannot but love His image wherever He sees it shining and is so much pleased with the faith and repentance of the creature as to grant it salvation).<sup>55</sup>

All that can rightly be deduced from God's preceptive will is that God is *pleased to command* faith and repentance to sinners as the only way of salvation. The precept says nothing concerning God's *desire* to grant these to any particular sinner. From the general precept we can *not* conclude that God is gracious toward or delights to save every sinner. The preceptive will is an aspect of God's providential dealings with man as a rational moral creature. It is a means whereby God realizes His sovereign will according to election and reprobation.

Secondly, we must understand that the preceptive will is that which God has given as the *duty* of man, not His own purpose.<sup>56</sup> The will of decree, having to do with what God Himself *will* do as sovereign Creator and Saviour can never be resisted,<sup>57</sup> whereas the will of precept, having to do with God's moral requirements as the duty of man, can be and often is resisted by sinful man.<sup>58</sup>

Whether God Himself wills an action of man in fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the command cannot be determined from the preceptive will itself. "All the activity of the divine mind concerning His precepts belongs to God's decretive will."<sup>59</sup> The preceptive will tells us only what it pleases God to propose as man's *duty*.<sup>60</sup>

The pleasure of God *can* be, but is not *necessarily* in the personal fulfillment of the preceptive will as Rev. Stebbins wrongly asserts.<sup>61</sup> Turretin explains that when God's preceptive will is called His "delight," Scripture,

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<sup>55</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. I, p. 224.

<sup>56</sup> Owen, *Works*, vol. X, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Isaiah 46:10: "Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel *shall* stand, and I *will* do *all* my pleasure."

<sup>58</sup> Acts 2:23; 4:28; Matt. 23:37; Prov. 1:24.

<sup>59</sup> E.P.C., *Universalism and the Reformed Churches*, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> Eph. 5:10; Col. 3:20.

<sup>61</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 17. Stebbins would have this delight in the person to be universal by virtue of the command to all. God, so the reasoning goes, delights in the *act of repenting*, but all are commanded to *repent*; therefore, God delights in the personal *repentance* and salvation of all.

... means nothing more than the mere complacency by which God approves anything as just and holy and delights in it (and besides, wills to prescribe it to the creature as his most just duty). Hence it does not properly include any decree of volition in God, but implies only the agreement of the thing with the nature of God (according to which He cannot but love what is agreeable to His holiness).<sup>62</sup>

The delight of God, therefore, is in the precept as a thing “pleasing” in itself.<sup>63</sup> In this sense God is said to “delight in it.”<sup>64</sup> The action of the creature that conforms to the precept is incidental to God’s delight in the precept itself. God’s active delight in the person fulfilling the precept is coincident, and wholly dependent upon God by His Spirit regenerating and working in the sinner both to will and to do of His good pleasure.<sup>65</sup> It is thus coincident only when God’s decree determines that God by irresistible grace makes it so. That is to say, God works faith and repentance graciously and irresistibly in the heart of the elect sinner according to the decree of election, so that the purpose of God and the fulfilling of the precept meet in the grace of Christ Jesus, by which grace, faith and repentance are alone made possible.

It is in this sense that God is said to delight in the actions of men that conform to His preceptive will.<sup>66</sup> This delight of God in precept and person can, therefore, never be apart from the mediation and imputed righteousness of Christ through faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, Rev. Stebbins’ assumption that “God’s delight would be not just in repentance and faith as things in themselves but in the wicked repenting and believing,”<sup>68</sup> is erroneous.

John Owen is certainly correct when he says: “*From our duty to God’s purpose is no good conclusion, though from His command to our duty be*

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<sup>62</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 222.

<sup>63</sup> God sees His own holy nature shining in the preceptive will and loves it as Himself with a complacent love. God requires that men love the law with a complacent love also because they must love God for what and who He is. This makes transgression of the law a horrendous rebellion and rebuttal of God. The sinner in effect says: “I do not and will not love you, and as your law reflects your holiness and being I hate and despise it.”

<sup>64</sup> Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:10; Col. 3:20.

<sup>65</sup> Phil. 2:13.

<sup>66</sup> Ps. 51:6; Prov. 11:1, 20; 15:8; Isa. 56:4.

<sup>67</sup> Heb. 11:6.

<sup>68</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 17.

*most certain.*”<sup>69</sup> Rev. Stebbins, however, argues from our duty to God’s “necessary principle of nature” and would attribute to God an unfulfilled delight. We insist that God’s delight is constantly in what He has freely decreed, namely, the full and free salvation of the elect.<sup>70</sup>

## God’s One Determinative Purpose

The *singularity* of God’s will means necessarily that the purpose of God in that will is also *one*, not many. Obviously, God has many subordinate ends that all work together in perfect harmony to achieve the ultimate end, God’s glory. This end must be realised in the lives of both elect and reprobate. The means of grace, including the gospel offer, stand in relation to this purpose as a means to an end. God’s clearly revealed purpose to glorify Himself in the way of double-predestination is determinative in laying a biblical foundation for the “offer” of the gospel.

Rev. Stebbins, however, does not teach or even want to acknowledge that there is an eternal decree of predestination that determines God’s purpose in the offer, nor men’s destiny. He insists that “preterition (i.e. reprobation, CJC) says nothing about God’s attitude towards those passed over (i.e. the reprobate CJC) ... nor about their destiny.”<sup>71</sup>

Surely, here is a parting of the ways between Reformed orthodoxy and Rev. Stebbins. Rev. Stebbins denies the reality and ultimacy of God’s decree of reprobation. He denies that God has eternally, sovereignly and unchangeably determined that the destiny of the reprobate be eternal destruction. He consequently stands in flat contradiction to the *Westminster Confession* which does not draw back from declaring that:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, *and others foreordained to everlasting death.*<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Owen, *Works*, vol. X, p. 394.

<sup>70</sup> God is free to do whatever He pleases and has freely determined to bring all His pleasure to pass (Isa. 46:10), but God is not free to change, be double minded or have unfulfilled delights or desires: “For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17; Num. 23:19).

<sup>71</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 60.

<sup>72</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3:3, emphasis added.

This clear statement of the *Confession* is based squarely upon Romans 9:22-23:

What if God, willing to make his power known, endured with much long suffering the *vessels of wrath fitted to destruction*? And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the *vessels of mercy* which he had *afore prepared unto glory* (emphasis is the *Confession's*).

Any distinction that exists between “predestination” and “foreordination” is irrelevant, for both terms refer to the sovereign decree of God which is made *apart from* and *without any consideration of* the works of the creature in the first instance. The unconditional nature of God’s decree of predestination is axiomatic to Reformed theology.

Rev. Stebbins denies the *whole* truth concerning reprobation in order to allow room for the universalism of the “well-meant” offer. This denial is of fundamental importance not only to this discussion, but to the Reformed faith itself. When one denies sovereign unconditional reprobation, as Rev. Stebbins does at this point, as sure as night follows day the truth of sovereign unconditional election and the Reformed faith itself will eventually be lost.

The purpose of God in having the gospel preached is according to, and governed by, the decree of double-predestination. God purposes to glorify His grace in Jesus Christ<sup>73</sup> through the salvation of the elect by the preaching of the gospel.<sup>74</sup> The negative of this is His purpose to glorify His justice in the condemnation and eternal punishment of the reprobate. God has before the foundation of the world set His love upon those who are “chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love.” God has “withheld mercy” from the rest of mankind “to the praise of His glorious justice.”<sup>75</sup> According to Scripture and the Reformed confessions, God’s decree of *double-predestination* is determinative.

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<sup>73</sup> Col. 1:15-20; 2:9.

<sup>74</sup> Ephesians 1-2 throughout.

<sup>75</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3:7.



It is in this context that the passages in Ezekiel 18 and 33 which are held forth as the biblical basis for Rev. Stebbins' "necessary principle in God" are to be considered.

## **The Ezekiel Passages**

Here we must ask: Is Rev. Stebbins correct in interpreting the Ezekiel passages to say God actively delights that all men be saved?

The passages read:

Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?"(Ezek. 18:23).

Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? for I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye (Ezek. 18:31-32).

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezek. 33:11).

These passages have been hotly debated over the years.<sup>76</sup> Rev. Stebbins, however, gives no careful exegesis of these passages, but asserts that it is quite legitimate to deduce from them that it is God's nature to delight in men turning to Him and His abhorrence that they die.<sup>77</sup> From this he concludes that God loves, is gracious to and desires the salvation of every sinner.

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<sup>76</sup> Historically the debate was between the universalists (i.e. Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians and Arminians) and the Reformed, but since the time of Amyraut, the debate has entered into the Reformed camp itself. For a treatment and refutation of the doctrines of Amyraut see Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. I, p. 395ff.

<sup>77</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 17. One assumes that Stebbins agrees in principle with Murray and Stonehouse's interpretation of the verses, provided the word "desire" is changed to "delight that pursues."

Rev. Stebbins is *not* saying that God by nature abhors death and loves life, but that He *delights in all men's repentance and salvation*. In other words, he is speaking not about God's precept, but about "a" will of delight within the being of God, other than the decree, and in contradiction to that decree!

The passages are God's reply to the proverb spoken in Israel: "*The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge*" (18:2). Judah accused God of injustice, (18:19, 25, 29). Furthermore, many excused their wicked refusal to turn from their sin by asserting that it was no use, because God is some kind of a fiend who delights in judgment and death. To this blasphemy God replies: "*Are not my ways equal? are not your ways unequal?*" (18:29). God is not a cruel tyrant, but a righteous Judge: "*I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord God.*" The command of God to the accountable sinner is: "*Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions: so iniquity shall not be your ruin*" (18:30). This command of God is designed to correct and encourage Judah in the knowledge that God has no fiendish delight in their suffering and death, but, as the faithful covenant God, commands them to repent as the way to life and happiness.

The emphasis in the whole passage and book clearly falls upon the command to repent. This command comes to the nation of Judah, elect and the reprobate alike, indicating that God delights in repentance and life. The promise of life that is made is *particular*. It is to those *who turn*.

Calvin's treatment of these verses in his polemic against the Semi-Pelagian, Pighius,<sup>78</sup> is most helpful. Calvin points out, that:

After God had terrified them with the apprehension of His wrath, and had duly humbled them as not being utterly desperate, He encourages them with the hope of pardon, that they might feel that there was yet left open a space for remedy. Just so it is with respect to the *conditional promises*<sup>79</sup> of God, which invite all

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<sup>78</sup> Pighius was a Semi-Pelagian opponent of the Reformed doctrine of predestination. He cited these texts in support of general grace and a desire in God to save all revealed in the preceptive will. His arguments were remarkably similar to those of Rev. Stebbins.

<sup>79</sup> Note carefully that Calvin denies that God makes a "general and indiscriminate promise of salvation to all." "A man," he says, "must be utterly beside himself to assert that this promise (of the Spirit to regenerate, CJC) is made to all men generally and indiscriminately" (*Ibid.*, p. 100).

men to salvation. They do not positively prove that which God has decreed in His secret counsel, but *declare only* what God is *ready to do* to all those who are brought to faith and repentance.<sup>80</sup>

Calvin also instructs us as to God's non-delight in the death of the wicked and delight in their life:

God requires of us this conversion, or "turning away from our iniquity," and in whomsoever He finds it He disappoints not such an one of the promised reward of eternal life. Wherefore, God is as much said to have pleasure in, and to will, this eternal life, as to have pleasure in repentance; and He has pleasure in the latter (i.e. repentance CJC), because He invites all men to it by His Word. Now all this is in perfect harmony with His secret and eternal counsel, by which He decreed to convert none but His own elect. None but God's elect, therefore, ever do turn from their wickedness.<sup>81</sup>

Turretin expresses this same understanding when he says:

God wills preceptively with respect to the reprobate the means to salvation in its material, but does not will them effectively in its formal. He wills to teach the reprobate what means for salvation are furnished, but does not will to effect them (so that they should

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<sup>80</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1956), p. 99.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100. Calvin goes on to say:

And yet, the adorable God is not, on these accounts, to be considered variable or capable of change, because, as a Law-giver, He enlightens all men with the external doctrine of *conditional* life. In this primary manner He calls, or invites, *all men* unto eternal life. But in the latter case, He brings unto eternal life those whom He willed according to His eternal purpose, *regenerating* by His Spirit, as an eternal Father, *His own children* only.

