

PROTEST

To the Moderator and other members of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland, to meet at Bready on Monday 10 June 1996. With respect to the article submitted by the Committee on Reformed Witness in the February issue of the Covenanter Witness, which clarifies the statement on the Free Offer of the Gospel adopted by Synod in 1995, I, Philip Rainey of 26 Caldwell Pk., Portrush, wish to protest points 2, 3, and 4 of the said article.

POINT NO. 2 SAVING FAITH

Under point no. 2 a conditional promise is taught. The whole scheme of a conditional covenant and a conditional promise is Amyrauldian. Amyrauldianism holds that the covenant is both conditional and unconditional; that the promise of the gospel is both universal and particular so that although the elect will definitely be saved, yet salvation is possible for all men on condition of faith.

The article cites the Larger Catechism Q. 32 which states that in the covenant 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. . . ." The word condition appears here, and from it the inference is that the Larger Catechism is teaching a conditional promise of salvation for all men. The reasoning is as follows. God makes a universal promise of salvation which is for all who hear the gospel but which only is realized when saving faith is exercised. Salvation, and the establishment of the covenant with a sinner is dependent upon the prior acceptance or rejection of the condition.

The Westminster Standards do not teach a conditional covenant or a conditional promise in this sense. In the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter W.C.O.F.) 7:3 and in the Larger Catechism (hereafter L.C.) Q. 32 the covenant is unconditional as it is initiated and established by the sovereign will of God alone and not jointly by God and man. Thus to say the covenant is conditional is anti-confessional. With reference to L.C. Q. 32 the statement "and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him" is NOT a conditional promise. This, like the parallel passage in W.C.O.F. 7:3 "whereby he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, *requiring* of them faith in him, that they may be saved. . . ." is a universal *demand* of faith rather than an expression that all men are potentially salvable if only they would exercise saving faith first. The W.C.O.F. here defines condition as *requirement* emphasising universal obligation not universal possibility of salvation. It says that faith is the *means* or *instrument* of salvation: that if anyone is to be saved then faith must be actively present.

The issue amounts to this: Is faith a condition to be fulfilled by unsaved man which leads to salvation or is it a part of salvation itself? If it is a condition of salvation then it cannot be a part of salvation. If it is a part of salvation it cannot be a condition of salvation. If faith is a condition of salvation, as the article says it is, it is not a part of salvation. And if it is not a part of salvation then it is not the work of God, but of man. And such a position is in flat contradiction to both the Westminster Standards (L.C. 32; W.C.O.F. 7:3) and the Bible (Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29).

To conclude this objection, the error here is due to a misunderstanding of how the Westminster Divines used the word "condition." There is the absolute

sense of the word and there is the limited sense in which the Westminster Divines used it.

The idea of condition in the absolute sense is something on which the result of a purpose or plan is really suspended. In the matter of salvation the result depends causally upon whether or not this condition is fulfilled by the unsaved hearer. Hence faith comes to be the human cause of salvation rather than a divine gift.

The meaning of the word in L.C. Q. 32 is as previously stated: "condition" is equivalent to "means to an end." This is how Reformed theologians have historically understood the word. In commenting on the use of the word in L.C. Q. 32 J. G. Vos says:

Though the word "condition" is used here, still the Catechism does not represent faith as a condition in the strict and proper sense of the term, for it immediately proceeds to state that the very faith which God requires is wrought in the elect by the Holy Spirit, promised and given to all the elect. Thus it is clear that the Catechism uses the word "condition" in the old-time sense of "means" or "instrument." Faith is the God appointed means by which sinners are to receive Christ; but since that very faith is itself a BENEFIT of the Covenant of Grace, purchased by Christ for the elect and bestowed on them by Christ's Holy Spirit, it cannot be a CONDITION of that covenant in the strict sense (J. G. Vos, *The Covenant of Grace*, p.8).

This distinction is fundamental in understanding what the Westminster Divines meant in L.C. 32 and W.C.O.F. 7:3 where the same teaching on the instrumentality of faith is found.

The Standards teach a particular promise for the elect which is proclaimed to all men promiscuously with a universal requirement/demand of faith. This is clear from L.C. 32 and W.C.O.F. 7:3.

POINT NO. 3 COMMON GRACE

Point no. 3 is objected to in that the idea of a general benevolence (or "common grace") is used to provide an underpinning for a universal gospel grace. This link finds expression in the article's reference to a term in W.C.O.F. Chapter 10 - "common operations of the Spirit." This reference is both out of context and is misinterpreted.

It is out of context in terms of a discussion of "common grace." The idea is that this work of grace - common operations of the Spirit - is a further example of common grace. But this reference comes in the Confession in the context of the preaching of the gospel which is by definition not the realm of common grace but the means of saving grace. The idea is that in the preaching of the gospel God expresses a general love to the reprobate, (or those whom God has eternally passed by in love and from whom He withholds His mercy, W.C.O.F. 3:7), in a work of common grace, which yet withal does not renew their hearts. This is inconsistent. You cannot have it both ways. It is either common grace or gospel grace.

It is also a misinterpretation. The idea is of a work of grace in the reprobate as the gospel offer is made to them which stops short of salvation. They are convinced of their sin and enabled to thirst after spiritual things somewhat, but finally resist this grace of God and are never regenerated.

