

The Myth of Common Grace

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Introduction

In 1948 Westminster Seminary professors John Murray and Ned Stonehouse wrote a doctrinal study for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church entitled *The Free Offer of the Gospel*. The study was published by that church and remains its major teaching on God's grace in the Gospel. The writing of the study was fuelled by a major doctrinal conflict in the OPC between Dr. Gordon H. Clark and the faculty of Westminster Seminary concerning Clark's fitness for ordination. Cornelius Van Til led the seminary faculty in a *Complaint* against Clark's understanding of the *Confession of Faith*. One of their chief objections concerned Clark's view of the so-called "sincere offer" of salvation to all men, including the reprobate.

A similar controversy had plagued the Christian Reformed Church during the 1920s, and that controversy originated among the faculty at Calvin Seminary. In 1924 the CRC controversy ended with the exodus of the Calvinists from the Christian Reformed Church under the leadership of Herman Hoeksema, and the formation of a new church, the Protestant Reformed Church. It is worth noting that a number of the Westminster faculty had been members of the Christian Reformed Church, were former professors at Calvin Seminary, and were influenced by the Christian Reformed view of common grace.

In 1945 Herman Hoeksema published a series of editorials on the so-called Clark-Van Til controversy in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in [*The Standard Bearer*](#), the magazine of the Protestant Reformed Church. Hoeksema wrote:

Here, too [on the issue of the sincere offer of the Gospel], the *Complaint* [against Clark] reveals, more clearly than anywhere else, its distinctly Christian Reformed tendency, particularly its sympathy with the three well-known decrees of the Synod of Kalamazoo, 1924.

The Complainants put it this way: "In the course of Dr. Clark's examination by Presbytery it became abundantly clear that his rationalism keeps him from doing justice to the precious teaching of Scripture that in the gospel God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to all who hear, reprobate as well as elect, and that he has no pleasure in anyone's rejecting the offer but, contrariwise, would have all who hear accept it and be saved" (*The Text of a Complaint*, 13).

Hoeksema continued:

The difference is not that the Complainants insist that the gospel must be preached to all men promiscuously, while Dr. Clark claims that it must be preached only to the elect. That would be quite impossible ... They are agreed that the gospel must be preached to all men ... But the difference between them does concern *the contents* of the gospel that must be preached promiscuously to all men. It is really not a question *to whom* one must preach, or *how* he must preach, but *what* he must preach. According to the Complainants the preacher is called to proclaim to all his hearers that God sincerely seeks the salvation of them

all ... According to Dr. Clark, however, the preacher proclaims to all his hearers promiscuously that God sincerely seeks the salvation of all the elect ...

[The Complainants] say that in the preaching of the gospel God sincerely offers salvation in Christ to the reprobate, that He would have them, the reprobate, accept the gospel, and that He would have them be saved. “God our Saviour will have all the reprobate to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth” (*The Text of a Complaint*, 13-14). And it is with the doctrine of universal salvation in mind that they write: “The supreme importance for evangelism of maintaining the Reformed doctrine of the gospel as a universal and sincere offer is self-evident” (*The Text of a Complaint*, 14). Now, you might object, as also Dr. Clark does, that this involves a direct contradiction: God sincerely seeks the salvation of those whom He has from eternity determined not to save. Or: God would have that sinner live whom he does not quicken. Or: God would have the sinner, whom he does not give faith, to accept the gospel ... You might object that this is not rational. But this objection would be of no avail to persuade the Complainants of their error. They admit that this is irrational. But they do not want to be rational on this point. In fact, if you should insist on being rational in this respect, they would call you a “rationalist,” and at once proceed to seek your expulsion from the church as a dangerous heretic. The whole *Complaint* against Dr. Clark is really concentrated in and based on this one alleged error of his that he claims that the Word of God and the Christian faith are not irrational ... To accuse the Complainants of irrationalism is, therefore, of no avail as far as they are concerned. They openly admit, they are even boasting of, their irrational position. To be irrational is, according to them, the glory of a humble, Christian faith.¹

What Hoeksema justly condemned as irrational was the Complainants’ bold assertion that the Scriptures contain apparent but irreconcilable contradictions. The Complainants wrote:

