

A Response to “The Free Offer of the Gospel” in the *Puritan Reformed Journal*

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Introduction

In a recent issue of the *Puritan Reformed Journal*, the journal of the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, David B. McWilliams, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church of Lakeland, FL, defends the “free offer” or “well meant offer” of the gospel against some unnamed critics.[1]

Frustrating about his article, however, is the failure (apart from one footnote on Herman Hoeksema) to interact with the critics of the offer. Surely if, in 2018, one wants to defend the offer, one should attempt to refute the writings of the Protestant Reformed Churches and their sisters, who, whether one agrees with them or not, have contributed much to the debate! Instead, McWilliams repeats many of the arguments of John Murray (1898-1975), Thomas Boston (1676-1732) and the “Marrow Men,” and Robert L. Dabney (1820-1898). While it is good in a scholarly article to discuss the views of such learned worthies, again I ask, why not interact with *contemporary critics* of the offer? In the third edition of his [*Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*](#), Prof D. Engelsma asks, “As for the avowed adversaries, is it too much to ask that rather than condemning the book out of hand you attempt to refute it?”[2] By not referencing the Protestant Reformed Churches and their sisters, the leading ecclesiastical opponents of “Free Offer” theology, McWilliams fails properly to define the terms of the debate (offer, invitation, promise, etc.), and he fails properly to present the position that he claims to refute.

In communication—and especially in theological debate—it is vital to define one’s terms. If this is not done, two people can find themselves talking at cross purposes, assuming erroneously that they are in agreement, or alternatively believing wrongly that they disagree with one another. What is an offer or invitation? What is hyper-Calvinism? What is a “warrant” to believe? What is a promise? These fundamental questions are unfortunately not answered in McWilliams’s article. In addition, McWilliams does not make any meaningful distinction between the offer and common grace/love/mercy/pity, which, although they are related, are two separate debates.

A Non-Saving Love and Desire and A Non-Destructive Hatred

The first major issue addressed by McWilliams is the extent of God’s love—does God love everybody or only the elect? Related to that question is the issue of the *nature* of God’s love, for is a general, non-saving, temporal, and changeable love really *God’s* love? And does God show such love in the preaching of the gospel, so that He offers His love to all hearers, a love

which is displayed in the cross? Besides that, how can a non-saving, non-redeeming love be displayed in the cross?

The first theologian cited is Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) who taught a general love of God in addition to a “particular, special, saving love that God has for His elect,” the latter including “a purpose to save,” which the other form of “love” lacks or “of which all other forms fall short” (p. 58). According to Vos, God loves the reprobate with a sincere love *without purposing their salvation* (but while actually purposing their damnation!). What kind of love is that? It certainly is not biblical love, for love is three things in the Bible: (1) deep affection for an object, which the lover treasures as precious and dear; (2) a desire for the good of that object; (3) a determination to establish a bond of fellowship with that object.

To the objection that God *hates* the reprobate (and therefore cannot love them), John Murray (1898-1975) responded, “It is in the sense of detestation that God hates, not in the sense of desiring to destroy or take revenge. God loathes them [the reprobate] for their rebellion, but at the same time loves and wishes for their repentance” (p. 60). But this does not fit with the biblical presentation of God’s hatred: (1) God hated Esau before he was born and before he had done anything good or evil (Rom. 9:11-13), that is, unconditionally—for reprobation (like election) is unconditional; (2) God’s hatred issues in the destruction of the reprobate—for in His hatred for Edom God “laid his mountains and his heritage waste” (Mal. 1:3), even smashing Edom after she attempted to rebuild (v. 4) and declaring indignation against her forever (v. 4). In His hatred for the wicked in Psalms 5 and 11, God, the righteous Lord, destroys and abhors them (5:5-6), and rains upon them “snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest,” which shall be “the portion of their cup” (11:6). Such hatred certainly includes a desire to destroy, without, however, any hint of injustice, for God cannot be unjust (Deut. 32:4; Rom. 9:14). God’s hatred of the reprobate issues in the lake of fire—where, ironically, the “non-saving” love of God also issues, for the reprobate perish, any “non-saving” love of God for them notwithstanding. This creates insurmountable problems—how can the child of God, who trusts in God’s love, derive any comfort from it, if, in fact, God loves everybody? How can the Christian know that God loves him with more than the “love” with which He supposedly loves the reprobate?

Chiding the so-called, but unnamed, “hyper-Calvinist,” McWilliams writes:

The Arminian might argue that if God has pity toward the sinner we must believe that God has exercised all of the power available to Him to save those sinners. The “hyper-Calvinist” argues, on the other hand, that since God is omnipotent He can have no pity towards the reprobate. If God had pity on the non-elect He certainly would exercise His omnipotence to save them. Both are incorrect. (p. 60)

Advocates of the “free offer” teach that God sincerely, earnestly, even passionately, desires the salvation of the reprobate, but they also concede that He does not do anything for their salvation: He does not elect them, He does not give Christ to die for their sins, He does not regenerate them—He merely pleads with them to accept the gospel while He tenderly offers them salvation, even promising them salvation *if they are willing to accept it*.

However, the Bible is clear: if the omnipotent God loves someone, He *saves* him. How could He not? What kind of love permits one’s beloved to perish, when it is in his power to save him? If God does not exercise His omnipotence to save the reprobate, how can it be claimed that He *desires* their salvation? The pity or mercy that God displays and exercises is an *omnipotent* mercy—God’s mercy is always omnipotent, for it is *divine* mercy. While as creatures we might desire to have mercy upon a miserable person, such as a beloved child, we are often powerless to alleviate his misery, but that cannot be said of the omnipotent God

and His almighty mercy. If a king had great power, but did not do everything in his power to deliver a servant out of misery, while claiming to desire to save him, we would not call that sincere love, but hypocrisy. It will not do to hide behind “apparent paradox” (p. 64). If the omnipotent God does not save the miserable creature, we cannot say that He truly desires to save him.

God’s will, says McWilliams, is one, but it “sometimes appears to be twofold” (p. 84). In support of this assertion, McWilliams recommends an article by Robert L. Dabney entitled “God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy,” an article to which John Piper has also appealed and which I have addressed elsewhere.[3] According to Dabney, God’s dealings with reprobate sinners are analogous to George Washington’s dealings with a British spy, Major Andre, toward whom Washington “exuded genuine compassion,” although he “signed his death warrant with spontaneous decision” (pp. 84-85). According to Dabney, Piper, and now McWilliams, God genuinely pities the reprobate and genuinely desires their salvation, but God restrains His own compassion out of other, equally important concerns, such as the desire for justice, just as Washington, who genuinely pitied Andre, executed him by *mastering his pity* “by means of wisdom, justice and patriotism” (p. 86). God somehow masters His pity toward the reprobate, so that although He desires, but does not purpose (and certainly does not accomplish) their salvation, He ultimately destroys them in His just wrath. Are we to imagine in the perfect heart of God a struggle between justice and mercy (genuine pity and compassion), in which justice, and not mercy, prevails? This is what Dabney, Piper, and now McWilliams, want us to imagine.

McWilliams concludes:

Dabney well sustained in these pages the concept that, while God has but one will, it is entirely consistent for God to show compassion where he has no purpose to save even though the purpose of this approach is hidden in his own wisdom. Dabney’s line of reasoning presents a strong case *contra* the reasoning of “hyper-Calvinists.” The issue at stake ultimately is whether a theologian is willing to read the data fairly and leave to God those matters that are hidden in his own wisdom (p. 87).

McWilliams includes in a footnote Dabney’s remarks on John 3:16: “Dabney observed that ‘so loved the world’ does not refer to the decree of election, ‘but a propension of benevolence not matured into the volition to redeem, of which Christ’s mission is a sincere manifestation to all sinners” (p. 87). But Dabney’s exegesis is not only wrong; it is absurd and unworthy of a Reformed theologian. John 3:16 concerns God’s *redemptive* love, for the text speaks of God’s *giving* His Son. Of course, God’s love is His volition (will) to redeem! Verse 17 even teaches, “For God sent *not* his Son into the world to *condemn* the world; but that the world through him might be *saved*” (my italics). God’s purpose in sending His Son (*giving* His Son to the cross) is the salvation of the world, which world does not include the reprobate, whose salvation God has not purposed. God does not have “a propension of benevolence not matured into the volition to redeem”!

If that is the meaning of God’s will expressed in the “offer”—“a propension of benevolence not matured into the volition to redeem”—how is such an offer preached? I have never heard anyone preach the offer with these words: “God loves you, but perhaps He loves you only with a propension of benevolence not matured into the volition to redeem you. God loves you in the sense that He pities you and desires your salvation, but He may perhaps not have purposed your salvation.” Instead of preaching that way, the “free offer” preachers that I have encountered preach thus: “God loves you, and Christ is willing to save you if you will only believe,” which sounds almost exactly, if not exactly, like what an Arminian preacher would say. McWilliams’s objections notwithstanding, “free offer” preaching *is* Arminianism

and the preaching of those, such as the Protestant Reformed Churches and her sisters, who reject the “free offer” is *not* hyper-Calvinism. It is consistent, biblical Calvinism.

An Offer/Invitation or A Command/Call

McWilliams, like many advocates of the “free offer,” confuses the command to believe, which pertains to all hearers of the gospel, with a supposedly well-meant or sincere offer. The Bible is clear that all men who hear the gospel, whether elect or reprobate, are *commanded* to believe it. With that we have no quarrel, for we are not hyper-Calvinists. Hyper-Calvinism is the teaching that the reprobate are *not commanded* to believe the gospel—only “sensible sinners” (or sensitive sinners, those whom God has awakened and regenerated) are commanded to believe the gospel. Herman Hanko writes:

To claim that the *preaching* of the promise is for the elect only is not and never was orthodox Calvinism. That the *promise* of God is for the elect only is the traditional view of the church and her theologians from the time of Calvin. The Reformed have also insisted that the particular promise of God must be promiscuously preached so that all who hear may know that promise, for God will not promise salvation to those he does not intend to save. But the promiscuous *preaching* of that particular promise is accompanied by the command to all men to repent and believe in Christ, in whom alone is found salvation.[4]

With other statements of McWilliams we have no quarrel:

The gospel directs sinners to Christ as the object of all true faith. The only sufficient Saviour to meet the needs of sinners is Christ (p. 63).

To say to sinners that they can only be justified by faith in Christ is to call them to put their trust in Christ (p. 63).

To preach the gospel is not just to present Christ. To preach the gospel is to love sinners to whom we preach, to implore them to respond to the gospel, and to urge them *as if we were Christ Himself* to receive the gospel message. To conceive of preaching the gospel as a mere proclamation eviscerates the gospel of its urgency and makes its proclamation fall far short of the gospel’s essence (76, McWilliams’s italics).

The Scripture teaches us to call sinners as sinners to Christ. They [sic.] also teach the particular nature of the atonement. Faithfulness requires that the ministers of the word bow before the authority of the Bible and call sinners to Christ ... the minister of the word is called to address sinners who stand in need of a Saviour that Christ is sufficient unto that need (p. 81).

There is in Christ’s atonement no lack of sufficiency to save the vilest sinner nor is there lack of sufficiency to save an infinite number of worlds. Therefore, the sinner is called to Christ as a sufficient Saviour for whoever believes (p. 82).

None of those statements requires the theology of the offer to be true. The Protestant Reformed Churches and their sisters can, and do, preach Christ to sinners in this way without teaching the free offer of the gospel. That we call men to believe in Christ, proclaiming Him to be the perfect Saviour, does not imply an offer, nor does it imply that God desires the salvation of all those to whom we preach the gospel. An offer is a presentation of something to someone *with the desire that the presentation will be accepted*, or an offer is *an expression of readiness* to do or give something to someone. If I offer someone a drink, for example, I expect and desire that my offer will be accepted. God does *not* offer Christ or the benefits of salvation in that way. In addition, an offer implies some kind of receptivity and ability in the one to whom the offer is made—one does not offer a cup of coffee to a corpse! One does not offer salvation to a sinner! We preach to dead sinners not because we believe that they can respond, although they are obligated to respond, but because we believe that God can raise the spiritually dead and cause them to believe in Christ. It makes sense to preach to the spiritually dead, therefore, only if one believes in sovereign regeneration, that is, if one is a Calvinist.

Many advocates of the “free offer,” such as McWilliams, express the gospel in terms of an “invitation.” An invitation is a polite, formal or friendly request to go somewhere or to do something. When we make invitations to one another, we do so with the desire that the invitee comes, but to refuse our invitation rarely, if ever, has serious consequences. The Bible does not present the gospel as a friendly invitation from God to sinners to do something. In the gospel, God *calls* (He does not invite). A call is an authoritative address to a person summoning him to come, which has consequences for the person if he does *not* come. A judge, for example, calls a witness to appear in court—if he refuses to come, the judge will compel him to come and penalize him for not coming.

The word “call” appears, for example, in Christ’s parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22:1-14, a passage to which McWilliams appeals. In that text, Matthew uses the Greek verb *kaleo* (call), translated variously as “bid” or “call” (vv. 3, 4, 8, 9, 14). The king’s call is not a friendly request, nor merely an entreaty, but a serious, authoritative command with a threat to the one who does not obey the call: refuse this “wedding invitation” and God will cast you into hell, for by refusing the call you dishonour both the Father and the Son! McWilliams acknowledges this: “Both refusal to come and coming without the garment call down the king’s wrath” (p. 71).

A Warrant to Believe

Some theologians, notably among them the so-called “Marrow Men,” unsatisfied with God’s bare command, which is a sufficient reason to do anything, have sought to find a *warrant* for the sinner to believe. McWilliams, clearly enamoured with the “Marrow Men” and their theology, argues from this warrant for the free offer of the gospel. However, he does not define what a warrant is. In legal terms, a warrant is a legal document usually signed by a judge or magistrate that allows someone to do something. For example, an arrest warrant authorizes the police to arrest a suspect, while a search warrant gives permission to the police to initiate a search of a suspect’s house or even his computer files. Without such legal authorization, the police would not have the right to carry out the arrest or the search. Supposedly, sinners need a warrant to believe in Jesus Christ in the gospel—the *command*, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ,” is not enough. The sinner needs a warrant to believe, argues McWilliams, because he needs to be assured—*before* he comes to Jesus—that God *desires* his salvation and that God will receive him. Complaining about hyper-Calvinists, McWilliams writes:

To some ... [t]he Bible does not teach a free offer of the gospel and the command to repent does not imply a warrant to come

to Christ. To those with this view the doctrines of election and particular redemption make it impossible to believe that God *desires* that reprobate sinners come to Christ by response to the gospel (p. 64, McWilliams's italics).

We would agree with that—God does not desire that reprobate sinners come to Christ, for He has not decreed that they come. Instead of giving them the power to come, by working faith in their hearts, or by drawing them (John 6:44), He leaves them in the blindness and depravity of their flesh, and even hardens them in their sins.[5] Nevertheless, God still commands them to come to Christ, which command is not a warrant. A warrant is not necessary—God's command is enough to obligate all sinners, whether elect or reprobate, to believe in Christ.[6]

McWilliams quotes A. A. Hodge (1823-1886) with approval: “we must acknowledge that the purpose expressed in the gospel declaration is that ‘it is God's purpose to receive and save all that believe on his Son, *elect or not*’” (p. 61, italics added). Nevertheless, Hodge's claim is erroneous, for it is not God's purpose to receive reprobate sinners who believe on His Son for the simple reason that reprobate sinners *do not, cannot, and will not* believe on His Son! It is God's purpose to save *elect* sinners who believe on His Son, who believe in Jesus because God works faith in their hearts; while it is the purpose of God to harden reprobates who do not believe and to render them without excuse for their unbelief. The preaching of Christ is “the savour of death unto death” to them (II Cor. 2:16).

Thomas Boston (1676-1732), again approvingly cited, writes,

The reprobate have as good and fair a revealed warrant to believe and take hold of the covenant of grace as the elect have, else they could not be condemned for unbelief, and not taking hold of the covenant. Be what you will, since you are certainly a sinner of mankind, your warrant is uncontestable, according to the word (p. 63).

What do the reprobate have a warrant to believe? Surely not that God loves them (He does not); nor that Christ died for them (He did not); nor that God desires their salvation (He does not). Notwithstanding, the reprobate are commanded to turn from their sins in repentance, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to trust in Him as the perfect, all-sufficient Savior who saves to the uttermost all those who come to Him (Heb. 7:25).

The Bible does not teach a “warrant” to believe, but it does teach a *command* to believe. That command to believe comes to everyone, elect or reprobate, who hears the gospel. At the same time, the Bible includes a promise, not to everyone, not to every hearer, but to *every believer*. And since only the elect are believers, it is tantamount to saying that the promise comes *unconditionally* to the elect. The reprobate hear the promise—it is proclaimed in their hearing, but the promise is not for them; it is for believers only, and no reprobate ever becomes a believer.

The closest that McWilliams comes to defining promise is “a promise, on the other hand, is sure and certain” (p. 60), although it is unclear whether that is his definition or the definition of his unnamed critics. Let me give a definition: the promise of God is His sure and certain word to give salvation and all the blessings of Christ to His people. Or to state it differently, the promise of God is His sure and certain word to give salvation and all the blessings of Christ to believers or to whomsoever believeth. Or to express it even more clearly, it is His sure and certain word to give salvation and all the blessings of salvation to the elect. God does not promise—even conditionally—to give salvation to the reprobate. If He did, His promise would prove to be false. Men's promises might prove to be false. Men might even

make sincere promises without foreseeing the difficulty that might arise so that they fail to keep their sincere promises. The promise of Almighty God cannot fail, for He is wise, holy, righteous, and good—nothing can annul His word or overturn His promise, not even the unbelief or unfaithfulness of His people, for by the power of His promise He works faith in their hearts.

In his brief treatment of the *Canons of Dordt*, McWilliams confuses the promise with an offer, something the *Canons* never teach. In Head II. 5 the *Canons* state: “the promise of the gospel is, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” The promise is to believers, not to all hearers. What is to be published with the promise to all hearers, continue the *Canons*, is “the command to repent and believe.” All are commanded to believe; *believers* are promised salvation. In addition, in Heads III/IV. 9 the *Canons* state, “[God] moreover seriously promises eternal life, and rest, to as many as shall come to Him, and believe on Him.” Again, the promise is to all *believers*, not to all hearers. To this McWilliams responds: “The ‘promise’ spoken of in II. 5 cannot be particular rather than general since it is followed by the statement of II. 6 that many called by the gospel do not believe but perish in their sins.” But this does not follow at all—many are called (commanded) to believe in Christ, but this does not imply any promise of God to them. The call (command or proclamation) is promiscuous, while the promise is particular. There is no “free offer” in the *Canons*.

But one might ask, what about the “unfeigned” call of *Canons* III/IV. 9? Although McWilliams does not appeal to that language (he merely quotes the article), the implication is that McWilliams believes that the *Canons* teach that God desires the salvation of all who hear the gospel. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere, three phrases in the article are derived from the same Latin word *serio*: the hearers of the gospel are “unfeignedly (*serio*) called;” God has “earnestly (*serio*) shown;” and God “seriously (*serio*) promises” to all believers.[7] That God *seriously* calls men to believe and is even pleased with faith and repentance does not mean that He desires, earnestly desires, or passionately desires the salvation of all hearers of the gospel. God’s seriousness underlines the responsibility of sinners and the great guilt incurred by unbelievers who refuse to believe the gospel. God is so serious that He threatens with damnation, and actually damns, all those who do not believe: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16); “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36). In short, God does not express in the gospel what He has decreed, nor what He desires, but what is *pleasing* to Him. Repentance and faith are pleasing to Him, although impossible for the reprobate. Unbelief and impenitence are displeasing to Him.

The Need for “Gospel Passion”

McWilliams is concerned that without the offer there could be a lack of passion in the preaching of the gospel. I agree with him that the preaching of the gospel is much more than the mere presentation of the facts of Christ crucified and risen—the gospel demands a response, as Engelsma explains:

The message proclaimed in the gospel is not something that may ever merely be received for information, nor does it ever leave anyone with the impression that God is satisfied with that. The message of the gospel is the message of God’s Son in our flesh, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The gospel must be believed, and the Christ presented in the gospel must be believed on—*today*. Nothing else will do. Therefore, the gospel *calls* those who hear the

good news ... For the sake of the elect, God has the church call all who hear the preaching; lest it call a reprobate, hyper-Calvinism tends to call no one.[8]

The gospel demands a response from the elect and reprobate alike. Whether the hearers are *able* to respond positively to the gospel is secondary: God *requires* a response and will judge the hearers on their response. But an offer is not required to create passion in the preacher. The preacher must be passionate, for he brings the greatest message that the world can ever hear, and he brings it with the authority of Almighty God, whose gospel it is. The gospel is urgent, whether an unbeliever hears it for the first time, or a child of God in the pew hears it for the one-hundredth time. McWilliams writes:

What does the free offer of the gospel mean? It means what the gospel itself means—that God does not call upon any man to look upon him for salvation apart from the gospel, but to look at him only through Jesus Christ and to receive him by faith! For Christ comes, as Calvin loved often to say, clothed in the garments of the gospel. I am observing, however, that many men, and especially young Calvinist ministers, seem to be hesitant to call men to Christ with freedom and passion (p. 87).