Note Calvin's distinction between God as Law-giver who gives the precept (outward call) and God as Father who makes the elect capable of compliance (inward call).

be performed by them as undoubted means to salvation to be attained).<sup>82</sup>

God deals with sinners as rational, moral creatures from the ethical view point. The passages speak of the wicked who turn and the wicked who do not turn. For all the wicked it is true that life can be found only in the way of turning. *Turning and living* are in the highest sense pleasing to God, as we have seen. For in the turning sinner God's precept and decree meet and agree. However, it is clear that it is only the wicked who turn who shall live and have life bestowed upon them according to the delight of God.

Calvin writes:

The prophet's instruction that the death of the sinner is not pleasing to God is designed to assure *believers* that God is ready to pardon *them as soon as they are touched by repentance*, but to make the wicked feel that their transgression is doubled because they do not respond to God's great kindness and goodness. God's mercy will always, accordingly, go to meet repentance, but all the prophets and all the apostles, as well as Ezekiel himself, clearly teach to whom repentance is given.<sup>83</sup>

The passages reveal the glory of the goodness of God: "I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth" (Ezek. 18:32). And again: "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." The passages *do not* teach that God has an active pleasure, delight or desire that *all men* should receive life through repentance. Such an active principle of delight within God Himself would necessarily remain unfulfilled, for the majority of Judah did not repent. This would mean that God is *less than perfectly*

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<sup>82</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 414. Turretin makes an important and helpful distinction between repentance and faith as "means of salvation" to the elect, and as the means and motive to excite obedience in the reprobate. The point is, that they can be means unto salvation in the full sense of the word only when it is the intention and purpose of God that it be so. The purpose of God is determinative as to whether these means save or harden. We note here in passing that this distinction which arises necessarily out of the application of the doctrine of predestination to the matter of the means of grace, effectively demolishes the notion that God is "gracious" to the reprobate in the preaching of the gospel.

<sup>83</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3:24:15 (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd), emphasis added.

*blessed in Himself*, which can never be.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, it is not correct to say, as does Rev. Stebbins, that there is a principle in God whereby He delights that all sinners should actually turn and live. The passages *do* clearly teach, however, that the God of the everlasting covenant of grace reveals Himself in a way that is full of encouragement to burdened and guilty sinners. Does God really delight in bestowing life in the way of repentance? The answer is yes. God is life and the source of all life in and of Himself. As such He actively and necessarily delights in life and only in life, never in death, and is pleased to open up a way to life for sinners through faith and repentance.

That God delights in *life* means firstly, that God delights in the perfect, all blessed life of communion with Himself. This is all blessed life and delight in life that God has in and of Himself as Father, Son and Holy Ghost.<sup>85</sup> This life lacks nothing. This life is the possibility of the life offered to unworthy sinners through the gospel of God's wondrous grace. Secondly, and importantly for our text, it is into this life of blessed communion that God delights to bring lost sinners as adopted sons alone through Jesus Christ, and alone in the way of repentance and faith.<sup>86</sup> Oh, yes! God delights in life, and the fearful sinner under the conviction of sin and deep sense of his unworthiness may be assured that God delights abundantly in bestowing eternal life upon every sinner who turns. The Lord delights in this with a perfect and righteous joy and the heavenly hosts join their rejoicing to that of Jehovah.<sup>87</sup> Thirdly, and in the highest sense of the word, God delights in bestowing heavenly life upon the redeemed, sanctified and glorified sinner. Thus He brings His adopted children into the fruition of creaturely blessedness in communion with Himself through Jesus Christ. This delight is in the life of the glorified saint as a precious son or daughter with whom God fellowships and communes. This life in the experience and fruition of all good in Him is the realization of man's chief end in the enjoyment of God forever. Life for sinners is possible exactly because God delights in life. That is, God delights that the sinner who turns should live. God delights in bestowing life upon the sinner *who turns*.

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<sup>84</sup> See Daniel 2:20-21 and I Timothy 6:15-16. Stebbins' attempt to explain away this fact comes to a disappointing conclusion when he says: "Dabney's solution is the most satisfactory answer to God's 'unsatisfied longings' I have yet found ... I see no reason to posit in God a *desire* to save all when Scripture says no more than God *delights* that all would be saved" (*Christ Freely Offered*, p. 34). This statement rests on the assumption that "delight that pursues" and "desire" differ. They do not!

<sup>85</sup> Prov. 8:30; John 17:21-26; *Westminster Confession*, 2:2-3.

<sup>86</sup> Rev. 21:3; John 17:3; I John 5:11, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Luke 15:7.

God's delight in the life of those who turn is in perfect harmony with His delight in the administration of the penalty of death as demanded by His righteous justice. However, when we speak of God's delight in life and His delight in justice, it is to be insisted that life and death meet and are perfectly reconciled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.<sup>88</sup> It is the death of the Mediator which purchases life for every elect sinner. He it is who satisfies the justice of God by enduring the infinite wrath of His offended justice in their stead.

God's delight in life, therefore, is displayed to sinners only through the person and work of Jesus Christ on behalf of His elect. Christ and His elect body cannot be separated. God's delight in life is focused upon the living of His elect people in Christ. Still God is one, as is His purpose, as is the object of His delight.

The passages are therefore full of sweet comfort and encouragement to any and every *guilt-laden* sinner who *longs for deliverance*. The way is clearly set before every sinner. All who repent will find God to be abundant in mercy, and may be assured that they, like the prodigal son, will be met by the open arms of their heavenly Father. These verses are fashioned by the sweet grace of God to draw *labouring and heavy-laden* sinners through the doorway of faith and repentance into that blessed rest and life laid up for them by Christ in communion with God. The verses, however, say nothing of a delight within God for the salvation of those who *do not* turn. If they did, then the encouragement that is here for all who turn and believe becomes nothing more than an ineffectual wish of God.

### **John Knox on the Ezekiel Passages**

It is instructive for us to pause a while to hear the testimony of our Reformed father, John Knox on these passages. A comparison of the clear sound of Knox with the confusion of Stebbins, we believe, demonstrates just how dim the gold of modern-modified Calvinism has grown.

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<sup>88</sup> Psalm 85:10: "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

First off, Knox insists that double-predestination is a *working principle* when explaining Scripture, and applies this to the Ezekiel passages. “Let the simple understand,” declares Knox,

... that such general sentences of necessity must be so restrained, that difference may be kept between the Elect and the Reprobate; else we shall do nothing in explaining Scriptures but confound light and darkness.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, insists the hard hitting Knox:

Whosoever doth deny, that from the beginning there has been, this day are, and to the end shall remain, two armies, bands or companies of men, whom God in His eternal counsel has so divided, that between them there continues a battle which shall not be reconciled until the Lord Jesus put a final end to the miseries of the church: Who doth not understand the truth of this, (I say), doth neither know God, neither His Son Christ Jesus, neither yet do such believe His Word, in which both the one sort and the other are most manifestly expressed.<sup>90</sup>

Knox describes the purpose of these passages as being to bring *the elect people of God* in Israel to repentance and life:

The mind of the prophet was to stir such as had declined from God, to return unto Him by true repentance. And because their iniquities were so many, and offenses so great, that justly they might have despaired of remission, mercy and grace, therefore doth the Prophet, for the better assurance of those that should repent, affirm: “God delights not, nor wills the death of the wicked.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, vol. 5, p. 415.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

In this polemic against the Anabaptists (who denied double-predestination, espousing an universalistic interpretation of these passages, differing only in degree from that which Rev. Stebbins is seeking to champion), Knox says:

Ye are not ignorant I suppose, what difference there is between an universal negative, and an indefinite, or particular? ... The prophet says not, “I will the death of no creature,” neither yet “I will the death of no sinner,” but simply says, “I will not the death of a sinner” ... And I fear not ... to affirm that God hath willed, doth will, and shall will the death of some men. The Holy Ghost, speaking of the sons of Eli the High Priest, saith: “But they did not hear the voice of their father, because *the Lord would kill them*” ...<sup>92</sup>

Knox recognizes also that God’s delight is in *all* His will, while He detests sin, and has no delight in death except as it is the revelation of His glorious justice.

Iniquity and sin are so odious before God, that in it can His goodness never delight, neither yet can He have pleasure in the destruction of any creature, having respect to the punishment only. But seeing that God’s glory must needs shine in all His creatures, yea, even in the perpetual damnation of Satan, and torment of the reprobate, why shall not He will, and take pleasure, that so it come to pass.<sup>93</sup>

This Reformed father does not shrink from asking: “*But of which wicked*” does the prophet speak?

Of him, no doubt, that truly should *repent*, in *his* death did not, nor never shall God delight. But He delights to be known as a God that shows mercy, grace, and favour *to such as unfeignedly call for the same*, how grievous so ever their former offenses have been. But such as continue obstinate in their impiety, have no portion of these promises. For them

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109, emphasis added.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.



God will kill, them will He destroy, and them will He thrust, by the power of His Word, into the fire which never shall be quenched.<sup>94</sup>

Knox's answer to the question: "What sinners they are whose death God will not, but rather that they convert and live?" is quite different to that of Rev. Stebbins. For Knox concludes that: "There are two sorts of sinners ..." <sup>95</sup> The one he describes as the sinner who mourns for his sins, confesses them and embraces Christ's justice and mediation. "The death of such sinners did God never will; neither yet can He will." <sup>96</sup> He goes on to explain *why* this is so.

For from all eternity they were His Elect children, whom He gave to His dear Son to be His inheritance; whom the Son received into His protection and safeguard; to whom He hath manifested, and to the end shall manifest Himself, and the loving kindness of His heavenly Father; in whose hearts He writes the law of God, and makes them to walk in His commandments, ever thirsting to a further and more perfect justice than they find within themselves by reason of their corruption. The death, I say, of those sinners God will not, but He will that they repent and live.<sup>97</sup>

With Knox we heartily concur.

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410, emphasis added.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

# Chapter 4

## Does God Love All Men?

There can be no question that God loves and is gracious to the elect in Christ. The question is this: *Does God love the “non-elect”?*

Rev. Stebbins, as we saw, answers this question in the affirmative. Yes, he says, God loves all, and God is gracious to all men including the reprobate. He teaches that God’s love and grace for the reprobate, however, is of a *non-saving* variety that lasts only until they are damned eternally for their sins.

Rev. Stebbins then shows how God graciously pursues the well-being and salvation of all by means “intrinsically useful.”<sup>98</sup> By intrinsically useful, he means that the good things God bestows as grace upon the reprobate are in themselves designed both to preserve life and ultimately to lead sinners to salvation in Christ. Rev. Stebbins calls the offer of the gospel “common grace” because it, like the rain and sunshine comes to all men without distinction. “common grace” is in all God’s good gifts to men but comes to its highest expression in the preaching of the gospel whereby He pursues the reprobate’s ultimate spiritual blessedness in Christ.

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<sup>98</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 67. “Intrinsically” is understood to mean “inherent in the very nature of the thing.”

It must be clearly noted that Rev. Stebbins' "common grace" has God aiming at the salvation in Christ of the reprobate. Rev. Stebbins' "common grace" is not concerned only with temporal gifts, as it would be if it were a species of non-saving grace distinct from saving grace. The great Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper championed a view of what he called, common, non-saving grace; but he so vigorously repudiated any idea that this species of grace was concerned with man's salvation that he gave it a completely different name. He called it "*gemeene gratie*," and saving grace he called "*genade*."<sup>99</sup> His reason for making such a clear distinction was that he insisted the two must never be confused. Rev. Stebbins on the other hand, willingly, even willfully confuses the two in order to produce a basis for his "well-meant" offer.

Rev. Stebbins' "common" grace sets God actively pursuing the reprobate with salvation through the gospel. In reality, Rev. Stebbins' "common" grace is *saving grace* with its power and purpose removed so as to be resistible and non-efficacious. Rev. Stebbins, quite distinct from Kuyper and many of the better Puritans, is not maintaining a "common" grace<sup>100</sup> of God as Creator in His providence over all His creatures; rather he has embraced and teaches the "general grace" of the Arminians. Admittedly, he has put general grace through what could be called a "Calvinizing" process. The problem is, however, that even though the corrupt metal now has the appearance of the genuine article; when you scratch the surface, you find that its nature remains unchanged.