... the Reformed doctrine of the gospel as a universal and sincere offer of salvation is self-evident. Again, we are confronted by a situation that is inadequately described as amazing. Once more there is a problem which has left the greatest theologians of history baffled ... But Dr. Clark asserts unblushingly that for his thinking the difficulty is non-existent ... Dr. Clark has fallen under the spell of rationalism. Rather than subject his reason to the divine Word he insists on logically harmonizing with each other two evident but seemingly contradictory teachings of that Word ... Dr. Clark’s rationalism has resulted in his obscuring ... a truth which constitutes one of the most glorious aspects of the gospel of the grace of God.²

In *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (hereafter *FOG*), authors Murray and Stonehouse assert:

God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. This means that there is a will to the realization of what he has not decretively willed, a pleasure towards that which he has not been pleased to decree. This is indeed mysterious ...³

Had *FOG* been published in England in the 1640s, Murray and Stonehouse would have been applauded by the Remonstrants and attacked by the great English Puritan John Owen, who wrote,

They [the Remonstrants] affirm that God is said properly to expect and desire divers things which yet never come to pass. “We grant,” saith Corvinus, “that there are desires in God that never are fulfilled.” Now, surely, to desire what one is sure will never come to pass is not an act regulated by wisdom or counsel; and, therefore, they must grant that before he did not know but perhaps so it might be. “God wisheth and desireth some good things, which yet come not to pass,” say they, in their Confession; whence one of these two things must need follow,—either, first, that there is a great deal of imperfection in his nature, to desire and expect what he knows shall never come to pass; or else he did not know but it might, which overthrows his prescience.⁴

Owen’s argument, of course, does not even consider that there might be contradictions in God’s mind. That “advancement” in theology had to await the twentieth century, the neo-orthodox theologians, and their unwitting disciples at Westminster Seminary. If Owen had made his reply to the Complainants in 1944 or to Murray and Stonehouse in 1948, he would have been condemned as a “rationalist” and drummed out of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Between the seventeenth century and the twentieth, the theologians’ attitude toward logic had changed considerably. It is the modern view of logic that Murray and Stonehouse accept.

Logic and Scripture

Christ and the apostles frequently used logical arguments, sometimes almost formal in arrangement, to silence the Scribes and Pharisees. In Luke 20:1-8 the chief priests, scribes, and elders accosted Christ and asked Him, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Or who is he who gave you this authority?” Christ’s response was to pose a simple dilemma: “I will also ask you one thing, and answer me: The baptism of John, was it from Heaven or was it from men?” Impaled on the horns of the dilemma, the priests, scribes, and elders sought to escape by professing ignorance. Of course, in professing ignorance, they left themselves open to another objection, the same one that Christ made to Nicodemus: “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?” But Christ did not let the matter end there; He went on to answer their question, though they did not like His answer. In verses 9-19 He tells a parable and then tells them the meaning of Psalm 118:22. Immediately they sought to kill Him, but did not do so because they feared the people.

In Luke 20:27-40, Christ destroys the Sadducees by deducing the resurrection from the name of God: “Now even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ For he is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to him.” In the parallel passage in Mark 12, Christ says—and all who would limit the role of logic in understanding and explaining Scripture should note it well—“Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God? ... You therefore are greatly mistaken.” Christ reprimanded the Sadducees for failing to draw the inescapable logical conclusion from the Old Testament premises: All those of whom God is God are *living*, not dead; God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; therefore Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are living.

Likewise, the epistles of Paul are packed with logical arguments defending the faith. In Galatians 3:16, Paul deduces from the singular word *seed* the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant in Christ. This in turn has further implications found in verses 26-29: the spiritual identity of Old and New Testament believers.

In Romans 4, Paul denies that Abraham was justified by works and argues that justification is by faith alone, a conclusion he draws from Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1-2. In Romans 9:6-13, Paul deduces God’s eternal love for the elect and hatred for the reprobate from Genesis 21:12; 18:1, 14; 25:23; and

Malachi 1:2-3. Thus when seminary professors attack logic, they betray their ignorance of Scripture or their unbelief of the Word of God.

In 1944 the leading Complainant against Clark's use of logic was Dr. Cornelius Van Til. To this day, Dr. Van Til remains a leading proponent of the doctrine that Scripture contains irreconcilable paradoxes. He asserts:

There are those who have denied common grace. They have argued that God *cannot* have any attitude of favour ... to such as are the "vessels of wrath." But to reason thus is to make logic rule over Scripture. Against both Hoeksema and Schilder, I have contended that we must think more concretely and analogically than they did ... All the truths of the Christian religion have of necessity the appearance of being contradictory ... We do not fear to accept that which has the appearance of being contradictory ... In the case of common grace, as in the case of every other biblical doctrine, we should seek to take all the factors of Scripture teaching and bind them together into systematic relations with one another as far as we can. But we do not expect to have a logically deducible relationship between one doctrine and another. We expect to have only an *analogical* system.⁵

One should immediately recognize Van Til's rejection of the *Westminster Confession's* claim to be a logically deducible system of truth:

The whole counsel of God ... is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.

