

The Preaching of the Gospel: General Offer or General Proclamation

By Rev. H. Veldman

What is the meaning of the expression, “the well-meaning offer of salvation”? What is its idea? The subject is surely pertinent and timely today. Today almost all churches believe in and proclaim this offer of salvation. Those who believe in the absolute sovereignty of God and deny this offer of salvation are regarded with general disdain and contempt. This has been the experience of the author. Historically those who maintained the sovereignly particular character of the love of God and Christ’s atoning, particular suffering and death upon the cross of Calvary, were ridiculed. Most thought it ridiculous that one should hold such a view. One is surely ridiculed if he denies a universal, head-for-head love of God and proclaims that Christ died only for his elect. The Arminian, advocating this universal love of God, boldly asserts that he has a much richer conception of Christ and His salvation than he who is Calvinistic and Reformed. Does not the Arminian speak of a love of God and of Christ that reaches out to all men, head for head? Does not the Reformed man, advocating the love of God and of Christ, limit this love of God to a few, comparatively speaking? Is, therefore, the Arminian’s Christ not richer than the Christ of the Calvinist? Of course, what we must understand at the outset is that the difference between the Arminian and the Calvinist is not between a universal Christ and a particular Christ. But the difference is essentially a particular Christ versus no Christ at all. After all, a Christ that dies for every man also dies for those who perish. And dying for those who perish He never did pay for their sins, because had he paid for their sins, they could never perish. Hence, such a universal Christ really accomplished nothing upon the cross of Calvary. According to the Arminian, therefore, a sinner is saved not because God loved him (does not the Lord also love all men, including those who perish?), but only because he (man) willed to be saved. Such a love of God and of Christ is surely wholly powerless and ineffectual.

Indeed, the subject is always pertinent and timely; for the salvation of a sinner and the glory of the alone blessed God are at stake here. It is that important!

What is meant with this well-meaning offer of the gospel, or of salvation? This well-meaning offer of salvation must not be confused with a general preaching of the gospel. The Reformed Calvinist surely believes in a general preaching of the gospel. And I assure you that the Protestant Reformed Churches surely believe that the gospel must be proclaimed and preached also to others than only the elect. Of course, we believe that the general preaching of the gospel is particular. The Canons of Dordrecht are one of the confessions of the Reformed churches. This confession is composed of five heads of doctrine. In Art. 3 of the first head of doctrine we read: “And that men may be brought to believe, God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings, to whom he will, and at what time he pleaseth; by whose ministry men are called to repentance and faith in Christ justified. Rom.10:14, 15.” The Lord, therefore, also determines to whom the gospel is preached. Hence, in this sense of the word also the general preaching of the gospel is not general but particular. The history of the church verifies this. When Paul and Silas ventured forth upon their second missionary journey, as recorded in Acts 16, we read in verse 6 that they were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia. This had been their intention. But coming to Troas, a vision appeared to Paul in the night. There stood a man of Macedonia and prayed him, saying, “Come over into Macedonia and help us.” And after Paul had seen the vision, they immediately endeavored to go into Macedonia, assured of the fact that the Lord had called them to preach the gospel there. Here the Lord directly changed the course of the gospel. The Reformed faith surely maintains this general preaching of the gospel. The preaching is not only to the elect and for the elect. This, of course, would be impossible. How could the church preach only to the elect? The Word of God must be preached to all men to whom it pleases the Lord to proclaim His gospel. Also they who do not believe must hear this preaching. And this is the will of God.

Neither does a well-meaning offer of the gospel simply refer to the preaching of a general command to repent and believe. Whoever hears the gospel must be commanded in the Name of God to repent and believe. No sinner has any license or right to sin. He must repent and believe. I do not say that he is able to repent and believe. But he must do so. And this command to repent and believe must be preached to all to whom the gospel is sent. This we firmly believe; to this calling the Protestant Reformed Churches are firmly committed.