## **Grace: Un-common**

Rev. Stebbins defines grace in this way: "Grace is a principle of God's attribute of goodness whereby He delights to deal with man with a favour he does not deserve."<sup>101</sup> Further, grace is "the undeserved favour of God ... referring to God's nature and the gift that proceeds from that nature." "The nature of the act is to be reckoned from the attitude of the doer."<sup>102</sup> This

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<sup>99</sup> For a treatment of this Kuyperian "common" grace, see David J. Engelsma's *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFP, 2014), pp. 164-168.

<sup>100</sup> We do not believe the term *common grace* used in this way is a wise use of the term *grace*. Grace is in Christ and is never common. However, the term was used by many sound divines to indicate God's bountiful care, preservation, and nurturing of His creation and indeed of sinful man together with that creation. But this general providential dispensation of God is distinct from *grace*.

<sup>101</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 56.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

means, for Rev. Stebbins, that because God has a “necessarily” gracious attitude toward all men, everything God does, gives or brings to men is *grace*. Therefore, grace is necessarily common to the reprobate and the elect alike.

There are serious problems with Rev. Stebbins’ definition of grace.

Firstly, Rev. Stebbins has written a book with the stated purpose of proving that Christ is (in our words) “*well-meaningly*” offered to all men by God and is defining God’s grace in the context of the preaching of the gospel and salvation, yet he does so *apart from* any mention of either the fountain of grace in God’s eternal decree of election, or the saving purpose of God in Christ. He again works out of his erroneous “necessary principle of God’s nature.” Rev. Stebbins has dual wills of God in operation in regard to grace.

Secondly, though it is true that, as Rev. Stebbins says, God’s grace is “undeserved favour” it does not follow that because God makes His grace known to sinners through the preaching of the gospel, God is gracious, or has a gracious purpose in that preaching *to the reprobate*.

Rev. Stebbins stops far short of a biblical definition of grace. We believe that grace is *the favour of God—through the mediation of Christ to elect sinners—contrary to all deserving—as that irresistible power through which God realizes His purpose to glorify His name in the full and free salvation of the whole body of the elect in Christ*.

A biblical conception of grace *must* reckon with sin, the curse, and God’s saving purpose toward the *elect* in Christ. Biblical grace comes from God the Father, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit as that irresistible power of God unto the *salvation* of totally depraved, undeserving sinners. Nothing less than God’s irresistible *saving* grace is revealed by, and proclaimed in, the preaching of the gospel.

Thirdly, any biblical definition of grace must be *grounded in Jesus Christ Himself* as the beginning and end of God’s grace. This is the reason our *Larger Catechism* is careful not to say, as Rev. Stebbins does, that the covenant was made with the elect, but rather: “The covenant of grace was made with *Christ* as the second Adam, *and in Him with all the elect as His seed*.”<sup>103</sup> Christ was from all eternity God’s gift of grace for the elect.<sup>104</sup> There

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<sup>103</sup> *Larger Catechism*, 31.

<sup>104</sup> See Ephesians 1-2.

is no grace for sinners outside of Christ; nor does God show favour to guilty sinners except it be through the person and work of Christ the Mediator of the covenant of grace. This point, in our judgment, is crucial. Christ's love, life, obedience, prayers, shed blood, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, glorification, mediatorial rule, continual intercession, sending the Spirit, effectual calling, and all the benefits of the covenant of grace are the gift of grace to *those that the Father has given to Christ before the foundation of the world*. God's grace is for none but the elect body of Christ.

Time should be taken carefully to read the first two chapters of Ephesians. In these chapters the nature of biblical grace is described. The apostle Paul, magnifying the glory of God's grace in Christ, says: we are "chosen *in him*," (1:4). We are predestinated to the adoption of children "*by Jesus Christ to Himself*, according to the good pleasure of His will" (v. 5). Here is the fountain of grace revealed. Why does God do this? It is "to the praise of the glory of His *grace*" (v. 6). Grace "*makes us accepted in the beloved*" (v. 6). It is "according to the riches of grace" that sinners have "*redemption through Christ's blood and forgiveness of sins*" (v. 7). God, by revealing the mystery of His will in Christ, causes the riches of His grace to abound toward *the elect* (v. 8). Grace brings God's love and mercy in Christ to quicken dead sinners (2:5). Grace *saves!* (2:5) Grace is pure undeserved favour: "For by grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (2:8). Grace raises the elect up, through faith, and makes them to sit together in heavenly places *in Christ Jesus* (2:6). *This*, and nothing less according to the apostle Paul, is *grace*. Evidently, grace, as far as the Holy Scripture is concerned, originates in the eternal predestination to the adoption of children *in Christ*. Grace *quickens* dead sinners. Grace unites the elect to Christ in the mystical union of faith. Grace applies redemption and bestows forgiveness. Grace raises the elect to heavenly glory as the adopted sons and daughters of God. Grace *saves to the uttermost*. Why? "That in ages to come he might show forth the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us *through Christ Jesus*" (2:7). This—and nothing less—is a biblical conception of God's grace.

## **Two Further Issues Concerning Grace**

Rev. Stebbins' argument requires that we consider two further questions regarding grace. First, does God have a non-saving attitude of favour (common grace) toward the reprobate as Rev. Stebbins defines it? Second, is

there “grace” in things? That is, are things—as things—*grace*? We have before concluded that in the context of the gospel of salvation God’s grace is *in Christ* and is saving grace. Nevertheless, these two questions must be considered in more detail.

### **God’s Attitude Toward the Non-elect**

Is God favorably disposed (gracious) to all men in the preaching of the gospel?

Oh yes! says Rev. Stebbins—otherwise God couldn’t be sincere in offering Christ and salvation in Him to all men!

“No,” we reply. Such a conclusion does not follow at all. There can be no doubt that God is gracious toward His elect in the offer of the gospel. The question, however, for this discussion is: *What is God’s attitude toward the reprobate in the preaching of the gospel? Is His attitude one of love and favour, or is it one of disfavour?*

The Reformed believer does well to remember that God’s decree has something to do with God’s attitude toward the one who hears the preaching of the gospel. Indeed, God’s eternal decree of double-predestination is absolutely determinative as to whether God is pleased to bestow or withhold His grace from any particular sinner.

The *Westminster Confession* has something to say on this vital point:

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, *out of mere grace and love* ... and all to the praise of His glorious grace (*WCF*, 3:5).

In predestinating the elect unto life, God made the elect the particular objects of His *love and grace*. Through and in the elect, God’s grace will be glorified.

Where does the offer of the gospel fit into the *Confession's* conception of grace?

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto (*WCF*, 3:6).

The elect, according to the *Confession*, are predestined unto life, but this life is to become theirs *through the means God has foreordained*. As far as life and salvation are concerned, *all* the means of grace, especially the preaching of the gospel as the chief means, are for the sake of the elect in Christ. To the elect these means *are* God's grace and mercy, in and through Christ, for their salvation. God desires their salvation. God pursues their salvation through the means of grace. God *achieves* this salvation, without fail, through the means He provides as these are effectually applied by the Spirit.

What then of God's attitude toward the reprobate? The *Westminster Confession* in the same chapter declares:

The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, *to pass by*, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice (*WCF*, 3:7).

From the non-elect, or reprobate—all who are not chosen to life in Christ—God, our *Confession* teaches, “*withheld mercy*” and “*passed by*” with His mercy and grace in Christ. The righteous and sovereign God withheld mercy, grace and love in Christ from “the rest.” He has passed by many with the benefits of the covenant of grace which are found only in Christ.

Rev. Stebbins, however, twists and, in principle, denies the truth of Scripture declared in the *Westminster Confession* when he says, “[This] preterition (i.e. reprobation, CJC) says nothing about God's attitude towards those passed over, (except that they are not going to be loved with God's electing love), nor about their destiny.”<sup>105</sup> This statement shows that Rev. Stebbins has diluted the Reformed teaching concerning reprobation until it has

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<sup>105</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 60.

become nothing more than God's reaction to man's sin. Almighty God, however, is not a *reacting* God; God *acts*. Rev. Stebbins seems to have lost sight of the fact that God is *God!*

Resistance to the mighty truth of God's absolute sovereignty over the destiny of men is not new. The apostle Paul anticipated this very objection, and his response must be heeded:

Nay, but O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?<sup>106</sup>

Rev. Stebbins argues this way because he must first deny the decisive nature of reprobation before he can teach a "well-meant" offer of God to the reprobate. Nevertheless, God, says the *Confession*, "withholdeth mercy." The proof text for this confessional statement is Romans 9:18: "*Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.*" Reprobation is *active*—"whom He *will* He *hardeneth.*" Furthermore, the *Confession* declares that God hardens the reprobate by "*withholding grace*" from them (*WCF*, 5:6). Reprobation means also, that God hardens the non-elect even through the good things showered upon them so liberally in this life, and through the hearing of the gospel. This too is an important confessional truth overlooked by Rev. Stebbins.

As for the wicked and ungodly men whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins, (that is, the reprobate viewed from the moral-ethical view point, CJC) doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened ... whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others (*WCF*, 5:6).

If we ask: Why? God replies: "*Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*"<sup>107</sup> Whatever else the proponents of the "well-meant" offer might say of this verse, it certainly is not teaching that God is "graciously disposed" toward the

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<sup>106</sup> Rom. 9:20-21

<sup>107</sup> Rom. 9:13.



reprobate. It certainly is not teaching that God “loves some less.” Rev. Stebbins, however, argues that God’s goodness manifest toward the reprobate is a form of love, grace and mercy.<sup>108</sup> With John Knox we can but say: “You make the love of God common to all men, and that *we constantly do deny*.”<sup>109</sup>

Is Rev. Stebbins’ “common” grace biblical? If it is indeed the case that there is a “common grace” that pursues all men’s salvation, as he so insists, where, we ask, is the proof from Holy Scripture?

The “proof” texts Rev. Stebbins presents for “common grace” which is grace in the giver and in the gift<sup>110</sup> militate against his own position and support our contention that God’s grace is always particular in Christ to the elect. He cites Galatians 1:15 (“But when it pleased God and separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace”), Ephesians 2:8 (“For by grace are ye saved”), and Titus 3:4 (“But after the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared”). All these texts manifestly refer to God’s sovereign, particular love and saving grace to His elect. This grace *saves!* Full and free salvation is the certain result of God “pursuing” the sinner with this grace. These passages say nothing of a love of God toward the reprobate. Rev. Stebbins is required by these texts to say, either, that in “common grace” God has elected all conditionally and given Christ as Saviour for all,<sup>111</sup> or he must acknowledge that he has given absolutely no biblical support for his definition of grace.

Is there another lesser species of non-saving grace and mercy apart from that which God decreed to bestow and withhold according to His sovereign good pleasure in Christ? To this question we must now turn.

## **God’s Goodness and Grace**

The several passages Rev. Stebbins points to in support of a “common non-saving” grace refer specifically to God’s *goodness*—not to God’s grace.<sup>112</sup> Rev.

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<sup>108</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>109</sup> Knox, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 51.

<sup>110</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 55.

<sup>111</sup> John Murray goes so far as to say that the benefits of Christ’s atonement accrue to the reprobate as well as the elect in common grace. In so doing he confuses things with grace.

<sup>112</sup> Stebbins points to Acts 14:16-17, 17:25-27, Matthew 5:43-48, and Luke 6:35 as proof that God is graciously disposed to all in His goodness.

Stebbins makes a fundamental mistake when he confuses good “things” with grace. He fails to distinguish between God’s general goodness in all His works of providence as Creator and Sustainer (from which nothing can be determined as to the *attitude* or purpose of the giver, other than that God is good), and God’s grace to the elect as Saviour (which has to do with the favourable attitude of God in giving those good things and His purpose to bless His elect in Christ through them).

## Goodness

We understand God’s goodness in Scripture to denote *the infinite perfection of the being and attributes of God*. God is essential goodness in Himself, and in every attribute of His nature He is pure goodness in the fullest sense of the term. God is the only Good (Mark 10:18). As pure goodness God *does* only good: “Thou art good, and doest good” (Ps. 119:68). The nature of God, then, is *the* fountain head of pure goodness from whom flow streams of most pure goodness. God is essential goodness in all His holy will that proceeds from His nature, and all the actions which proceed from that holy will toward the creature.

Holy Scripture clearly teaches us that God’s decree of double-predestination is also pure goodness. Jehovah declares:

I will make all my *goodness* pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee, and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy (Exod. 33:19).