The great Princeton theologian, Benjamin Warfield, clarified the attitude of the Westminster divines toward Scripture and logic in his book, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*:

It must be observed, however, that the teachings and prescriptions of Scripture are not confined by the *Confession* to what is "expressly set down in Scripture." Men are required to believe and to obey not only what is "expressly set down in Scripture," but also what "by good and necessary consequence may be *deduced* from Scripture." This is the strenuous and universal contention of the Reformed theology against Socinians and Arminians, who desired to confine the authority of Scripture to its literal asseverations; and it involves a characteristic honouring of reason as the instrument for the ascertainment of truth. We must depend on our human faculties to ascertain what Scripture says; we cannot suddenly abnegate them and refuse their guidance in determining what Scripture *means*. This is not, of course, to make reason the ground of the authority of inferred doctrines and duties. Reason is the instrument of discovery of all doctrines and duties, whether "expressly set down in Scripture" or "by good and necessary consequence *deduced* from Scripture": but their authority, when once discovered, is derived from God, who reveals and prescribes them in Scripture, either by literal assertion or by necessary implication ... It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the *Confession*, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its *implications*. The reemergence in recent controversies of the plea that the authority of Scripture is to be confined to its expressed declarations, and that human logic is not to be trusted in divine things, is, therefore, a direct denial of a fundamental position of Reformed theology, explicitly affirmed in the *Confession*, as well as an abnegation

of fundamental reason, which would not only render thinking in a system impossible, but would discredit at a stroke many of the fundamentals of the faith, such e.g. as the doctrine of the Trinity, and would logically involve the denial of the authority of all doctrine whatsoever, since no single doctrine of whatever simplicity can be ascertained from Scripture except by the use of the processes of the understanding ... [The] recent plea against the use of human logic in determining doctrine has been most sharply put forward in order to justify the rejection of a doctrine which is explicitly taught, and that repeatedly, in the very letter of Scripture; if the plea is valid at all, it destroys at once our confidence in all doctrines, not one of which is ascertained or formulated without the aid of human logic.⁶

In contrast to this scriptural view, Van Til denies the possibility of a deductive system and asserts that the “analogical truths” we have all appear to be contradictory. Apart from this unscriptural denial of the role of logic and the perspicuity of Scripture, one must ask the question: What is the meaning of a “system” of non-deducible paradoxes?

Although Westminster Seminary’s apologetics professor John Frame endorses Van Tilianism, he presents an excellent analysis of Van Til’s proposal:

... the necessity of formulating doctrines in “apparently contradictory” ways certainly increases the difficulty of developing a “system of doctrine,” especially a system such as Van Til himself advocates ... How may it be shown that one doctrine “requires” another, when our paradoxical formulations fail even to show how the two are compatible? His stress on apparent contradiction, though it does not render Christianity irrational or illogical, does seem at least to make very difficult if not impossible the task of the systematic theologian.⁷

Mr. Frame should understand that Van Til’s views do make Christianity irrational and illogical. They are incompatible with systematic theology. More fundamentally, Van Tilianism, in the words of Warfield, “logically involves the denial of the authority of all doctrine whatsoever.” To accept Van Tilianism is to reject, implicitly, the whole of Christianity. The two are not logically compatible. Therefore, we conclude that the Complainants’ charge of “rationalism” against Clark was founded upon an unscriptural and anti-Confessional rejection of logic and constitutes an inexcusable attack upon one of the central teachings of the Reformation: Scripture interprets Scripture.

Some Great Theologians

During the Clark-Van Til controversy in the OPC, the Complainants alleged that there are other mysterious paradoxes in the Bible besides common grace and reprobation. They sought to discredit Clark by claiming that these paradoxes had left the greatest theologians of history baffled. They quoted from Berkhof, Calvin, Vos, A. A. Hodge, and Abraham Kuyper to support their position; but their quotations do not support their position. The reader is encouraged to study Hoeksema’s discussion of these quotations published in [The Standard Bearer](#) [now in the book, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy*].

One must keep in mind that Clark was accused of rationalism not because of the particular solutions he offered for the alleged paradoxes, or at least not primarily for that reason, but because he attempted to find solutions. It was indeed amazing that a group of theologians would actually accuse a brother theologian of heresy because he tried to solve theological problems. Hoeksema’s comments are pertinent:

No theologian has ever proceeded from the assumption of the Complainants. Dogmatics is a system of truth elicited from Scripture. And exegesis always applied the rule of the *regula Scripturae*, which means that throughout the Bible there runs a consistent line of thought, in the light of which the darker and more difficult passages must be interpreted. The Complainants virtually deny this ...⁸

John Owen's comments quoted previously revealed the Complainants' leanings toward Remonstrant doctrine. But both the Christian Reformed and the Orthodox Presbyterian doctrines of common grace are more specifically similar to the seventeenth-century heresies of the School of Saumur, France, under Cameron and his pupils, Amyraldus and Testardus. A. A. Hodge described these "novelties":

Their own system was generally styled *Universalismus Hypotheticus*, an hypothetic or conditional universalism. They taught that there were two wills or purposes in God in respect to man's salvation. The one will is a purpose to provide, at the cost of the sacrifice of his own Son, salvation for each and every human being without exception if they believe—a condition foreknown to be universally and certainly impossible. The other will is an absolute purpose, depending only upon his own sovereign good pleasure, to secure the certain salvation of a definite number ...

This view represents God as loving the non-elect sufficiently to give them his Son to die for them, but not loving them enough to give them faith and repentance ... It represents God as willing at the same time that all men be saved and that only the elect be saved. It denies, in opposition to the Arminian, that any of God's decrees are conditioned upon the self-determined will of the creature, and yet puts into the mouths of confessed Calvinists the very catch-words of the Arminian system, such as universal grace, the conditional will of God, universal redemption, etc.

The language of Amyraldus, the "Marrow Men," Baxter, Wardlaw, Richards, and Brown is now used to cover much more serious departures from the truth. All really consistent Calvinists ought to have learned by now [1867] that the original position of the great writers and confessions of the Reformed Churches have only been confused, and neither improved, strengthened nor illustrated, by all the talk with which the Church has ... been distracted as to the "double will" of God, or the "double reference" of the Atonement. If men will be consistent in their adherence to these "Novelties," they must become Arminians. If they would hold consistently to the essential principles of Calvinism, they must discard the "Novelties."⁹

Both the Complainants and the Amyraldians assert a "double will" in God, and Hodge's warning is just as relevant today as it was over a hundred years ago.

Proponents of common or universal grace have appealed to the Dutch Reformed theologian, Abraham Kuyper, as a proponent of their view. The Protestant Reformed historian and theologian, David Engelsma, corrects this error:

It is widely assumed that the well-meant gospel offer, or free offer, has strong backing in the Dutch Reformed theologian, Abraham Kuyper ... This assumption is false ... [It] is not true that Kuyper held the doctrine of the well-meant offer—not even in *De Gemeene Gratie*; on the

contrary, he was an avowed foe of the theology of the offer ... Kuyper's common grace had nothing to do with this universal grace. The common grace of Kuyper was merely a favour of God that gives the world 'the temporal blessings' of rain, sunshine, health, and riches, and that restrains corruption in the world so that the world can produce good culture. It was not a grace that aimed at the salvation of the reprobate, a grace that was expressed in a well-meaning offer of Christ, or a grace that was grounded in a universal atonement ...

Kuyper feared—prophetically—as history shows!—that misuse would be made of [his] doctrine of common grace, “as if *saving* grace were meant by it,” with the result that “the firm foundation that grace [*genade*] is particular would again be dislodged ...”

An outstanding and very clear instance of the fatal development of common grace into universal, saving grace is the first point of the doctrine of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 ...

One finds on every hand that men ground their teaching of a grace of God for all in the preaching, i.e., the well-meant offer, in God's common grace, thus transforming common (non-saving) grace into the universal (saving) grace of historic Romanism and Arminianism. In doing this, they are deaf to Kuyper's pleas not to make this mistake ...

The Orthodox Presbyterian theologians, Murray and Stonehouse, are guilty of this ...