This might surprise McWilliams, but if he substituted the word “gospel call” for “free offer of the gospel,” the Protestant Reformed Churches and their sisters would agree with him. We call men to look to God for salvation only through faith in Jesus Christ and the gospel. We call our members—including our covenant children—to faith in Jesus Christ preached in the gospel. We preach this gospel call on the mission field to the unconverted. We do so with passion and urgency out of love for perishing souls and for the glory of God. The offer does not energize or enliven the gospel.

Neither does our rejection of the “free offer” make us hyper-Calvinists. Engelsma, warning against hyper-Calvinist tendencies even among Reformed people, writes:

Another betrayal of the spirit of hyper-Calvinism is embarrassment and hesitation, that is, fear, over giving the call, “Repent! Believe!” and over declaring the promise “Whosoever believes shall not perish, but have everlasting life!” This language is not suspect. It is not the language of Arminian free-willism. It is pure, sound, biblical language ... If the fruit of the preaching of the gospel is that men, pricked in their hearts, cry out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” or that a Philippian jailor says, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” it is not in place, nor is it typically Reformed, to launch into a fierce polemic against free will or to give a nervous admonition against supposing that one can do anything toward his own salvation. The answer to such questions, the Reformed answer, is “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” and “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 2:38; 16:31).[9]

McWilliams concludes with a long quotation from John Owen and these remarks:

Owen is a stellar example of a host of Calvinist preachers from his era who sounded forth the call of the gospel universally without in any way misleading the hearers into free will

assumptions, decisional regeneration, or universal atonement. If preachers fail to stress the urgency of the gospel and the need for conversion, a cold chill will blow over the church that may in time open the door to all manner of heresy as it has in the past. May the Lord fill His church with passionate preachers who love the lost and who emulate Owen both in his defence of particular redemption and in the freeness of his gospel proclamation (p. 90).

Again, we can say “Amen” to that—we too sound forth the call (not the offer) of the gospel universally; we too stress the urgency of the gospel without misleading our hearers with Arminian assumptions; and we too pray for passionate preachers to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. But for that we do not *need* the “free offer” of the gospel.

An Appeal to Scripture

We do not have the time or space to address all of McWilliams’s appeals to Scripture. Surprisingly, he does not appeal to I Timothy 2:4 or II Peter 3:9, but he treats half-a-dozen passages from the prophets, four from the gospels, one from Acts, and two from the epistles.

[*Isaiah 55:1*]

For example, in Isaiah 55:1 the prophet addresses “every one that thirsteth” (not every sinner is thirsty—many do not have any sense of their urgent need for salvation; many detest the bread of life, which is loathsome to them). Through the prophet, God promises life, the everlasting covenant, and the sure mercies of David not to everyone, but to them who hear and come to Him (v. 3). This does not mean that we preach only to the thirsty, for we do not know who they are—we preach to all, but *God promises salvation only to the thirsty*, whom He makes thirsty by the power of His grace, a thirst that He also graciously satisfies (Matt. 5:6).

[*Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11*]

McWilliams places a lot of emphasis on the texts in Ezekiel that speak of God having “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11). But *which* wicked does God have in mind here? Not all wicked everywhere, but the wicked of the house of Israel! Moreover, within the house of Israel, addressed as one organic whole, God does not even have all wicked people in mind. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked who *turn*: “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?*” “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; *but that the wicked turn from his way and live.*” God says nothing here about any pleasure or displeasure that He might have in the death of wicked people *who do not turn*. And God delights in the life of the turning wicked exactly because He *purposes* the salvation of the turning wicked, for He grants repentance to His elect people, so that they turn to Him.