This passage demonstrates that the revelation of those particular perfections of God’s goodness called *grace and mercy* are *inextricably united to predestination*. The revelation of God’s goodness as “grace and mercy” is not, as Rev. Stebbins teaches, a “necessary act of God’s nature” toward all men. It is according to God’s sovereign will. The pure goodness of God revealed as grace and mercy is *particular*—for those whom “*I will.*” This truth is taken up and further explained and applied in Romans 9:18-24.

Rev. Stebbins, however, is content to define goodness as that “attribute of God by which He delights to deal bountifully and kindly with all His

creatures.”<sup>113</sup> Rev. Stebbins again draws his whole argument (that God “doing good” to men means He is “gracious”) out of his faulty premise of the “necessary principle of God’s nature” showing favour and mercy apart from His will.

Rev. Stebbins’ mistaken view, as we have already seen, cannot stand before the truth that all God’s works *ad extra* (outside the being of God toward the creature) are *free* acts of God’s will. No revelation of God’s goodness to the creature is a *necessary* act. Rev. Stebbins has his answer ready: “God is free,” he declares, “to manifest His goodness however and whenever He will.”<sup>114</sup> But what nonsense is this? Of course God is free. God is *God!* But, we must ask, *in what does God’s freedom consist?* His freedom consists in His perfect freedom and ability to do all His holy will. Rev. Stebbins’ “principle of active delight,” however, *denies* that God is free to bestow, or withhold grace and mercy as He pleases.

There are several considerations that when taken together show Rev. Stebbins’ teaching regarding God’s goodness (common grace and mercy) to be erroneous.

In the first place, God is free only to act in the expression of His goodness *according to His good pleasure—His decree*, never in flat contradiction to it. Rev. Stebbins, however, has God’s nature actively being gracious and merciful apart from, and in flat contradiction to, His own will of good pleasure established in the decree. Action apart from will is not freedom; it is chaos.

In the second place, Rev. Stebbins’ teaching actually refuses to allow God to act freely. He insists that God acts from a “necessary principle” of His nature. This is to say, that God, when He reveals His goodness, *must* be gracious to sinners. This we deny. John Owen, arguing against the Arminians,<sup>115</sup> demolished Rev. Stebbins’ argument, when he declared:

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<sup>113</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 56.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56. Here, we must understand that this “free expression” is free in the sense that it is not controlled by God’s eternal decree of predestination.

<sup>115</sup> There is a striking similarity between the arguments of the Arminians and Stebbins on this point. They argue, says Owen, that:

God considering all mankind as fallen from that grace and favour in Adam wherein they were created ... yet God by His infinite goodness was inclined to desire the happiness of them, all and every one, that they might be delivered from misery, and be brought unto Himself,

That God hath any *natural or necessary* inclination, by His goodness, or any other property, to do good to us, or any of His creatures, we do *deny*. Everything that concerns us is an act of His free will and good pleasure, and not a natural, necessary act of His Deity.<sup>116</sup>

Owen has drawn the lines here according to biblical truth and Reformed orthodoxy. Nothing that God does outside of His own being and essence is “necessary” to Him, not even love and grace. Grace and mercy are the active expressions of God’s essential goodness outside Himself, not *necessarily* or universally, but *freely as willed* to be made known through Jesus Christ to the miserable creature fallen in sin. Grace and mercy, as *free* acts of God *ad extra*, proceed from His will as established immutably in the decree.<sup>117</sup> God’s immutable will of decree is to bestow grace and mercy on the elect alone, and by withholding grace and mercy to pass by the rest of mankind. This is the only will of God that Scripture knows. Therefore, there is no attitude or active outgoing of grace and mercy from God’s essential goodness toward the reprobate.<sup>118</sup>

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which inclination of His they call His universal love and antecedent will, whereby He would desirously have them all to be saved (*Op. cit.*, p. 227).

Could it be that the Arminians are consistent to follow their reasoning through to a conditional will in God, while Stebbins (desiring to maintain the Reformed truth of predestination) halts half-way by not attributing to God a conditional will?

<sup>116</sup> John Owen, *Works*, vol. X, p. 227.

<sup>117</sup> God, *ad infra* (within Himself apart from the creature), stands in need of no such necessary expression of grace and mercy to the creature, for He knows within Himself perfect blessedness and rectitude regardless of the creature. That He is gracious and merciful *ad extra* (outside Himself to the creature) is not a *necessary* act of will but a *free* act of His will. That free act of will becomes “necessary” only in His *decree*, because then it partakes of God’s immutability and simplicity (see *WCF*, 2:2). This is what Luther, when arguing against Erasmus, called the “necessity of immutability.” Erasmus also refused to accept the determinative nature of God’s will.

<sup>118</sup> We understand the *Westminster Confession* to teach as follows:

God’s Goodness >>> Decree of Election	>>> Grace and Mercy in Christ ( <i>Providence over all</i> ) >>> Good to all <i>as Creator</i>
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Stebbins’ position on the other hand is this:

In the third place, God’s essential goodness determines that all He wills to do outside Himself is necessarily good. However, whilst *grace and mercy* are themselves the free manifestations of goodness toward the elect, it does not follow that God’s goodness is also *grace and mercy to the reprobate*. Grace and mercy have to do with the *attitude and purpose* of God, neither of which are favourable to the reprobate. God’s essential goodness is also manifest in holiness, righteousness, justice, judgment and damnation. These manifestations of goodness over against sinners from whom God freely chooses to withhold mercy belong to the reprobate and reveal God’s attitude.

In the fourth place, we ask, does not Rev. Stebbins teach that God *must* (according to this “necessary principle” of nature) love and favour the reprobate for a time and then *change* to hating him eternally? He answers, it is not inconsistent for God to love the reprobate and hate the elect.<sup>119</sup> In other words God loves and hates all men at one time or another; indeed God hates and loves every sinner at some time or another! The “well meant” offer necessitates this confusion and changeability. God must love and desire to save the reprobate or the “well-meant” offer has no basis. But, we ask, are not love and hate opposite, mutually exclusive motions of the affections of the will of the one immutable God? Equally startling, is the assertion that God “hates” one whom He loved with an eternal love in Christ. Unbelievably, God, for a time prior to conversion, hates the one whom He so loved from all eternity that He sent His only begotten Son to die on the cross and shed His precious blood for his sins! What could be more contrary to the Scripture?

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<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <span>God’s Essential Goodness</span> <span>&gt;&gt;&gt; Grace and mercy to all direct from God’s nature</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-top: 5px;"> <span></span> <span>&gt;&gt;&gt; Grace and mercy to elect according to election</span> </div>
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It can be seen from this illustration of both positions that Stebbins posits *two active and contradictory wills within the one being of God*—one governed by God’s eternal decree, the other free-wheeling toward all men without and apart from the decree.

<sup>119</sup> God loves the reprobate out of His “necessary principle of nature” and hates the elect judicially for their sins prior to conversion, again out of a “necessary principle of His nature.” This confusion, which requires a change of the unchangeable God’s attitude toward the creature, is possible only if the motions of God’s will toward the creature are considered apart from the determinative nature of the decree. God then becomes a “reacting” God—not the sovereign *acting* God. What is more, both the decree of election and the atonement of Christ must be removed before God can hate the elect, and both the decree of reprobation and righteous judgment must be removed from God if He is to love the reprobate. Stebbins proceeds on the basis of “common love and grace” which has no basis except in a dual contradictory will within the being of God.

God has “loved with an everlasting love” so wondrous that even “while we were yet in our sins, Christ died for us.”<sup>120</sup> Away with such confusion.

The error of Rev. Stebbins’ teaching that God loves and hates the same man, at the same time, for a time, is, firstly, that he confuses “judicial wrath” with “sovereign hatred.”<sup>121</sup> Because Rev. Stebbins refuses to acknowledge that a *real* difference exists between God’s attitude toward the elect and the reprobate from all eternity, and not only *after* conversion, he confuses *liability to condemnation* with *condemnation* itself. He fails to distinguish between *what the elect sinner is and deserves in himself* and God’s attitude toward that sinner *as elect in Christ*. Secondly, God *never* “hates” the elect and God *never* “loves” the reprobate. Romans 9:13 is decisive: “As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”—and this while “being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth” (Rom. 9:11). This passage speaks of the sovereign, eternal and unchanging attitude of God toward the elect and the reprobate.<sup>122</sup> As Francis Turretin rightly says:

Love necessarily includes the purpose of having mercy upon and saving Jacob; the hatred denies it and marks the purpose of reprobation by which he was freely passed over and excluded from salvation.<sup>123</sup>

God’s eternal love for the elect in Christ is revealed in that

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<sup>120</sup> Jer. 31:3; Rom. 5:8; I John 4:10.

<sup>121</sup> The reader ought to turn to Calvin’s *Institutes*, 2:17:2-3, for a clear explanation of this point.

<sup>122</sup> Reprobation is always “*to*” sin, not “*on account of*” sin. The latter makes God’s decree of election “conditional” upon the will and works of man and is to be rejected by Reformed believers. It is also true that God’s hatred of the reprobate is a *judicial* hatred arising from offended righteousness, but this makes not a whit of difference to God’s sovereignty in reprobation. The reprobate is sovereignly left in sin and given over to sin from eternity. Not so the elect. Let any who would set an infralapsarian view point over against the truth of sovereign reprobation read the strong infralapsarian Francis Turretin on election and reprobation, (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. I, pp. 329-395).

<sup>123</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 400. Turretin allows for a “general love and common providence by which He is borne to all his creatures” in varying degrees. But he denies that there are degrees effectively in God’s special and saving love. This “general love,” if it may be so called, must be viewed as that of God as creator in His good providence manifest toward the whole creation as we shall see.

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect; and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them.<sup>124</sup>

The application of Christ unto the elect sinner in time is itself the *manifestation* of God's eternal love. Justifying faith is not a *condition* which man must first fulfill before God can love, but a *gift* of God's love in Christ to guilty, damn-worthy sinners. "We love Him because He first loved us" (I John 4:19). According to Rev. Stebbins, the elect sinner is the object of "hatred" prior to conversion. This is impossible, for then none would ever be converted.

It is in this light that God's *forbearance* and *longsuffering* are to be considered. Both are aspects of God's perfection of patience. God's attribute of patience is, as it were, the life of providence whereby God stretches out time and unfolds His will in and as the history of creation. But God's goodness as manifest in patience and unfolded in providence is directed toward the realizing of two great ends, according to the decree of eternal predestination. *Longsuffering* is the positive aspect of God's providence. It is His power to hold back the immediate and ultimate blessing of His elect in Christ. *Forbearance* on the other hand is God's perfection of patience whereby He holds back or forebears immediately to punish the ungodly reprobate for their sins.

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<sup>124</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 11:4. John Owen's reply to Richard Baxter (who made faith a gospel *condition* required of man) is pertinent:

Whether absolution from the guilt of sin and obligation unto death, though not as terminated in the conscience for complete justification, do not proceed our actual believing; for what is that love of God which through Christ is effectual to bestow faith upon the unbelieving? And how can so great love ... producing the most distinguished mercies, consist with any such act of God's will as at the same instant should bind that person under the guilt of sin?"

This does not imply an "eternal justification" for it does not confuse the decree with the means. Nor does it make justification an eternal act wholly immanent within the eternal mind of God, but recognizes that it is an act that terminates upon the elect in time. Scripture and the *Westminster Confession* teach that sovereign, eternal love in Christ stands behind the wonder of justification.

God is longsuffering toward His elect because He earnestly desires their repentance and salvation, “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”<sup>125</sup> He therefore leads them by His Word outwardly and by His Spirit inwardly and irresistibly to repentance.<sup>126</sup> When God forbears to punish the reprobate wicked He delays their final judgment and certain destruction, *for the sake of His elect*. In this stretching out of providence, as God sees fit, many are confronted by Christ and salvation through the gospel and called to faith and repentance. But this confrontation with the truth, except God’s saving grace intervene, is itself the cause of further rebellion and hatred of the God who exposes their sin.<sup>127</sup> This is God’s will and serves His purpose to the praise of His glorious justice. Though the reprobate lives *in the sphere* of God’s goodness, and may have an *outward acquaintance* with God’s grace, this cannot be construed to mean that God has an attitude of favour toward them.