Kuyper [was] encouraged to defend particular grace by the fact that “in earlier, and spiritually better, ages, I would have found plenty of allies.” He points to a “cloud of witnesses” which did not know a grace which is not particular. This cloud of witnesses includes Augustine, Calvin, Peter Martyr, Rivet, Voetius, Witsius, Beza, Zanchius, Gomarus, Turretin, and many others ... The teaching of ‘universal or common grace,’ on the other hand, which is the ‘doctrine of Rome, the Socinians, the Mennonites, the Arminians, and the Quakers, crept into the Reformed Churches from without, especially through Amyraut and the Saumur school.¹⁰

If Kuyper and Hodge were disturbed by the widespread influence of common grace in the last century, is it any wonder that Clark and Hoeksema were forced to separate from such a fierce and firmly implanted error seventy-five years later?

The Exegesis of Scripture

Anyone who proposes a theological doctrine must support his claim from Scripture. In the opinion of Cornelius Van Til, “The most important thing to be said about John Murray is that he was, above all else, a great exegete of the Word of God.”¹¹ We shall see.

In *FOG* Murray exegeted several passages of Scripture in support of his peculiar view that “God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass” and that “there is in God a benevolent loving kindness towards the repentance and salvation of even those whom he has not decreed to save ... [The] grace offered is nothing less than salvation in its richness and fullness. The love or lovingkindness that lies back of

that offer is not anything less; it is the will to that salvation.”¹² The passages Murray appeals to are Matthew 5:44-48; Acts 14:17; Deuteronomy 5:29; 32:29; Psalm 81:13ff; Isaiah 48:18; Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34; Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11; Isaiah 45:22; and II Peter 3:9.

Matthew 5:44-48

Murray himself admits that “This passage does not indeed deal with the overtures of grace in the gospel ... What bearing this [passage] may have upon the grace of God manifested in the free offer of the gospel to all without distinction remains to be seen.”¹³

Unfortunately the bearing of this passage upon the free offer of the Gospel is not made clear in *FOG*. At the end of their essay, Murray and Stonehouse do conclude, however, that “our provisional inference on the basis of Matthew 5:44-48 is borne out by the other passages. The full and free offer of the gospel is a grace bestowed upon all ... The grace offered is nothing less than salvation in its richness and fullness. The love or lovingkindness that lies back of that offer is not anything less; it is the will to that salvation.”¹⁴

This sort of exegesis, as we shall see shortly, rests upon a most peculiar hermeneutical principle: Passages of Scripture which do not support common saving grace demonstrate common saving grace in a passage that, by the exegete’s own admission, does not deal with saving grace. Perhaps this is an example of the sort of non-deducible “analogical truth” that Van Til has praised and recommended. But let us proceed to those other passages on which Murray and Stone house rest their case.

II Peter 3:9

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Let us compare Murray’s exegesis of this verse with Francis Turretin’s, John Owen’s, John Gill’s, and Gordon Clark’s:

Murray:

God does not wish that any men should perish. His wish is rather that all should enter upon life eternal by coming to repentance. The language in this part of the verse is so absolute that it is highly unnatural to envisage Peter as meaning merely that God does not wish that any believers should perish ... The language of the clauses, then, most naturally refers to mankind as a whole ... It does not view men either as elect or as reprobate.¹⁵

Turretin:

The will of God here spoken of ‘should not be extended further than to the elect and believers, for whose sake God puts off the consummation of ages, until their number shall be completed.’ This is evident from ‘the pronoun *us* which precedes, with sufficient clearness designating the elect and believers, as elsewhere more than once, and to explain which he adds, not willing that any, that is, of us, should perish.’¹⁶

Owen:

“The will of God,” say some, “for the salvation of *all*, is here set down both *negatively*, that he would not have any perish, and *positively*, that he would have all come to repentance ...” Many words need not be spent in answer to this objection, wrested from the misunderstanding and palpable corrupting of the sense of the words of the apostle. That indefinite and general expressions are to be interpreted in an answerable proportion to the things whereof they are affirmed, is a rule in the opening of the Scripture ... Will not common sense teach us that *us* is to be repeated in both the following clauses, to make them up complete and full,—namely, “Not willing that any of us should perish, but that all of us should come to repentance”? ... Now, truly, to argue that because God would have none of those to perish, but all of them to come to repentance, therefore he hath the same will and mind towards all and every one in the world (even those to whom he never makes known his will, nor ever calls to repentance, if they never once hear of his way of salvation), comes not much short of extreme madness and folly ... I shall not need add any thing concerning the contradictions and inextricable difficulties wherewith the opposite interpretation is accompanied ... The text is clear, that it is all and only *the elect* whom he would not have to perish.¹⁷