What, then, is a well-meaning offer of the gospel of salvation? Generally speaking, an offer of salvation implies a universal, head-for-head love of God, and a divine desire that all who hear the gospel may believe and obtain everlasting life. In fact, according to this view, this is what prompts the Lord as He has His gospel proclaimed. The Lord loves all men, everybody, and he would have all men, everybody, be saved. Specifically speaking, a well-meaning general offer of salvation implies three things. It implies, first of all, that God possesses salvation for everybody. It implies, in the second place, that this salvation is offered and that man must accept the offer. Man's receiving of salvation, therefore, depends upon his accepting of this offer. And this offer implies in the third place that he to whom the offer is extended is also able to accept it. Otherwise an offer would not make any sense. The sinner to whom the Lord offers His salvation is able to accept it and be saved. This is the idea of a well-meaning offer of salvation.

And now we ask the question: how do these advocates of this well-meaning offer of salvation prove their contention? What scriptures do they advance in support of their view?

But now, in the first place, there is what might be called the philosophical proof or argument. The contention is that the very fact that the gospel is preached to all men must imply that all men are able to accept it. Why command men to repent and believe if they cannot repent and believe? Does it make any sense, they say, to tell or command a man to do something he cannot do? Hence, the very fact that a sinner is commanded to believe the gospel must imply that he is able to accept this offer of salvation.

However logical this reasoning may at first appear, this does not necessarily hold. It is well to understand this. For it is certainly scriptural that a sinner cannot of himself believe the gospel. We read in John 6:44: "No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him." This, of course, would also be true. The sinner hates the living God and refuses to come to Jesus and to the living God. But the Lord says that no man can come to Him. Hence, it is impossible for any man to come to Jesus. He can come to Jesus only when the Father draws him. In addition to this passage, we read in Rom.8:6-8: "For to be carnally minded is death: but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." The meaning here is plain. When the apostle speaks of being carnally minded, of them that are in the flesh, he is speaking of the natural man, the sinner apart from the regenerating grace of God. He is speaking of the sinner as he is by nature, of himself. And of the natural man he declares that he is enmity against God, does not merely hate God, but that he IS enmity against God. Enmity against God is his being. That is what he IS. Besides, he also declares of this sinner, this natural man, that he is not subject to the law of God, cannot be subject to it, that he cannot please God. Hence, the sinner certainly cannot repent or believe.

A third passage of Holy Writ to which we would call attention is Eph.2:1-3, and we quote: "And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in times past ye walked, according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Does this passage need any commentary? Notice, we are dead in trespasses and sins. We also read here that we ALL had our conversations in times past in the lusts of our flesh. There is no single exception. A fourth passage to which we would call attention and which we consider very vital in this discussion is Rom.3:10-18. We need not quote this lengthy passage of the Word of God. The passage surely speaks for itself. The apostle is quoting in the passage of Scripture from the Old Testament Word of God. The terrible condition of the sinner is vividly set forth here.

Now these passages, you understand, are not the only passages that could be quoted from Scripture. All the Scriptures emphatically present the utter hopelessness of the natural man, of man apart from the saving, regenerating grace of God. It is surely true that Adam, when he sinned, died, and the whole world died IN him and BECAUSE of him - see also in this connection Rom.5:12. We could call attention to all the miracles of our Lord. Notice their absolute character. Jesus healed the blind, the deaf, the dumb, and the lame. Men and women who could not see, hear, speak or walk. And these absolute diseases were but symbols of the absolute power of sin, of the sinner who of himself cannot see, hear, speak and walk spiritually. Indeed, the sinner cannot of himself repent and believe the gospel. He is dead and God alone can restore him to life. The infallible Word of God knows no other language.

And this is not all. Bear in mind that man himself is responsible for his terrible condition. Vividly this is held before us in Art.1 of the third and fourth heads of the Canons, which reads: "Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright; all his affections pure; the whole man was holy; but revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections." The language of our Reformed fathers here is clear. We need not doubt what they are saying in this confession. They are clear as crystal. The winner was created perfect, but he revolted from God and forfeited his excellent gifts. He is therefore responsible for his present terrible condition. And the Lord continues to demand of him, in the preaching of the gospel, that he turn from his evil way and unto the Lord. This truth the Protestant Reformed Churches maintain. We believe in a general preaching of the gospel, but this is not to be confused with a well-meaning offer of salvation. Indeed, we believe in a general proclamation of a particular gospel, and even this general preaching is determined by the Lord. What we believe in this respect is clearly set forth in Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 9 reads: "Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in his law, that which he cannot perform?" And the answer reads: "Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts."