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# JOHN CALVIN AND THE GOSPEL OFFER

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‘the promises of the Gospel make offer of the grace of Christ equally to all; and God, by the external call (*externa voce*), invites (*invitet*) all who are willing to accept of salvation’.<sup>1</sup>

Calvin to Melanchthon, 1552

The issue of ‘gospel offers’ has had a long and turbulent history in Reformed theology, not least in the disputes surrounding the theology of Jacobus Arminius. For instance William Den Boer notes in his study of Arminius that ‘Unconditional predestination and irresistible grace ... according to the Remonstrants leads infallibly to the supposition that God is hypocritical in his offer of grace’.<sup>2</sup> Such debates over the gospel offer are not consigned to history. There is a current and persistent debate over the place of the gospel offer in Reformed theology in general, and the theology of John Calvin in particular.<sup>3</sup>

In an influential article Raymond Blacketer has argued that Calvin denied that God ‘offers’ the gospel to all who hear it preached, and that the external call for Calvin was in no way expressive of a ‘common grace’ to all.<sup>4</sup> Indeed when ‘offer’ (*offero*) is used by Calvin this is best understood as ‘confronted’ rather than ‘offered’.<sup>5</sup> In this assertion he has been

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, 4 vols; ed. by Jules Bonnet; trans. by David Constable (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 2, pp. 379–80; *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*. (W. Baum et al. (ed.); 59 vols.; Braunschweig, 1863–1900), 14:417 [hereafter CO].

<sup>2</sup> William den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> The focus here on Calvin is not to suggest that Calvin was the norm or the source of Reformed thought e.g. Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond A. Blacketer, ‘The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 (2000), 37–65.

<sup>5</sup> Blacketer, ‘Three Points’, pp. 44–5.

followed by, amongst others, John Bolt and Patrick Baskwell.<sup>6</sup> However, others have challenged this interpretation. In particular Mark Beach has argued that Calvin clearly teaches that God ‘offers’ the gospel to all, and that this offer is expressive of divine grace and love.<sup>7</sup>

As the brief survey of secondary literature above indicates, the place and the definition of a ‘gospel offer’ in Calvin’s thought is disputed. For instance, is the ‘offer’ of the gospel, for Calvin, a presentation of the truths of the gospel, or is it more akin to an offer as it would be understood today, that is, a proffering of the gospel? Or, if it is an ‘offer’ how does this relate to the divine intention? For instance, is the ‘offer’ made in the genuine expectation that all who hear might actually respond positively?

With these questions in mind, this essay, in exploring Calvin’s teaching on the ‘gospel offer’ will give careful attention to how Calvin defined offer, in order to illustrate in what manner he employed this term. Consideration will also be given to the way in which Calvin related the gospel offer to the will of God, and the explicit reasons he gave for a ‘gospel offer’, will also be considered to determine how he understood the gospel offer in relation to the divine purpose.<sup>8</sup>

In seeking to examine Calvin’s position on these matters consideration will first be given to his certain important prolegomena, namely his doctrines of accommodation and the will of God. Attention will then be given to his teaching in *Institutes* and theological treatises, followed by that of his commentaries.

<sup>6</sup> John Bolt, ‘Herman Hoeksema Was Right (On the three Points That Really Matter)’, in *Biblical Interpretation and Doctrinal Formulation in the Reformed Tradition: Essays in Honor of James De Jong*, ed. by Arie C. Leder and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), pp. 295-318; Patrick Baskwell, *Herman Hoeksema: A Theological Biography* (Manassas, VA: Full Bible Publications: 2009).

<sup>7</sup> J. Mark Beach, ‘Calvin’s Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace’, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011), 55-76. See also A.C. De Jong, *The Well-Meant Gospel Offer: The Views of H. Hoeksema and K. Schilder* (Franker: T. Wever, 1954), pp. 123-7; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 5-7.

<sup>8</sup> The debate surrounding Calvin and ‘particular redemption’ is beyond the scope of this article. For a recent treatment of Calvin on this see, Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), pp. 70-106.