Gill:

It is not true that God is not willing any one individual of the human race should perish, since he has *made* and appointed *the wicked for the day* of evil, even *ungodly men*, who are *fore-ordained to this condemnation*, such as are *vessels of wrath fitted for destruction*; yea, there are some to whom *God sends strong delusions, that they may believe a lie, that they all might be damned* ... Nor is it his will that all men, in this large sense, should come to repentance, since he withholds from many both the means and grace of repentance ...¹⁸

Clark:

Arminians have used the verse in defense of their theory of universal atonement. They believe that God willed to save every human being without exception and that something beyond his control happened so as to defeat his eternal purpose. The doctrine of universal redemption is not only refuted by Scripture generally, but the passage in question makes nonsense on such a view ... Peter is telling us that Christ’s return awaits the repentance of certain people. Now, if Christ’s return awaited the repentance of every individual without exception, Christ would never return. This is no new interpretation. The *Similitudes* viii, xi, 1, in the *Shepherd of Hermas* (c. A.D. 130-150) ... says, “But the Lord, being long-suffering, wishes [*thelei*] those who were called [*ten klesin ten genomenen*] through his Son to be saved” ... It is the called or elect whom God wills to save.¹⁹

Murray’s interpretation of II Peter 3:9 conflicts with the rest of Scripture. He arrogantly refuses to let his understanding of the passage be governed by the principle that all the parts of Scripture agree with one another. He implicitly denies, as the *Confession* that he professed to believe asserts, that one of the marks of Scripture is the “consent of all the parts.”

Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11

“Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die,” says the Lord God, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live? ... For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live! ... I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?”

Murray:

It does not appear to us in the least justifiable to limit the reference of these passages to any one class of wicked persons ... It is absolutely and universally true that God does not delight in or desire the death of a wicked person ... This [“turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways”] is a command that applies to all men without any discrimination or exception. It expresses therefore the will of God to repentance ... God does not will that any should die ... There is the delight or pleasure or desire that it should come to be, even if the actual occurrence should never take place ... In terms of his decretive will it must be said that God absolutely decrees the eternal death of some wicked and, in that sense, is absolutely pleased so to decree. But in the text it is the will of God’s benevolence ... that is stated, not the will of God’s decree ...²⁰

Calvin:

If it is equally in God’s power to convert men as well as to create them, it follows that the reprobate are not converted, because *God does not wish their conversion*; for if he wished it he could do it: and hence it appears that *he does not wish it*.²¹

Turretin:

Although God declares that he “does not will the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his way and live,” it does not follow that he has willed and planned from eternity the conversion and life of everyone, [even] subject to any condition, for ... it is certain that this refers to God’s will as commanding, not to the will of his good pleasure ...²²

Gill:

The expostulation, *Why will ye die?*, is not made with all men; nor can it be proved that it was made with any who were not eventually saved, but with *the house of Israel*, who were called the children and people of God; and therefore cannot disprove any act of preterition passing on others, nor be an impeachment of the truth and sincerity of God. Besides, the death expostulated about is not an eternal, but a temporal one, or what concerned their temporal affairs, and civil condition, and circumstances of life ...²³

Clark:

Ezekiel 18 presents several difficulties. Verses 2, 4, and 20 could in isolation be taken as contradictory of Romans 5:12-21 ... Another difficulty, one that occurs in several books of the Bible, including Romans 2:10, 14-25, occurs in Ezekiel 18:19, 21-22, 27-28, 31. These verses, in both books, sound as if some men could merit God’s justification on the basis of their own works of righteousness. But the

context in Romans and Galatians and elsewhere teaches justification by faith alone. Now, if these contexts so completely alter the superficial meaning of the verses in question, one must be prepared to alter the Arminian interpretation of verses 23 and 32 ... Therefore the contiguous verses in Ezekiel, the context of the book as a whole, and the references in the New Testament indicate that God has no pleasure in the death of Israel ... Ezekiel 33 contains similar statements, which must be given the same interpretation.²⁴

If the Complainants were correct in thinking that Clark was heretical for *attempting* to apply logic to Scripture, Calvin and Turretin must be heretics as well. Calvin's argument makes a very neat syllogism: All that God wishes he does; God does not convert the reprobate; therefore, God wishes not to convert the reprobate.