### **Good Things: Not Necessarily Grace**

Two misunderstandings must be cleared out of the way before we proceed. Firstly, the fact that God’s love, grace and mercy are for *the elect alone* is in perfect harmony with the truth that God’s goodness is over all His works and creatures. God’s overflowing goodness in all His works receives great emphasis in Holy Scripture right along with sovereign particular grace. Both must, therefore, receive proper emphasis in the proclamation of the truth by the church.<sup>128</sup> Second, an emphatic denial of “common” grace is in no wise a minimizing of the infinite goodness of Jehovah God. Rather, it is the error of “common” grace that degrades the glory of divine goodness by presenting God’s amazing grace as “common” and so making it something less than what it is—sovereign irresistible grace in Jesus Christ.

There is no disagreement that God’s good gifts are given to the elect as blessings and grace. The question that must be addressed is this: Are God’s good gifts grace to the *reprobate*? Rev. Stebbins affirms this. We deny it.

We point out in the first place, that by making God’s grace common, Rev. Stebbins has confused God’s *goodness* with God’s *grace*. As was pointed out

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<sup>125</sup> II Pet. 3:9.

<sup>126</sup> I Tim. 1:16.

<sup>127</sup> This is the teaching of Calvin in the first five chapters of his *Institutes*, especially 5:6-7.

<sup>128</sup> Ps. 119:68; 145:9.



previously, God's grace as an attribute, or infinite perfection of God's nature flows from His goodness, but it does not follow that God must, therefore, be gracious to all to whom His goodness is shown. God's goodness is also holiness, righteousness, wrath, hatred and just judgment upon sin. God is good and does good *even while He inflicts the most grievous torments upon the sinner in the fires of hell*. Obviously, therefore, God can be perfectly good without maintaining any attitude of favour to the creature to whom He is good.

In the second place, Rev. Stebbins is guilty of confusing God's good *providence* toward the non-elect with participation in the *blessings of the covenant of grace*.

All that is contained in the administration and dispensation of the covenant of grace is a purchase of the death of Christ, and God's providence within that covenant is both temporal, concerning all men, and spiritual in respect to the separation of the elect from the reprobate. We acknowledge that God in His providence, in which He governs all His creatures and all their actions, bestows temporal blessings (good gifts, CJC) on all men, restrains evil in the world and promotes good.<sup>129</sup>

This statement highlights the important biblical distinction between God's rule of providence and power as *Creator* on the one hand, and God's rule of grace as *Saviour* on the other.<sup>130</sup> This distinction gives the framework within which we must sharply distinguish *universal goodness* from *particular grace*. The rule of God as *Creator*, on the one hand, reveals His goodness in all things temporal; the rule of God as *Saviour*, on the other hand, reveals His love and grace toward the elect by ordering and disposing all things to their ultimate and eternal blessedness. As sovereign *Creator*, God's rule of power knows no limits and embraces all created reality, good and evil,<sup>131</sup> as

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<sup>129</sup> E.P.C., *Universalism and the Reformed Churches*, p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> The biblical basis for this distinction is implicit throughout Scripture but is found in the following: Psalms 2 & 73, Romans 8:19-21, 9:17, Ephesians 1:18-23 (especially v. 22), I Cor. 15:22-28, Hebrews 2:8-11, Revelation 6:9-11, Colossians 1:14-21, etc. For a further discussion of this distinction, see William Symington, *Messiah the Prince* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Water Revival Books), pp. 71-108, and Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, pp. 250ff.

<sup>131</sup> Rom. 8:38-39.

one organic whole from the lowest form of life, to the highest, men,<sup>132</sup> and angels.<sup>133</sup> As *Saviour*, on the other hand, God's rule of grace encompasses all that, and *only* that, which is redeemed in the blood of Christ.<sup>134</sup> These two may be distinguished but not separated, for both are the act of God and are governed by God's one decree and purpose in Christ. Thus, "God hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."<sup>135</sup> The *Westminster Confession* makes this distinction when it says: "As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so after a most special manner, it taketh care of His own church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof."<sup>136</sup> God takes the "all things" in which the reprobate share, and disposes them to the good of His elect—the church. Goodness is shown to all, but grace through that goodness belongs to the elect alone.

God's grace must be viewed covenantally. God's providence as *Creator and Judge* is administered according to the covenant of *works*. Under this first covenant there is and can be no grace for the sinful creature, only the curse of the law: "There is none righteous, no not one ... The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 3:10; 6:23a). God's reign of grace as *Saviour*, however, is administered under the terms of the covenant of *grace*. This covenant, made with Christ and His elect in Him, declares: "... but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23b). Under the terms of this covenant there is nothing but free, sovereign and saving grace for the elect in the blood of Christ. Christ, you see, has fulfilled all righteousness under the law of God (the covenant of works) that His people might not perish but have everlasting life.

This means that the non-elect can and do know of the rule of God as Saviour in His grace, as God sends the gospel throughout this world in His providence, but they never know it in its transforming power. They know of

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<sup>132</sup> Gen. 1:27-28; Ps. 8.

<sup>133</sup> Phil. 2:10.

<sup>134</sup> To confuse these two is to fall into some form of universalism, as does John Murray when he says: "All the good showered on this world, dispensed by Christ in the exercise of His exalted lordship, is related to the death of Christ and accrues to man in one way or another from the death of Christ." In other words "Christ for all men" in some sense! Scripture and the confessions however repudiate the notion that Christ's blood was shed in any way for all. This universalizing of Christ's benefits is a logical consequence of the "well-meant" offer and of common grace. Mistaken as this notion is, at least Professor Murray was consistent to trace "grace" for the reprobate back to the only source of grace to sinners—Christ's death.

<sup>135</sup> Eph. 1:22-23.

<sup>136</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 5:7.

it outwardly as they see around them all God's goodness, come into outward contact with the means of grace, and see God's grace at work through His word and Spirit in effectually calling and transforming the elect into the image of Christ. However, they never know that rule of grace inwardly and savingly in the heart.<sup>137</sup>

This fact in no way minimizes the reality of God's goodness to all creatures. God as *Creator*, in His rule of providence, loves and is good to His own creation as the good work of His own hands. Adam's sin and the subsequent curse did not alter God's one purpose with His own creation.<sup>138</sup> Rather, sin serves God's purpose, for it is through the way of sin and redemption that God wills to raise His earthy creation to heavenly splendour.<sup>139</sup> The creation, be it ever so marred by sin, is to be renewed and ushered in as the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>140</sup> It is this creation upon which God showers His goodness. It is with this creation that all men, elect and reprobate, are federally and organically connected.<sup>141</sup> As Creator, God deals in pure goodness with each creature according to its form, action, and quality. God's goodness is, therefore, revealed variously toward men as rational, moral creatures, the animal world and the inanimate creation. In every case God works in the way best suited to display His goodness and glorify His great name<sup>142</sup> by bestowing those gifts that, as coming from God the fountain of all good, and being good in themselves give existence,<sup>143</sup> and preserve life.<sup>144</sup> God's goodness over-arches and warms His creation as the sun at noon day.<sup>145</sup>

God's grace as *Saviour* in and through these good things is another matter. It is when the good things God bestows in His providence as *Creator and Sustainer* are taken up and applied by Him as *Saviour* that they become

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<sup>137</sup> I Cor. 2:14.

<sup>138</sup> Gen. 3:15, 17.

<sup>139</sup> Compare Colossians 1:20, I Corinthians 15:49 and Romans 8:21.

<sup>140</sup> II Pet. 3:12-13.

<sup>141</sup> Gen. 2:7; 3:17-20; Rom. 5.

<sup>142</sup> Acts 14:17: "Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he *did good* and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

<sup>143</sup> Acts 17:25: "... seeing He *giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.*" This natural life is principally different from the spiritual life given in grace by Christ through His word and Spirit (II Cor. 3:6).

<sup>144</sup> Ps. 104:27-30.

<sup>145</sup> However, this does not imply an attitude of grace in God to all, but, as Francis Turretin rightly says, "The same sun that melts the wax also hardens the clay." The elect are softened; the reprobate are hardened.

grace, and bear the favour of God in their wings. The good thing was not in itself grace, nor was it a spiritual blessing. That blessing has to do with God's purpose as *Saviour* with that thing. As *Saviour*, God's goodness goes forth powerfully and efficaciously in love, grace and mercy to His elect who are scattered throughout the earth and organically connected to creation and mankind. The same things (that are good in themselves yet stumble the reprobate) are sent as true blessings upon *the elect*. The rain and the sunshine, the seed time and harvest, civil government, and all creation support their physical existence, so that God's saving purpose might be realized. In short, the providential dealings of God in His power so govern all things that His church is born, sustained in life, and brought to glory.

This distinction between goodness and grace stands back of such passages as Matthew 5:44-48 and Luke 6:35-36. In these passages God's redeemed and regenerated elect are commanded to "do good" and show mercy and kindness to all men in order that we may be perfect as is God our Father. The verses direct attention to God's ultimate perfection, His overflowing goodness. The point is that God, according to His perfection of goodness, always does good—never evil; so must we! The striking nature of God's goodness is that God is good to all without exception and regardless of their nature or attitude toward Himself. This is the pattern for our love. This universal goodness of God showered upon all men is the pattern for our conduct toward our fellow man. We must love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, etc. (Matt. 5:44). Only in this way do we, as children, reflect the image of our Father in heaven. God loved us as His elect even while we hated Him. How could we then do any less toward our fellow man, any one of whom could be God's elect? Thus, the command is, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."<sup>146</sup>

We may not assume, however, that the rule for God's goodness and the rule for man's love are identical. God as the sovereign Lord of all, necessarily does good to all, but always in harmony with His own perfection, and freely according to His own good pleasure. We however, as creatures redeemed into the service of Christ, are given God's law (the preceptive will) as the rule for our perfection. This law requires that we love our fellow man. God's revealed will must govern all our actions toward our fellow man. Obedience to the second table of the law, as summarized in loving our neighbor as ourselves, is the God-ordained way believers must fulfill their calling as children of God.

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<sup>146</sup> Matt. 5:48.

This calling is universal, is to be shown in a disinterested love in fulfillment of God's law and has God's universal goodness as its pattern.

We remind ourselves, however, that the fact that God commands *us* to love all men, does *not* mean, nor may we legitimately conclude from it, that *God* must love all men. As we have seen, we may not argue back from man's duty revealed in the precept to God's purpose and attitude of grace. What we can conclude from these verses, however, is that God's perfection of goodness according to which He does nothing but good, even to the unthankful sinner, must be the pattern for all our dealings with our neighbour, if we are to reflect the perfection of our heavenly Father.

### **The Testimony of History**

The particularity of God's goodness as manifest in grace and mercy is the teaching of historic Presbyterianism.

John Owen writes:

Now, this kindness and mercy of God is *generally and loosely* called mercy; but, in fact, quite wrongly so when it is coupled with an assumed intention behind the act which is good in itself. Goodness is a quality of God, but to be "merciful" indicates a specific purpose of mercy in a specific situation. It is therefore, incorrect to translate, as in Psalm 145:9, 15-16, that God is "merciful" not only to men but to His whole creation; yea, to sheep and oxen and beasts of the field. These all feel the benefits of God's general goodness in His providential upholding of His creation, but it is quite incorrect to argue from the fact of God's kindness, manifesting and displaying itself in a vast number of earthly and temporal blessings, that the recipients of these benefits might improve them to arrive as a real and true, and saving repentance ... Considering that *true* mercy—published and revealed from the bosom of the Father by Christ—is the fount of all saving faith and repentance, we can distinguish this from all *loose and*

*mistaken* concepts of “mercy” displayed by the general work of God in providence; and, having done so, we gladly let the point drop, since we here have nothing to prove but the one great truth of mercy *only in and through Christ*.<sup>147</sup>

William Symington, explaining how Christ rules universally in power but is in no way gracious to all, rightly says:

It is not irrelevant to advert to the distinction betwixt things viewed simply in themselves, and viewed as blessed by God. The things themselves may be enjoyed when the blessing of heaven is withheld.

Symington, applying the distinction between God’s *goodness* in the rule of power and His *blessing* known only in His rule of grace, has a Reformed eye on the one purpose of God in Christ. He goes on to explain:

The things viewed in themselves, flow, we admit, from the natural *goodness* of God, and so may be participated in by more than the saints; yet, viewed as *blessed by God*, that is, as real blessings, they are to be regarded as flowing from the blood of Christ, by which they are secured, redeemed, and sanctified for the use of His own people.<sup>148</sup>

Symington makes no uncertain sound here. There is no blurring of the lines between providence and grace. David Dickson agrees with Symington and says:

God giveth the wicked and violent persecutor to have seeming prosperity, while the godly are in trouble; yet that is no act of love to them: for the wicked and him that loveth violence, His soul hateth. All the seeming advantages which the wicked have in their own prosperity, are but means of hardening them in their

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<sup>147</sup> John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994), p. 74, emphasis added.