## PROLEGOMENA

Before considering the gospel offer directly it is important to note that Calvin held to the *accommodated* nature of revelation. For instance, discussing scriptural representations of God as ‘repenting’ Calvin comments that the ‘description of God that [is] given to us must be accommodated to us ... the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is himself (*non qualis in se est*), but as he seems to us (*sed qualis a nobis sentitur*)’.<sup>9</sup> This distinction between God ‘in himself’ and as he is ‘to us’ anticipates the explicit distinction in Reformed Orthodoxy between *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa* and highlights the accommodated nature of revelation.<sup>10</sup>

This doctrine of accommodation is significant for Calvin’s doctrine of the will of God. He, for instance, distinguished between the ‘will of God ... [which] has been set forth familiarly in the law’ and ‘another hidden will (*voluntatem absconditam*) which may be compared to a deep abyss’.<sup>11</sup> However, this acknowledgment of a hidden will and a revealed will did not mean that there were ‘two wills’ in God.<sup>12</sup> This distinction was simply a way of speaking which recognized human theology is finite in its comprehension: ‘Even though his will is one and simple (*una et simplex*) in him, it appears manifold (*multiplex*) to us because, on account of our mental incapacity we do not grasp how in diverse ways (*diverso modo*) it wills and does not will something to take place ... the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable.’<sup>13</sup> While the *voluntas*

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.13 = *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:227 [hereafter Battles]; CO, 2:165-6). See also, Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 35.

<sup>10</sup> A number of works have examined Calvin’s doctrine of the accommodated nature of revelation, e.g., Jon Balserak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006); Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin’s Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.2. (Battles, 1:212-13; CO, 2:155). The importance of this for understanding Calvin on the free offer is acknowledged in De Yong, *The Well Meant Offer*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>12</sup> See Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 113-120.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xviii.3. (Battles, 1:234; CO, 2:171). Therefore although ‘some discrepancy may appear between his secret counsel (*arcanum eius consilium*) and what he requires of us’ if the ‘smallness of the human intellect (*mentis humanae*)’ is acknowledged then it will be ‘easily understood how

*arcane* is the ‘ultimate’ will of God by which he ‘controls all things’, in relation to human actions it is ‘God’s other will’ (*alia Dei volunta* i.e. the *voluntas revelata*) that showed what was pleasing to God and which was the guide for life.<sup>14</sup>

These distinctions had important consequences for Calvin’s theology as ‘Logic is ... subordinated to Scripture, and ... is rejected as a device for understanding what is beyond the limits of the revealed mysteries’.<sup>15</sup> Calvin repeatedly denied that the ‘incomprehensible counsel of God (*incomprehensibile Dei consilium*)’ can be ‘measured by the little measure of our senses’.<sup>16</sup> He regarded it as absurd that nothing could be regarded as true unless it had been measured by ‘common sense (*sensum commune*)’ and ‘reason (*ratione*)’; rather, God ‘commands us to marvel and to be astonished because when we come before the incomprehensible counsel of God (*incomprehensibile Dei consilium*) all our understanding is deficient’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed it would be a ‘mad master’ who attempted to instruct pupils who ‘will have none of the mysteries (*mysteriis*) of God hidden and closed to them’.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, difficulties in reconciling a sovereign decree with a genuine gospel offer would not necessarily entail Calvin rejecting one or the other, if he found both taught in Scripture.

#### INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION (1559) AND THEOLOGICAL TREATISES

Moving then to Calvin’s teaching on the gospel offer, it is clear from the *Institutes*, that he believed that ‘There is the general call (*universalis vocatio*), by which God invites (*invitat*) all equally to himself through the outward preaching of the word’, and that ‘Christ is offered (*oblatus*) and held

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God ... always wills the one thing, though in different ways’. John Calvin, *The Secret Providence of God* (ed. Paul Helm; trans. Keith Goad; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), p. 93 [hereafter *TSPG*]; *Calumniae nebulonis de occulta Providentia Dei cum responsione*, CO, 9:302. See further, John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (trans. J.K.S Reid; Repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 182-5 [hereafter *CEPG*]; *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione* in CO, 8:364-6.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xx.43 (Battles, 2:906; CO, 2:668). Thus the *voluntas revelata* cannot simply be disregarded as unimportant compared to the *voluntas arcane* for ‘when he commands or forbids, God does not pretend (*simulat*), but his nature is sincerely (*sincere*) disclosed’. Calvin, *TSPG*, 95; CO, 9:303-4.

<sup>15</sup> Battles, 1:234, fn. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, pp. 76-7; CO, 9:294.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 87; CO, 9:299-300. Specifically on the incomprehensibility of the fall, see Calvin, *CEPG*, 123; CO, 8:315.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *CEPG*, p. 124; CO, 8:316.

forth (*propositus*) by the Father to all unto salvation, yet not all acknowledge and receive him'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Calvin, the general call and offer is equated with an invitation. Nevertheless, while the gospel invitation is to all, Calvin was clear that 'not all indiscriminately embrace ... Christ ... offered through the gospel (*per evangelium offertur*)'.<sup>20</sup>