A further comment needs to be made. In their exegesis of this passage and several others, Murray and Stonehouse violate one of the laws of logic repeatedly by making inferences from imperative sentences. Luther condemned such elementary blunders with these words:

By the words of the law man is admonished and taught, not what he can do, but what he ought to do. How is it that you theologians are twice as stupid as schoolboys, in that as soon as you get hold of a single imperative verb you infer an indicative meaning ... ?"²⁵

Deuteronomy 5:29; 32:29; Psalm 81:13; Isaiah 48:18

"Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear me and always keep all my commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever ... Oh, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end! ... Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! ... Oh, that you had heeded my commandments!"

Murray:

[Here] we have the expression of [God's] earnest desire or wish or will that the people of Israel were of a heart to fear him and keep all his commandments always ... [Therefore] we have an instance of desire on the part of God for the fulfilment of that which he had not decreed, in other words, a will on the part of God to that which he had not decreetively willed.²⁶

Gill:

[These] words do not express God's desire of their [Israel's] eternal salvation, but only of their temporal good and welfare ...²⁷

Owen:

[In] all these expostulations there is no mention of any ransom given or atonement made for them that perish ... but they are all about temporal mercies, with the outward means of grace ... [There] are no such expostulations here expressed, nor can any be found holding out the purposes and intention of God in Christ towards them that perish. Secondly ... all these places urged ... are spoken to and of those that enjoyed the means of grace, who ... were a very small portion of all men; so that from what is said to them nothing can be concluded of the mind

and purpose of God towards all others ... Fifthly, that desires and wishing should properly be ascribed unto God is exceedingly opposite to his all-sufficiency and the perfection of his nature; they are no more in him than he hath eyes, ears, and hands.²⁸

This last comment of Owen's points up the defective view of God held by Murray and Stonehouse. Some people are confused by the anthropomorphisms in Scripture: They think that God actually has hands, arms, eyes, and wings. Others, like Murray and Stonehouse, are confused by the anthropopathisms of Scripture: They think that God actually has emotions and passions, which He suffers. In fact, half of *FOG* is given over to attempting to prove not only that God has desires, but that He has *unfulfilled* desires, desires that He knows will never be fulfilled. God, according to Murray and Stonehouse, is a pathetic victim of unrequited love. This is not the sort of God described in chapter two of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34

“O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”

Murray:

In this passage there should be no dispute ... [We] have the most emphatic declaration on the part of Christ of his having yearned for the conversion and salvation of the people of Jerusalem.²⁹

Calvin:

By these words, Christ shows more clearly what good reason he had for indignation, that *Jerusalem*, which God had chosen to be his sacred ... abode, not only had shown itself to be unworthy of so great an honour, but ... had long been accustomed to suck the blood of the prophets. Christ therefore utters a pathetic exclamation at a sight so monstrous ... Christ does not reproach them with merely one or another murder, but says that this custom was ... deeply rooted.... This is expressive of indignation rather than compassion.³⁰

Gill:

That the *gathering* here spoken of does not design a gathering of the Jews to Christ internally, by the Spirit and grace of God; but a gathering of them to him internally [externally?], by and under the ministry of the word, to hear him preach ... [In] order to set aside and overthrow the doctrines of election, reprobation, and particular redemption, it should be proved that Christ, as God, would have gathered, not Jerusalem and the inhabitants thereof only, but all mankind, even such as are not eventually saved, and that in a spiritual saving way and manner to himself, of which there is not the least intimation in this text.³¹

Acts 14:17

“Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

Murray:

This text does not express as much as those considered already [Matthew 5:44-48].³²

Since, by Murray's own admission, Matthew 5:44-48 "does not indeed deal with the overtures of grace in the gospel," need we say more? Only this: Murray's principal of hermeneutics seems to be the ten leaky buckets theory. That theory holds that while a passage may not be relevant to a certain doctrine, by putting several such irrelevant passages together, the doctrine is established. This principle doesn't hold water, and Murray leaks.

Isaiah 45:22

"Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the Earth!"

Murray:

This text expresses then the will of God in the matter of the call, invitation, appeal, and command of the gospel, namely, the will that all should turn to him and be saved. What God wills in this sense he is certainly pleased to will. If it is his pleasure to will that all repent and be saved, it is surely his pleasure that all repent and be saved ... [God] declares unequivocally that it is his will and, impliedly, his pleasure that all turn and be saved.³³

It must be expected that those who despise logic should make silly blunders like that above. Notice the word *impliedly*. Murray is obviously making a logical inference. But is the inference valid? His argument is this: Since God has commanded all men to repent, he has willed that all men should repent. It simply does not follow. The whole is a logical fallacy. Perhaps the reader will see this better if we apply it to Abraham: If God commands Abraham to kill Isaac, then it is God's pleasure that Isaac be killed. Of course, it never was God's pleasure that Isaac be killed, as we are told. Murray again makes an invalid inference from an imperative verb.

In addition to avoiding logical blunders, theologians should strive to use precise language. Murray's exegesis relies on an ambiguity in the word *will*. Will can mean either *command* or *decree*. It is God's will (command) that murder not be committed, and it is His will (decree) that Jesus should be murdered. There is no contradiction in this statement once one sorts out the two meanings of the word *will* in Scripture. But Murray would have us believe that God wills and not wills murder—and salvation—in a similar sense. He fails repeatedly to distinguish between God's decree and God's command. That is why his use of the word *impliedly* fails in this passage. God is *commanding* all the ends of the earth to look to Him and be saved. He is not *wishing*, still less *decreeing*. God is unequivocal, but Murray is not.

Conclusion

The reader may wonder what all this has to do with "practical" Christianity. It has the most serious implications. The inherent contradictions in Van Tilianism generally and in *FOG* in particular thwart the preaching of the gospel. The content of the gospel is itself confused: Did Christ die for all men, does He wish the salvation of all men, or did He die only for His people and actually accomplish their salvation? If the Bible teaches ideas that cannot be reconciled with each other, if all the teaching of the Bible is apparently contradictory, then no one, including the preacher, has the foggiest idea what the Bible says. The result is an increasing indifference to theology and doctrine and a growing interest in other sorts of religiosity. Intellectual Christianity, already abandoned in most denominations, is

being rapidly replaced by activist, aesthetic, and experiential religion in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as well.

Saving grace is not common. It is particular. Sin is common. For forty years the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has been confused about this matter. Perhaps there are some within it who will choose Paul, Calvin, Luther, Turretin, Hodge, Warfield, Owen, Gill, Kuyper, Hoeksema, and Clark rather than Murray, Stonehouse, and Van Til. If so, they had better do it quickly, for the deadly effects of irrationalism have already seriously eroded the foundations of that church.

FOOTNOTES:

1. *The Standard Bearer*, June 1, 1945, 384-386. These editorials have been reprinted and are available from The Trinity Foundation in the book *The Clark-Van Til Controversy*.

2. *Text of a Complaint, Minutes of the Twelfth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 29.

3. *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, no city, no publisher, no date, 26.

4. *The Works of John Owen*, vol. X. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967, 25.

5. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973, 165-166.

6. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, Mack Publishing Company, 1972, 226-227.

7. John Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, Gary North, ed. Ross House Books, 1976, 310.

8. Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy*.

9. Archibald A. Hodge, *The Atonement*. Evangelical Press, 1974, 375-378.

10. David J. Engelsma, [*Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*](#). Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980, 109-115.

11. Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Life of John Murray*. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984, 93.

12. *FOG*, 26-27.

13. *FOG*, 5, 7.

14. *FOG*, 27.

15. *FOG*, 24.

16. Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, as quoted by David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism*, 96.

17. John Owen, 348-349.

18. John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*. Baker Book House, 1980, 62-63.
19. Gordon H. Clark, *I & II Peter*. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, 71.
20. *FOG*, 14-19.
21. John Calvin, *Commentary on Ezekiel*. Baker Book House, 1979, 248.
22. Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, John W. Beardslee, ed. Baker Book House, 1977, 437.
23. John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 24.
24. Gordon H. Clark, *Predestination in the Old Testament*. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978, 41-42.
25. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*. James Clarke and Company, 1957, 151.
26. *FOG*, 8-9.
27. John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 5.
28. John Owen, as quoted by David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism*, 400-401.
29. *FOG*, 10-11.
30. John Calvin, *Commentary*, vol. XVII, 105-106.
31. John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 29. Gill's exegesis of the verse is unsurpassed but too lengthy to quote here. He explains how commentators have seen both indignation and compassion in it.
32. *FOG*, 8.
33. *FOG*, 20-21.

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