<sup>148</sup> Symington, *Messiah the Prince*, p. 105.

ill course, and holding them fast in the bonds of their own iniquities, till God execute judgment on them.<sup>149</sup>

Dickson is not confusing the “wicked” and the reprobate here. He is simply stating the clear teaching of Scripture. He sees clearly that not all the wicked are reprobate but all reprobate are wicked, and, therefore, he describes them according to their character. He is dealing with God’s attitude and purpose in the giving of “good” gifts. God has no gracious purpose in good gifts to the wicked reprobate. Again he says:

Whence learn, to the wicked—God for His own holy ends useth to give health of body, long life, little sickness, and a quiet death ... yet God doth not love them, nor approve any whit more of them for this.<sup>150</sup>

These statements echo the clear and unequivocal teaching of Scripture. God’s love and gracious attitude are not manifest toward the reprobate in the giving of good things.

James Durham, Dickson’s co-author of *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, was in full agreement and excluded the idea that “common grace” was purchased by Christ by arguing that “it cannot be said that Christ intended any of the things purchased by His death as advantageous to the reprobate.”<sup>151</sup>

Samuel Rutherford, the great Scottish divine and commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, also denied an attitude of grace and love of God toward the reprobate. He was not ashamed to speak of “God’s hatred of the reprobate and love and peace on the elect,” and referred to God’s love as “simple not contradictory.”<sup>152</sup> God, in Rutherford’s opinion, cannot love and hate the one person and does not have an attitude of love and grace toward the reprobate. These men represent Presbyterian and Calvinistic truth prior to compromising principles.

With the judgment of these eminent divines we are in full agreement.<sup>153</sup> There is no grace in things apart from the blessing of God in Christ. And the

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<sup>149</sup> David Dickson, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Banner of Truth Trust), p. 51 (on Psalm 11:5).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446 (on Psalm 73:4-10).

<sup>151</sup> James Durham, *Commentary on Revelation* (Amsterdam: 1660), p. 310.

<sup>152</sup> Rutherford, *Trial and Triumph of Faith* (Edinburgh, 1845), pp. 348-350.

<sup>153</sup> Some may also have spoken of a “common grace” but when they did, the context shows that they were referring to God’s goodness in all the works of His providence as set out above.

reprobate are strangers to that blessing. Things, be they ever so good and “intrinsically useful” as indeed they must be as flowing from the God of all goodness, are not indicative of any favourable attitude or grace of God.

This leads to the next step in Rev. Stebbins’ argument. Namely, that God is actively pursuing the salvation of the reprobate through the means of common grace and the “well meant” offer of the gospel.



## ***Chapter 5***

### **Does God “Well-Meaningly” Offer Christ to All Men?**

Again it must be pointed out that we do not question God’s gracious *intent* in the preaching of the gospel. God certainly *intends* it to be the means unto the salvation of sinners. The question is, however, *What is God’s intent in the “well-meant” offer to the “reprobate?”*

According to Rev. Stebbins, God offers Christ to all because He is pursuing their salvation. Rev. Stebbins joins God’s “delight that all should be saved” to a “pursuing with salvation” by the “common” grace of the gospel. God delights to save the reprobate; God pursues him with grace by offering him Christ and salvation. Where is Rev. Stebbins leading us? Who cannot see that this is the road of universal grace that leads right into the error of Arminianism?

## God Pursuing the Non-elect with Grace

We should notice the tradition in which Rev. Stebbins' position stands. He stands in the line of the "Marrow" men<sup>154</sup> and of the modern-modified Calvinism of Murray and Stonehouse.

There is, in our judgment, no actual difference between the views of Rev. Stebbins and those of Profs Murray and Stonehouse. Rev. Stebbins does, however, attempt to distance himself from the obvious weakness of their view by substituting the word "delight" in place of "desire." In so doing he wants to escape the charge of positing two contradictory wills within God's nature. He fails to extricate himself from the professors' error by this sleight of hand. The words might differ but the meaning is the same.

Profs Murray and Stonehouse, were well aware of the words "desire" and "delight" but they saw no difference in meaning when applied to the concept of the "well-meant" offer. They understood God's delight to have volitional force and quality and therefore wrote:

... this [preceptive] will of God to repentance and salvation, is universalized and reveals to us, therefore, that there is in God a benevolent loving-kindness towards the repentance and salvation of even those whom He has not decreed to save.<sup>155</sup>

Notice that the professors, like Rev. Stebbins are concerned with God's attitude and will toward the reprobate. Thus far they have outlined Rev. Stebbins' exact position. But the professors continue: "This pleasure, will, desire is expressed in the universal call to repentance." Here they indicate

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<sup>154</sup> The "Marrow men" were a number of Presbyterian Divines in the early 1700s who embraced the views of one Thomas Fisher as set forth in the book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991). Fisher, and the "Marrow" men after him, taught that the preacher was to tell the sinner that "the Father hath made a deed of gift and grant unto all mankind" (p. 126), "Christ has taken upon Him the sins of all men" (p. 102), "Whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, He did for you" (p. 118), "Go and tell every man without exception that here is good news for him, Christ is dead for him" (p. 127). In this way Christ's atonement was made broad enough to support a conditional offer to all men. The Scottish church in 1720-1722 condemned the doctrine of the book of the "Marrow" on the grounds that it was a compromise and denial of the truth of Christ's limited atonement and therefore "contrary to Scripture and the Confession of Faith."

<sup>155</sup> Murray and Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (1948), p. 27.

that they believe that the concepts “pleasure” and “desire” express the one thought. They are correct—a *conditional will* to the salvation of the reprobate is the basis of a “well-meant” offer.

## **An Active Pursuit**

Try as he may, by weakening the force of the verb “to will,” Rev. Stebbins’ own system of theology determines that “pleasure or delight” cannot be separated from “desire or will.” What is so clearly implied is made explicit when Rev. Stebbins actually links God’s “delight that all be saved” to God pursuing the communication of His nature with them and pursuing their salvation.<sup>156</sup> Let it be clearly understood that in Rev. Stebbins’ theology delight and pursuit are related as willing and acting.<sup>157</sup> God *delights* to save the reprobate, therefore He *pursues* him with salvation in the “well-meant” offer.

What exactly does it mean for God to “pursue man’s salvation?” Rev. Stebbins uses “the term *pursue* in preference to *seek* because the latter,” he thinks, “implies a determination to see an end accomplished ... God pursues by providing ... means that are intrinsically useful for accomplishing that end.”<sup>158</sup>

There are at least two things that are involved in this pursuit as described by Rev. Stebbins. First, there is an active will of God whereby He determines to pursue the salvation of all. Volition cannot be removed from pursuit which is an action directed toward the creature *ad extra*. This means that God’s pursuit has to do with the living will of God, not the precept. The precept is merely the intrinsically useful means used by God as He pursues. Obviously God cannot pursue through means unless it is His living *will* to do so.

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<sup>156</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 67.

<sup>157</sup> Here we begin to see the implications of Rev. Stebbins’ treatment of the nature of God and the preceptive will. The structure of hypothetical universalism is erected on that faulty basis. God is delighting in and pursuing a universal salvation? Is this Reformed theology?

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67. Again we emphasize that this is a distinction without a difference. Both “seek” and “pursue” are actions having volitional quality and presupposing a purpose to be achieved by that action. That purpose could be an absolute or conditional purpose to save. Neither can be applied to God’s dealings with the reprobate. God has no absolute purpose to save all—that is a total denial of reprobation. God has no conditional purpose to save all—that requires an eternally conditional decree and is blatant Arminianism. So what does Stebbins believe God pursues here?

Second, unavoidably, the purpose of God in this “pursuit” must be reckoned with.

## The End Pursued

If God “pursues” but does not “seek,” what then is “the end” which God pursues? Rev. Stebbins, remember, is describing a pursuit which evidently is designed *not* to succeed, for he does not wish to imply that God’s pursuing has a *saving* end in view.<sup>159</sup> Rev. Stebbins insists, however, that God pursues the salvation of the reprobate.<sup>160</sup> Yet, he also insists that God does not *will* this end to be realized. What we are really talking about here, is an *hypothetical* pursuit. It is *as if* God is pursuing salvation, but when you look closely, it turns out to have been an illusion.

Seeing Rev. Stebbins is unable to decide if God’s pursuit of universal salvation really aims at anything concrete, we suggest that there can be only four possibilities. First, it could be that God determines to pursue an end without attaining it, in which case it is a *purposeless* action performed by God in which God *aimlessly* pursues ... *nothing!* Such “pursuit” cannot be attributed to the all wise and sovereign God. Nor can it be argued that God is free to act without purpose if He so pleases. God’s will is His eternal purpose. If God wills to pursue the salvation of all He does so for a purpose. Purposeless action cannot be attributed to Jehovah God.<sup>161</sup> Second, it could be a pursuit flowing from a *conditional decree* whereby God wills to pursue the salvation of all and save those who fulfill certain conditions. But in that case it is an Arminian error in flat contradiction of the Reformed creeds.<sup>162</sup> Thirdly, it could be a determination to pursue and achieve the salvation of all, in which case it is a Pelagian notion condemned by the Reformed creeds. Rev. Stebbins, however, wants to be neither Pelagian nor Arminian. He prefers to meld the first two possibilities into a third thing. Rev. Stebbins has God pursuing the salvation of the reprobate *conditionally*, determining beforehand to stop short and never achieve that salvation. There is a fourth possibility that was overlooked by Rev. Stebbins. That is, that God, through

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>161</sup> Isaiah 46:10.

<sup>162</sup> See the argument of the Remonstrants regarding the first article dealing with predestination (5-6), together with their arguments concerning “The grace of God and conversion of man” (8-10), for a clear statement of the Arminian position. De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), p. 223.

the means of grace, actually pursues and realizes His saving purpose toward His elect,<sup>163</sup> and through the same means He pursues and realizes His purpose in respect to the reprobate—namely, their hardening and just condemnation. After all is said and done, what God aims at He achieves, in spite of the confusion created by Rev. Stebbins’ “well-meant” offer.

God’s sovereign purpose for the preaching of the gospel is revealed clearly enough in Scripture. Think of Isaiah’s solemn commission:

Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed ... But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return ... to the holy seed shall be the substance thereof (Isa. 6:10, 13).

Or, the words of the apostle Paul:

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of His knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? (II Cor. 2:14-16).

What could be clearer than the testimony of the Spirit in II Corinthians 2:14-16? The faithful, full and free “offer” of the gospel is designed by God Himself to be “a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, *and* in them that perish: To the one it is the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.” This passage is not designed to describe the reaction to the truth of the gospel by the sinful heart,<sup>164</sup> but to explain how the

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<sup>163</sup> Eph. 1:3-12, Rom. 8:28-39, Deut. 7:6-8.

<sup>164</sup> John 3:19-20: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.” The way such hatred for Christ presented in the offer is overcome is by the irresistible grace of God.

sovereign purpose of God is realized through the means of the preaching. This text is cited as the biblical basis for the following statement of the *Westminster Confession* concerning divine Providence:

As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts ... whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.<sup>165</sup>

We confess on the basis of Scripture that God realizes His sovereign purpose toward the reprobate *through the means of preaching*. God sovereignly hardens the reprobate *through* the very gospel which sets forth Christ Jesus, so leaving them without excuse to the praise of His glorious justice.

All Rev. Stebbins has succeeded in doing with this doctrine of “aimless pursuit” is to inject enough universalism into the Reformed faith to allow the preacher to make a “well-meant” offer of Christ for all as would the Arminian. The difference is, however, that Rev. Stebbins knows that God’s decree is decisive: the saving grace the perishing sinner needs is not common but particular, and that same word will ultimately be for the greater damnation of the wicked who go on in their sins.

### **The “Well-Meant” Offer as “Common” Grace**

Here the question is not whether the preaching of the gospel is intrinsically good, useful, and perfectly suited to God’s purpose of saving sinners. It is! Not only so, but it is the instrument of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of sinners. Nor is the question whether God clearly and wonderfully sets forth Christ Jesus and full and free salvation in Him in the proclamation of the gospel. He does! Not only so, but He applies that grace and that salvation irresistibly to the hearts of His elect, regenerating and effectually calling them unto Himself. The question is, rather, *Is the preaching “grace” for the*

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<sup>165</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 5:6.

*reprobate*? To this question Rev. Stebbins answers Yes! Scripture and the confessions we believe require us to answer, No!

### **No Grace in the Offer for the Reprobate**

To call the preaching “grace” to the reprobate when it is the very means through which God *hardens* the reprobate in sin and increases their guilt and condemnation is absurd.

Nor is it possible to argue, as does Rev. Stebbins, that hardening is not an act of God, but of the sinner who hardens *himself* by rejecting or resisting God’s grace. *God* hardens sinners’ hearts—even through His word.

And the LORD said unto Moses ... *I* will harden his heart that he shall not let the people go (Exod. 4:21).

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have *I* raised thee up that I might show My power in thee ... Therefore He hath mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will *He hardeneth*.<sup>166</sup>

*God’s* word hardened Pharaoh’s wicked heart as it does every wicked rebellious heart except grace intervene to change the heart and set the captive free. John Calvin is worthy of a hearing on this point:

God commands the ears of His people Israel to be stricken by, and filled with, the voice of His prophet. For what end? That their hearts might be touched? Nay; but *that they might be hardened!* That those who hear might repent? Nay; but *that, being already lost, they might doubly perish!* ... Hence, it is by no means absurd that the doctrine of the truth should, as commanded of God, be spread abroad; though He knows that, in multitudes, it will be without its saving effects.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Rom. 9:17-18.

<sup>167</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: RFPA), p. 173, emphasis added.

Pharaoh, wicked Israel, and an innumerable host of sinners have resisted and denied the truth as applied to their consciences by the word and common operations of the Spirit, but never, not once, has God's *grace* been successfully resisted. This is because God's grace is *irresistible*. Irresistible grace is axiomatic to Reformed theology and does not rely for its efficacy upon the spiritually dead sinner.<sup>168</sup>

The *Westminster Confession* delivers us from Rev. Stebbins' quandary when, as we have seen, it declares quite clearly that whilst God sends the "means of salvation" to all, He withholds His grace from all but the elect. The purpose of God (who stands always toward the reprobate as a righteous and offended judge) through the means of grace is

to blind and harden ... whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others.<sup>169</sup>

Therefore, the preaching of the gospel is not in itself "grace to the hearer." Rather, it is grace only to those elect who are the objects of God's love and for whom Christ died. All those who are "pursued by grace" are most certainly saved!<sup>170</sup>

### **The Insincerity of a "Well-Meant" Offer to All Men**

We must do what Rev. Stebbins steadfastly refuses to do: face the fact that there must be a *basis* provided which shows that God is sincere in His "well-meant" offer of Christ to the reprobate. Rev. Stebbins acknowledges that "this debate centers around the question of whether God offers salvation to every hearer of the gospel, and if so, how such an offer can be 'sincere' in the light of the particular atonement."<sup>171</sup> That a basis in the nature and extent of the atonement (and not Rev. Stebbins' "necessary principle of delight") is the *real* issue is evident from the fact that he wrote a book entitled *A Discussion of the General Offer of Salvation in Light of Particular Atonement*. The

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<sup>168</sup> Eph. 2:1-10.

<sup>169</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 5:6.

<sup>170</sup> John 6:37-40.

<sup>171</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 6.



precise question at issue is: How can God “well-meaningly” offer (i.e. *promise*) to give the reprobate what is not *provided for him*?

## A “Well-Meant” but Insincere Offer

For the “well-meant” offer to the reprobate to be sincere it must have a basis in *fact*, not mystery. That is, if Christ and salvation in His blood is conditionally *promised* to the reprobate, then the redemption purchased by Christ must be both *provided for*, and *available to*, the reprobate. If the redemption offered is not *provided*, then the “well-meant” offer *cannot* be sincere.

This being the case, we must ask: What basis in *fact* can Rev. Stebbins show for teaching that God makes a “well-meant” and *sincere* offer of Christ to the reprobate? What does he see as the *warrant* for God to make this kind of an offer? He fails to give one—which is hardly surprising for there is none to be found. Instead he flees to the paradox of his own making and from its shadow declares, with authority, that God’s basis for making a “well-meant” offer is “essentially mysterious.”<sup>172</sup> Rev. Stebbins, then, in order to avoid close scrutiny, declares that to require a non-contradictory basis for the offer is the height of impiety.<sup>173</sup> Then, he asserts that though his offer is shrouded by the mysterious paradox, “there are no evidences of insincerity.”<sup>174</sup> On the contrary, it appears to us that there are clear evidences of insincerity in the “well-meant” offer. Rev. Stebbins can show no basis in either God’s decree of election—His intention to give—nor can he show any basis in Christ’s substitutionary and limited atonement—the *content* of God’s offer and promise. Without a basis in the blood of Christ there can be no sincerity.

Rev. Stebbins’ “well-meant” offer may lay no claim to the legitimate argument that “a charge of insincerity on God’s part can only be sustained if it can be shown that someone has accepted God’s offer only to find it void.”<sup>175</sup> In reference to the “well-meant” offer this would mean that, although a general conditional promise is void, the void will never be discovered. This is cold comfort indeed. Rev. Stebbins has overlooked the fact that this

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>173</sup> We do not believe it is a sign of piety to cry “mystery!” when contradictions are evident in one’s theology, especially when the contradiction is of one’s own making.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

argument belongs to those of us, who, like John Owen, and William Cunningham, maintain sovereign particular grace. This argument is legitimate only when the outward call is accompanied by a particular promise to those who hear and obey. Then there is no insincerity and the promise will never be found to be void. However, for those who preach a general conditional promise to the reprobate, this valid argument is irrelevant.

Rev. Stebbins simply *cannot* provide a satisfactory answer to what he recognizes is *the* crucial point. He is hemmed in and thwarted by God's decree on the one hand, and by a limited atonement on the other. This failure shows that his whole elaborately constructed position is without basis. This fundamental flaw cannot be hidden behind some "mysterious paradox." The necessary contradiction is there. It *must* be faced.

### **Christ: God's Basis for a Sincere Biblical Offer**

We do not for a moment question the sincerity of God in the offer of the gospel when the "offer" is rightly understood. Rather, we insist that the "well-meant" offer Rev. Stebbins defends cannot be sincere, because it has no basis in the blood of Christ, apart from which there is no salvation *to* offer.

The sincerity of a "well-meant" offer to the reprobate not only relies upon the atonement of Christ, but more particularly upon the *extent* of that atonement. A divine warrant for the "well-meant" offer of Christ to all, therefore, requires that Rev. Stebbins prove from Scripture that the extent and nature of Christ's atonement answers exactly to the extent and nature of his "well-meant" offer. That is, the redemption purchased by Christ, in all its efficacy, *must* be shown to extend at least to every sinner who hears the "well-meant" offer. It will not do for Rev. Stebbins to appeal to the infinite sufficiency of Christ's atonement; the question has to do with the *efficiency* and intention of God in the atonement. The redemption provided in the substitutionary atonement of Christ is, after all, what Rev. Stebbins would have us believe God is sincerely offering all who hear the gospel. Full and free redemption purchased by Christ *for all who hear the gospel* is, therefore, the only basis that will support Rev. Stebbins "well-meant" offer.

Surely, then, it is no solution to say, as does Rev. Stebbins, that God's ground for the call of the gospel is "essentially mysterious."<sup>176</sup> Rev. Stebbins is either saying that the basis of the universal "well-meant" offer is a contradiction that faith believes, or, he sees there is no basis but refuses to acknowledge it. Either way this response is not to be accepted or allowed to slip quietly past, hidden in a cloud of rhetoric. Rev. Stebbins must show some basis in Christ's atonement for the *well-meant* offer.

In our judgment, professors Murray and Stonehouse were more consistent than Rev. Stebbins when they said:

The loving and benevolent will that is the source of that offer and that grounds its veracity and reality is the will to the possession of Christ and the enjoyment of the salvation that resides in him.<sup>177</sup>

Murray and Stonehouse, though mistaken in their theology, were undoubtedly correct on this score. The only ground that can be argued for a "well-meant" offer is a conditional will in God to the salvation of the reprobate. The fact that this contradicts the will of *decree* however, forces Rev. Stebbins to flee to the sanctuary of the "profound mystery."

### **The Insincerity of General Conditional Promises**

Rev. Stebbins says: "The gospel is a gracious offer of salvation to man if he will perform his duty."<sup>178</sup> This "offer" is a general conditional promise of Christ for all upon fulfillment of certain conditions.

The theology of the "well-meant" offer forces Rev. Stebbins to present faith as a pre-requisite which the sinner must provide in order to be saved. We reject this notion. It is one of the basic premises of Arminianism.

God does not promise salvation to all men contingent upon their fulfilling certain conditions. Such a general conditional promise of salvation is inherently insincere. It can be genuine and sincere only if it is first grounded in a *conditional decree* within the being of God. As we have seen, there is no

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>177</sup> Murray and Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel*.

<sup>178</sup> Stebbins, *Christ Freely Offered*, p. 95.

such conditional decree. The reader should note just how “natural” it is to slide from Rev. Stebbins’ “common” grace and “well-meant” offer to all, into the Arminian’s “universal” grace and conditional salvation. Surely, if one has eyes to see, this is exactly what is happening today in many Reformed churches.

Contrary to Rev. Stebbins’ usage, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the Reformed tradition uses the term *condition* to express the idea of the *necessary means* through which God works salvation. Faith as a condition was merited, is promised and bestowed by Christ through His Spirit upon “those whom God hath predestinated unto life and those only.”<sup>179</sup> The Synod of Dordt dealing with the Arminian heresy of general love and grace, also repudiated the whole idea of faith as a condition in the sense that Rev. Stebbins uses it:

... the Synod *rejects* the errors of those ... who teach that He chose out of all possible *conditions* ... the act of faith which from its very nature is undeserving ... as a *condition* of salvation ...

... the Synod rejects the errors of those ... who teach that faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness and perseverance are not *fruits* of the unchangeable election unto glory, but are *conditions* ...<sup>180</sup>

Faith, within the covenant of grace, is not a condition to be met by the sinner in order to be saved. It is a *benefit* which flows from Christ to the elect. It is not a pre-requisite, but a free *gift* bestowed upon the sinner as the divinely appointed *means* of union with Christ. It is in this light that faith is to be viewed in relation to the call and promise of the gospel. God seriously and sincerely calls all who hear the gospel to believe. He promises life to all who believe. He “promises to give the Spirit to all those who are ordained unto life to make them willing and able to believe.”<sup>181</sup> He sovereignly and graciously bestows the promised gift, effectually drawing the elect sinner to Christ as He is presented in the gospel. There is no condition within the covenant of grace that is not fulfilled in and bestowed by Christ as Mediator of the grace of that covenant.

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<sup>179</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 10:1.

<sup>180</sup> *Canons of Dordt*, Head I, Rejection of Errors Section, 3, 5.

<sup>181</sup> *Westminster Confession*, 7:3.

# ***Chapter 6***

## ***A Sincere Biblical Offer***

Though Rev. Stebbins' "well-meant" offer is inherently insincere, God is and can be seen to be completely sincere in every aspect of the *biblical* offer of the gospel.

Firstly, because He has provided a Mediator, Christ Jesus, and sets Him forth in absolute verity as the Saviour of sinners. In this God is absolutely sincere.

Secondly, because God seriously and solemnly commands all sinners as responsible, rational, moral creatures to repent and believe on Christ as the way unto life. If the sinner, who is responsible and accountable for his own actions, perishes because he will not believe, he may never blame the righteous and holy God.

The cause and guilt of this unbelief as well as of all other sins is no wise in God, but in man himself; whereas faith in Jesus Christ and salvation through Him is the free gift of God ...<sup>182</sup>

This being so it cannot be argued, as does Rev. Stebbins, that God must love, be gracious toward and pursue the reprobate with salvation before he can be

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<sup>182</sup> *Canons of Dordt*. I:5.

held accountable for his rejection of Christ. This is to deny God's sovereign right to command the whole duty of sinners. When God commands, the sinner is obligated to obey. Nothing could be clearer, nothing could be more sincere. Furthermore, God is under no obligation to bestow grace upon sinners to make them willing and able to obey. That He does so flows alone from His sovereign electing love in Christ.