McWilliams quotes Murray: “It is absolutely and universally true that God does not delight in or desire the death of a wicked person. It is likewise absolutely and universally true that he delights in the repentance of that wicked person” (p. 68). But this is not true of the reprobate. The text does not teach that God desires the salvation of all reprobate people.

Positively, the text means this: there is salvation and life for the wicked who *turns*—no matter how wicked he may be. The people of God in Ezekiel’s audience needed that

encouragement. Their companions were telling them that there was no point in turning, and the devil wanted them to despair so that they would never repent. God answered the fear of His own people who were sorry for their sins, but were afraid to repent. God swears that there *is* life for the one who turns. Essentially what God says is this, “As I live, if I have no life for the wicked who turns, then I am not God. If the wicked turns to Me from sin and finds no life in Me, I am not the living God.” Behind that solemn promise stands the cross where life was purchased for all turning sinners.

In fact, there are some wicked in whose death God *does* delight, whose death *does* please God. I Samuel 2:25, speaking of the reprobate sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, teaches that “they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, *because the Lord would slay them.*” Literally, I Samuel 2:25 says, “because the Lord delighted, took pleasure in and willed to cause them to die” (Hebrew: *chapez*). God *did* take pleasure in the death of these two non-turning, wicked, reprobate men. Hophni and Phinehas, although Israelites and sons of the high priest, were never the object of God’s favor or love. God never had compassion on them. God never desired to save them.

[Matthew 11:28]

In Matthew 11:28 (similar to Isaiah 55:1) Jesus does not give a general invitation—He calls the labouring and heavy laden (the burdened) to come. While the command is universal, for all must come whether they feel the burden or not, the promise “I will give you rest” and “ye shall find rest unto your souls” (v. 29) is only for the ones who are burdened and who, therefore, come. Indeed, Jesus prefaces His call in verse 28 with a declaration of God’s will or desire—God wills to or desires to reveal His Son to only some, while He hides the truth from others (vv. 25-27).

[Matthew 23:37]

McWilliams misinterprets Matthew 23:37:

Jesus expresses with great pathos his longing to gather Jerusalem’s children under his wings. Jesus longs to—but they have been unwilling! The unwillingness is not on Jesus’s part but on the part of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This unwillingness speaks of the depth of sin, the obstinacy of rebels against God and his gospel. The text, however, confirms the desire of Jesus that sinners respond to his invitation (p. 71).[10]

First, there is no pathos in Matthew 23—there is *anger*. Verse 37 comes at the end of a long denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. Second, Jesus makes a distinction between Jerusalem’s children whom He would gather and Jerusalem who did not desire—and who therefore sought to hinder—that gathering. Jerusalem is a reference to the leaders of Jerusalem, while Jerusalem’s children are the elect within the nation. Third, Jerusalem’s sin was her deliberate opposition to Jesus’ ministry, which opposition culminated in Christ’s crucifixion, but despite (and even through) that opposition Jesus gathered the church: “he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad” (John 11:52). There is no free offer or ineffectual desire of Christ in Matthew 23:37.[11]

[II Corinthians 5:20]

One final passage, which according to McWilliams is “perhaps the strongest and most moving passage that demonstrates a free offer of the gospel” (p. 74), is II Corinthians 5. While it is true that “Paul does not simply *present* the gospel. The entire passage is bracketed with a sense of urgency” (p. 74), this in no way requires a “free offer.” McWilliams dismisses as inadequate the interpretation that “the apostle is saying to the Corinthians that due to their obstinacy they *as Christians* should be reconciled to God” (p. 74) an interpretation advocated by John Calvin.[12] Even if we concede the point that all hearers, whether believers or unbelievers, elect or reprobate, are addressed in II Corinthians 5:20, the text still does not teach the “free offer.” With McWilliams’s words, again, we do not disagree:

The apostle as preacher of the gospel is *ambassador*. His speech represents the mind and heart of Christ. When Paul speaks, Christ speaks! What does Christ say through his ambassador as the gospel is preached? He commands men (it is an imperative) to “be ye reconciled to God” [sic] (p. 76).

What the text does not teach is that Christ pleads with sinners to be saved—the preacher might do that, and he often does. However, Christ, the sovereign Lord, never pleads with sinners, and the text does not teach that He does: “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ (Greek: *huper Christou*), *as though* God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead (Greek: *huper Christou*), be ye reconciled to God.” To prove the free offer, someone would have to demonstrate that God desires the salvation of the hearers and that He sincerely offers salvation to all of them (including to all the reprobate), which McWilliams does not do.