The Confession (and L.C. Q. 68 where the same term is used) is NOT speaking about such a work of grace here. As the context to both of these occurrences show, as well as the phrase "called by the ministry of the Word," which always precedes them, the Westminster Divines saw these "common operations of the Spirit" to be an external rather than an internal work of grace. They were talking about the external call of the Word the author of which is the Holy Spirit and by which the truth of the gospel is revealed equally to all men.

POINT NO. 4 THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

This point throws light upon the conclusions of the statement on the free offer of the gospel adopted by Synod on 13 June 1995 in that it sees the free offer as an expression of God lovingkindness to all who hear the gospel. Hence it clarifies indirectly the phrase used in the statement "a sincere and well-meant invitation": God expresses and gives His lovingkindness/grace to all men in the preaching of the gospel. Through His preachers God declares His sincere desire that all men who hear the gospel call be saved contrary to what He has decreed.

The criticism of the Protestant Reformed Churches levelled in the first subparagraph of point no. 4 and the parallel rejection contained in the first conclusion of the aforementioned synodical statement vis. the rejection of the view which says "The gospel message contains nothing more than an exhibition of truth and a command to obey" is a "straw man" argument. It is as well to realise this. In terms of the present debate on the free offer of the gospel neither the PRCs nor anyone else is saying this! As well as the gospel call/invitation/command, there is also the promise of the gospel. The promise is also declared promiscuously with the assurance that none who come to Christ will be turned away. The disagreement, of course, is over the erroneous idea of a conditional promise.

In support of its position the committee cites a string of unexegeted Scripture texts. That these texts in no way provide any warrant for the "well-meant offer" will now be shown. The texts will be considered in order.

1. **Isaiah 55:1-7** nowhere says that God loves all those who hear the call of the gospel, or desires their salvation. This call to faith comes to all men and indeed all men are called to forsake their wicked ways and turn to God, but in verses 1-5 it is the elect who are being addressed - those who are 'thirsty.' In applying these verse to all men the gracious promises of the gospel are universalised. The reasoning is: (i.) All men are in some degree spiritually thirsty thus denying the spiritual inactivity of the natural man; (ii.) The gospel comes to them as a universal and conditional promise: the promise that if they come to Christ these blessings of salvation will be theirs. It is a universal promise born out of universal grace.

To say (i.) is to say the unregenerate can be spiritually thirsty for righteousness which is contradicted by Scripture (Psalm 14:1-3 and Romans 3:10-12) and the Canons of Dordt, the original Five Points of Calvinism (Heads 3 and 4, Rejection of Errors IV).

2. **Ezekiel 18:31-32 and 33:11**. These texts are often quoted to show that there is a love of God expressed in the gospel which desires the salvation of the reprobate.

Commenting on Ezekiel 33:11 John Calvin repudiates this view. Calvin says this Scripture's purpose is to encourage penitent sinners: that God is merciful to those who repent of their sins. But he goes on to explain that God does not will the repentance of all those who are invited by the gospel (*Institutes* Book 3, Chapter 24, Section 15). This explanation accords with the closing words of verse 10 where God is addressing specific people in Israel - those concerned about their sins.

3. **Luke 19:41-42.** Citing this passage in support of the well-meant offer the idea is of an expression of Christ's lovingkindness upon all Jerusalem, and by implication upon all men without exception. Jerusalem, however, rejected his lovingkindness thereby resisting His attempt to save them.

This interpretation involves a denial of irresistible grace (effectual calling), i.e., that those whom God purposes (or desires) to save *He saves*. The W.C.O.F. 10:1 links the purpose to save to those who are actually saved, and to none other: "All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, *and those only* (emphasis mine, PR), he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call . . . to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ."

The context of these verses is the same as the parallel passage in Matthew 23:37 - prophetic judgment, cf. vv. 43-44. The tears of verse 41 are tears of righteous anger, not of compassion, an anger displayed in the Saviour's actions in the temple (verse 45). Also according to verse 42 Christ is lamenting the people's ignorance of their good and opposition to it. Far from wishing that they would all have been saved He declares that these things were hid from their eyes (verse 42). The things which belonged unto their peace were hid from their eyes according to the sovereign good pleasure of God, cf. also Matthew 11:25 and 13:11.

4. **Matthew 23:37.** This text supposedly expresses Christ's desire to have gathered Israel, but they would not. Then the verse would have to read "how often would I have gathered *you* together as a hen . . . and ye would not." The verse does not say that. The verse distinguishes Jerusalem from her children. "Jerusalem" is being addressed and Christ is saying He would gather her children, but she - "Jerusalem" - would not. He does not say it was ever His will to gather and save "Jerusalem." "Jerusalem" represents the nation's religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, who opposed the work of grace, cf. also Matt. 23:13. But Christ gathers Jerusalem's children in spite of their opposition.

5. **2 Corinthians 5:19-20.** Two objections to the use of this passage in support of the "well-meant offer" arise:

i. Verse 20 is not speaking about a love of God for all who hear the gospel. It is speaking about the urgency of the call to be reconciled because it is God who issues it: the preachers are urgent and fervent because it is God's call.

ii. The context is strongly particular in vv. 19-21. The "world" in verse 19 that Christ reconciled to God is the same "world" in respect of which the apostles had received the "word of reconciliation." The particularity of these verse is confirmed by verse 21 which teaches vicarious atonement. Therefore, although all who heard this preaching were urged to be reconciled to God by the way of the cross, Paul's primary concern is the reconciliation of the elect. The particularism of these verse is confirmed by "The Practical Use of Saving Knowledge" where they are applied to the elect (Second Warrant to Believe, 1 and 2).