Thirdly, God is absolutely sincere in His promise of life to all those who repent and believe. The *biblical* offer is the revelation of what God *really* wills in regard to the salvation of sinners. As Francis Turretin has pointed out,

When God's revealed will signifies that He wills the salvation of all believers and penitents it signifies that He wills that which He really wills and nothing is more true, nothing more sincere than such a declaration.<sup>183</sup>

God actively wills the salvation of all *penitent* sinners. His promise is personal and particular to sinners *who repent and believe*. It is never made generally to *all men if they will fulfill certain conditions*. The particular promise is sincere because it promises what God Himself intends to do and has already provided in Christ. It is always and forever fulfilled.

In the *biblical* offer, Christ promises "rest" to the "weary and heavy laden" sinner, "water and the bread of life" to the spiritually "thirsty and hungry," and salvation to the man who sees himself as sick and perishing in sin; never is God's promise made generally to those who are carnally secure and smugly self-righteous.<sup>184</sup> This is so, because it is through the means of the outward call of the gospel Christ effectually calls His sheep by name. They recognize their *spiritual* name and heed the Shepherd's call. The elect sinner hears himself described in his spiritual condition: a heavy laden, weary, hungry, thirsty, poor, guilty sinner. Ah!, cries the awakened sinner with wonder: He calls *me!* Jesus is calling *me!* I will flee to Him who so graciously calls me, the sinner, to rest and life. For I see Him now as the altogether lovely one, the Saviour of God's providing who is able to save sinners like me. This is the overwhelming tender kindness of God's love (Jer. 31:3). It melts the heart, overcomes all resistance and draws the elect sinner to Jesus Christ in

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<sup>183</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, p. 225.

<sup>184</sup> Matt. 11:28, Isa. 55:1, Mark 2:17.

wholehearted approbation of God's way of salvation in Him. The elect sinner sees Christ as the answer to his every need, his all sufficient and blessed Saviour. He is brought to cry:

O the manifold wisdom and unsearchable love of God, to prepare and furnish a Saviour so fully answering all the needs, all the distresses, all the fears and burdens of a poor sinner.<sup>185</sup>

Thankfully, the gospel offer is not trapped in Rev. Stebbins' quandary. It can answer positively, *and demonstrate* to the needy sinner that the *biblical, confessional* offer<sup>186</sup> is sincere. Christ Jesus the Mediator of the covenant of grace, and His particular, substitutionary atonement are the strong rock and high tower of the biblical offer.

God's offer, the *biblical* offer, is without contradiction or duplicity of any sort. God promises to *repentant, believing* sinners what He has eternally purposed to give—namely, the full and free salvation provided in the blood of Christ Jesus. The proclamation from beginning to end is a declaration of sovereign, particular, saving grace in Christ directed by God toward the gathering of the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

This offer is full and free and unfettered. The Reformed preacher will labour earnestly to impress upon every hearer through sound doctrine the perfect sufficiency, suitableness and graciousness of Jesus Christ to save to the uttermost all who flee unto Him by faith. He will call every sinner earnestly, patiently and with tears to repent and believe. He will proclaim without hesitation God's faithful promise that there is in Christ full and free salvation for *every sinner who comes*. But, he will not make unfounded assertions that go far *beyond* his clear warrant of Scripture. He is therefore, both unfettered

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<sup>185</sup> John Flavel, *The Method of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 122.

<sup>186</sup> This *confessional* offer reads thus:

[God] freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator and life and salvation by Him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all His elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which He hath appointed them to salvation (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, 32).

in his preaching, *and* free from the insincerity that is inherent in Rev. Stebbins' "well-meant" offer.

## **Rejection of the "Well-Meant" Offer Not Hyper-Calvinism**

Rev. Stebbins infers that any who dare to deny his conception of a "well-meant" offer are thereby manifest as "hyper-Calvinist." He thinks that to deny the "well-meant" offer is to deny the confessional "free" offer. In this he is seriously mistaken. An hyper-Calvinist is one who believes the gospel should only be offered to those who are already regenerated and convinced of sin. The hyper-Calvinist confession expresses it this way:

We deny duty faith and duty repentance--these terms signify that it is every man's duty spiritually and savingly to repent and believe ... We deny also that there is any capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever. So that we reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in or turn to God ... While we believe that the gospel is to be preached in or proclaimed to all the world, as in Mark 16:14, we deny offers of grace; that is to say, that the gospel is to be offered indiscriminately to all.<sup>187</sup>

Thus, the hyper-Calvinist limits those to whom the gospel may be offered and will not call all men without distinction to faith and repentance. We utterly reject this error which would choke off the good news of the gospel, the power of God unto salvation, before it can be spoken.

We take up our position between the hyper-Calvinist on the right hand and the hypothetical universalism of Stebbins on the left. We insist that the gospel *must* be preached, and preached fully, freely, and earnestly calling all men, without distinction, to faith and repentance as the God-ordained way unto life in Jesus Christ.

Rev. Stebbins throws a wide and loose loop when he seeks to portray our denial of the "well-meant" offer as hyper-Calvinism. He must throw his loop over the large and venerable company with whom we stand.

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<sup>187</sup> *Articles of Faith of the Gospel Standard Aid and Poor Relief Societies.*



John Knox is among our number:

True it is that Isaiah the prophet and Christ Jesus Himself with His apostles do call on all to come to repentance; but that generally is restrained by their own words; to those that thirst, that hunger, that mourn, that are laden with sin as before we have taught.<sup>188</sup>

John Owen is prominent also:

Multitudes of these invitations and calls are recorded in the Scripture, and they are all of them filled up with those blessed encouragements which divine wisdom knows to be suited to lost, *convinced* sinners, in their present state and condition.<sup>189</sup>

Samuel Rutherford is also included:

It is most untrue that Christ belongeth to sinners as sinners for then Christ should belong to all unbelievers, how obstinate soever, even to those that sin against the Holy Ghost ... He belongeth only to *believing* sinners. Those thus and thus qualified are to believe and come to Christ. It is true all sinners are obliged to believe, but to believe after the order of free grace, that is, that they be first self-lost and sick and then be saved by the physician.<sup>190</sup>

John Flavel demands to be included.

The order of the Spirit's work in bringing men to Christ, shows us to whom the invitation and offers of grace in Christ are to be made; for none are convinced of righteousness, that is, of the complete and perfect righteousness in Christ for their justification until

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<sup>188</sup> John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, vol. 5, p. 404.

<sup>189</sup> John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, p. 229.

<sup>190</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *Trial and Triumph of Faith* (Edinburgh, 1845), pp. 128ff.

first they are convinced of sin; and consequently no man comes to Christ by faith till convictions of sin have wakened and distressed him, (John 16:8, 10). This being the order of the Spirit's operation, the same order must be observed in gospel offers and invitations.<sup>191</sup>

Flavel highlights a fundamentally important truth. He is not saying that evidence of contrition of sin is a pre-requisite to freely *preaching Christ crucified* like the hyper-Calvinist. Rather, he is pointing out that the *promise* declared in the offer belongs personally to *contrite, believing* sinners. When this order is observed there is simply no place for a “well-meant” offer. There is an order of operation of the Spirit in drawing sinners to Christ, which order determines that there may be no *universal conditional* promise, as is necessary in the “well-meant” offer.

The number of faithful witnesses could be multiplied.

### **The Divine Order of the Gospel Offer**

The point which Knox, Owen, Rutherford and Flavel make should not slip by unnoticed. There is a divine order in the operation of free grace which is to be reflected in a faithful, *biblical* offer of the gospel.

John Flavel, as quoted above, uses the term “offer” in the way we have defined it. Flavel, speaks in the context of the Spirit working through the gospel to bring elect sinners to Christ, and in this context the way he uses the term *offer* makes a vitally important point. His use of the term implies that the offer of the gospel, as it applies the particular promise of God to the heart of the labouring sinner, is indeed an expression of God's sincere desire and delight in bestowing life upon repentant, believing sinners.<sup>191</sup> This is certainly correct. The offer of the gospel is “well-meant” *to the elect, regenerated sinner* in the full sense of the word. It is so without the least hint of insincerity. The Reformed faith does not need to conjure up some kind of

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<sup>191</sup> A careful reading of many of the Puritan divines claimed as support by the proponents of the “well-meant” offer reveals that they held views that so militated against the idea of contradictory wills within God and universal love and grace, that they can not be so claimed. Admittedly they used the term “common grace” but this had a fundamentally different meaning then from what it has now. It meant what we have described as the goodness of God upon His creation as sovereign benevolent Creator.

hypothetical universalism to be able to press the gospel with power and compassion upon the hearts of men.

Sinners must see themselves as *sinners* before they can flee for refuge to Christ. This order of free grace that is set out in Scripture may not be reversed so that Christ and salvation are promised indiscriminately to all. When this reversal takes place to allow room for the “well-meant” offer (i.e. a well-meant offer to all that outwardly hear the preaching), the gospel of sovereign, free grace is robbed of its power, glory and comfort.

The *biblical* offer requires a close and personal applying of the promise of salvation and life in such a way that it reaches out to the *convicted* sinner to encourage *him* to come and rest upon Christ in true faith. To the penitent believer there is indeed the assurance that it is God’s desire and delight to give Christ and all the blessings of the covenant of grace in Him. The faithful preacher of the gospel proclaims the truth of God’s will, delight and faithful promise to receive all *penitent, believing* sinners. In the *biblical* offer of the gospel, the love of Christ reaches out in the promise to tenderly encourage and sweetly draw the *convicted* sinner into His life and rest. This aspect of the preaching in which God draws the convicted sinner unto Christ with bowels of love and tenderness is a vital aspect of the truth of the gospel call. The cords of God’s love are personal and particular and exceeding sweet to the *burdened* sinner. In the preaching this *must* be evident.

# *Chapter 7*

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have sought to apply four truths to the offer (i.e. presentation) of the gospel that show that Rev. Stebbins has erred in his presentation. These were, first, that because God is one, His will and purpose are also one, and there is no “necessary principle” of God’s nature that is at variance with His decree. This means that God does not “pursue” the non-elect with grace and love.

Second, that the particularity of the love and grace of God as Saviour flowing from eternal election determines that God pursues only the *elect* with grace and salvation through the gospel. It also means that God has no attitude of love and grace toward the reprobate over whom He rules in power as Creator-Judge.

Third, these truths when applied to the offer of the gospel exclude any “well-meant” offer in which God desires, but does not achieve, the salvation of all.

Fourth, we have shown that there can be no sincerity in a universal, conditional offer and promise based on a limited atonement.

We have also demonstrated that the denial of all universalism, together with its expression in the “well-meant” offer, is no restriction or distortion of the

preaching of Christ crucified to all men. We have seen that the gospel does not require faith in a contradiction, or a mysterious paradox. God “offers” what He has determined to give and has already provided—namely, Christ and salvation in Him—to all those who *believe*.

Therefore, we conclude that Rev. Stebbins is in serious error regarding the offer of the gospel. The truth he attacks stands firm.

We conclude with a quote from Prof. David J. Engelsma which describes the full and free offer of the gospel, and shows God’s purpose in it.

When God sends the gospel forth into all the world, presenting Christ crucified to all who hear the preaching and calling all who hear to repent of their sins and believe on that Christ, His purpose is to save the elect and the elect only. The love that sends forth the gospel, like the love that sent forth Christ in the fullness of time, is the love of God for the elect church. This love is sovereign love. As the call to repent and believe goes out, God the Holy Spirit works that repentance and faith in the hearts of the elect in the audience. He gives us what He calls for, and He gives it by the calling. “Come!” He says, and that sovereignly gracious call draws us irresistibly to Christ.<sup>192</sup>

This gospel is particular saving grace for God’s elect.

Of this gospel we may say: “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).

Rutherford’s “order of free grace” and the implication to the presentation of the gospel is biblical. It is identical to *The Practical Use of Saving Knowledge*, which says:

The chief general use of Christian doctrine is to convince a man of sin, and of righteousness, and of

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<sup>192</sup> David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism & the Call of the Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: RFPA, 1994), p. 24.

judgment (John 16:8), partly by the law or covenant of works, that he may be humbled, and become penitent; and partly by the gospel or covenant of grace, that he may become an unfeigned believer in Jesus Christ, and be strengthened in his faith upon solid grounds and warrants, and give evidence of the truth of his faith by good fruits, and so be saved.”

The *Heidelberg Catechism* sets forth the same truth in Question and Answer 2:

How many things are necessary for you to know, that thou in this comfort may live and die happily?

Three; the first, how great my sins and misery are; the second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery; the third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.