In conclusion, McWilliams does not prove the “free offer.” Instead, he proves that all men everywhere are commanded to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, which is not the gospel offer, but the gospel call. And that is something with which the Protestant Reformed Churches and their sisters wholeheartedly agree and which we practice.

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NOTES:

1. David B. McWilliams, “The Free Offer of the Gospel,” *Puritan Reformed Journal*, 10:1 (January 2018), 57-90. Page numbers in parentheses are from this article.
2. David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (RFPA: Jenison, MI, repr. 2013), xvi. In his famous and influential article, “A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism,” Phillip R. Johnson directly criticises Engelsma’s book and writes, “The best known American hyper-Calvinists are the Protestant Reformed Churches,” a charge that I refute in a seven-part editorial in the *British Reformed Journal*. The whole series can be accessed on the CPRCNI website, <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/hypercalvinist/>.
3. See John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god), and the editorial “A Double-Minded God Unstable In All His Ways” in *British Reformed Journal* (issues 57-58), available on the CPRCNI website, <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/doublemindedgod/>.
4. Herman C. Hanko and Mark H. Hoeksema, *Corrupting the Word of God: The History of the Well-Meant Offer* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016), 103.
5. Reprobation is, according to *Canons* I.15, God’s decree to “leave [the reprobate] in the common misery into which they have wilfully plunged themselves, and *not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion*; but leaving them in His just judgment to follow their own ways, at last for the declaration of his justice, to condemn and punish them forever” (italics added).
6. The *Heidelberg Catechism* answers an objection here: “Doth not God then do injustice to man by requiring from him in His law that which he cannot perform? Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it, but

man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own wilful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts.” (Lord’s Day 4, Q&A 9).

7. See the seven-part editorial, “Hypercalvinist” or “An Answer to Phil Johnson’s ‘Primer’ on Hyper-Calvinism,” in the *British Reformed Journal*, which can be accessed on the CPRCNI website, <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/hypercalvinist/>.

8. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism*, 23-24.

9. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism*, 193, 194.

10. What does McWilliams mean by “*they* have been unwilling” (italics added)? Is “they” a reference to Jerusalem or to Jerusalem’s children—if McWilliams means that Jerusalem’s children have been unwilling, he not only misinterprets the text, but he also misquotes it.

11. A whole list of theologians, whose quotes have been compiled on the CPRCNI’s website, agree with our exegesis of Matthew 23:37, <https://cprc.co.uk/quotes/matthew23v37/>. In connection with this text, McWilliams quotes a comment of Herman Hoeksema from his booklet “Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper: A Comparison” (pub. 1930), the only quotation from a Protestant Reformed author in McWilliams’s essay. This booklet has been edited and republished in the more recent work, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn* (ed. David Engelsma; Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015). Bypassing the exegesis of Augustine and Calvin cited by Hoeksema in the booklet, McWilliams quotes one stray comment from Hoeksema, “I always contended that when Jesus lamented over Jerusalem he spoke according to his human nature” (p. 331). Engelsma in an editorial note writes, “To differ with this notion, that according to his human nature Jesus desired to gather all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, does not at all detract from Hoeksema’s main point: the genuine children of Jerusalem were the elect among the inhabitants of the city. These Jesus desired to gather. These he *did* gather, despite Jerusalem’s opposition. Jesus spoke in the text as the Messiah, whose will, or desire, is the will of God who sent him. The will of God was the gathering not of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but only of Jerusalem’s genuine children, that is, the elect” (p. 332).

12. John Calvin, “It is to be observed that Paul is here addressing himself to believers. He declares that he brings to them every day this embassy. Christ therefore, did not suffer, merely that he might once expiate our sins, nor was the gospel appointed merely with a view to the pardon of those sins which we committed previously to baptism, but that, as we daily sin, so we might, also, by a daily remission, be received by God into his favour. For this is a continued embassy, which must be assiduously sounded forth in the Church, till the end of the world; and the gospel cannot be preached, unless remission of sins is promised” (*Commentary on First and Second Corinthians*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 2009], 240).