What was the purpose, then, of offering of the gospel promises to all, even to those who reject them? Calvin offers various reasons in the *Institutes*. In particular Calvin held that, 'In his promises he in a sense calls them to witness how unworthy they are of his loving-kindness (*benignitate*)'.<sup>21</sup> Even for those who rejected the freely offered gospel promises, they remained a 'testimony of love (*dilectionis testimonium*)' in that 'the force and peculiar nature of the promises are never extinguished by our unfaithfulness and ingratitude ... the Lord, by his promises, invites man (*hominem invitet*) not only to receive the fruits of his kindness but also ... at the same time declares his love (*dilectionem*) to man'.<sup>22</sup> Therefore 'any promise whatsoever is a testimony of God's love (*dilectionis testificationem*) towards us'.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence to reject the gospel offer was to 'reject the testimony of God's love (*testimonium amoris Dei repudient*)'.<sup>24</sup> This clearly supports Beach's contention that the gospel offer expresses God's love to all.

Additionally the gospel offer was also 'grace' to all who heard it. Calvin himself did not, in general, restrict the concept of 'grace' to the elect. For instance, in so far as the fall was not allowed to entail the 'destruction of our whole nature' this was due to the 'general grace of God (*generalem Dei gratiam*)'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed amidst the ruin of fallen humanity there are those who have 'striven towards virtue', and this is to be attributed to 'God's grace (*gratiae Dei*)' which although 'not such grace as to cleanse' is

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.8 (Battles, 2:974; CO, 2:718) and IV.xiv.7 (Battles, 2:1282; CO, 2:945-6). The 1560 French translation of the *Institutes* has 'vocation universelle' and 'invite' (CO, 4:516) and 'offert et présenté' (CO, 4:884). In both contexts Calvin notes the gospel offer ultimately condemns, or is a savour of death, to those who reject it. But, for Calvin, that does not prevent the gospel offer being in *itself* a good thing.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.I.1 (Battles, 1:537; CO, 2:393).

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.v.10 (Battles, 1:328; CO, 2: 237-8). God does not 'cruelly delude' any he 'invites (*invitat*)' to him; *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.32 (Battles, 1:579; CO, 2:424). The French equivalent of 'invites man' is 'invite et convie les hommes' (CO, 4:52).

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.32 (Battles, 1:579; CO, 2:424).

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.2 (Battles, 2:967; CO, 2:713). The context here is addressing 'the wicked', i.e. not the elect.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.17 (Battles, 1:276; CO, 2:199).

still grace.<sup>26</sup> In specific connection with the gospel Calvin notes that God 'illumines wicked persons with some rays of his grace (*gratiae*), which he later allows to be quenched'.<sup>27</sup> Thus it does not seem an accurate summary of Calvin's teaching to posit that 'The universal call is ... not grace for the reprobate'.<sup>28</sup> Rather Beach is correct to state that 'insofar as Calvin's theology evidences some conception of a general grace or favour of God towards all sinners, the offer of the gospel is a constituent of that conception'.<sup>29</sup>

As well as the gospel offer expressing 'love' and 'grace' Calvin also taught in the *Institutes* that those who rejected the gospel offer brought greater condemnation on themselves: 'Nothing prevents [the wicked], in habitually rejecting the promises intended (*destinatas*) for them, from thereby bringing upon themselves a greater vengeance'.<sup>30</sup> Thus the rejection of this testimony of love and grace brings greater condemnation to 'the wicked', and this is ordained of God. However, that does not expunge the loving nature of the testimony itself, for as Calvin said 'unfaithfulness' and 'ingratitude' cannot alter the nature of the promises.<sup>31</sup> Blacketer is therefore correct to say that for the reprobate ultimately 'the external call is a testimony of God's judgment', however, it is not warranted to deduce from this that 'the external call ... [comes] not as an offer of actual salvation but ... [as] a sign of his judgment upon human unbelief'.<sup>32</sup>

The function of the free offer, therefore, for the non-elect was, at least, threefold, namely, to testify of God's love even to those who rejected it, to render them inexcusable for their unbelief, and to increase their condemnation for sin.<sup>33</sup> These may appear mutually exclusive, but they are all present in Calvin's thought, and a full account of Calvin's teaching must encompass them all.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3 (Battles, 1:292; CO, 2:211).

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.12 (Battles, 1:556; CO, 2:407).

<sup>28</sup> Blacketer, 'Three Points', p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', 56.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.32 (Battles, 1:579; CO, 2:424).

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.32 (Battles, 1:579; CO, 2:424). Calvin here also notes that God 'witnesses his benevolence' to the wicked in that they 'are plied with the huge and repeated benefits of God's bounty'.

<sup>32</sup> Blacketer, 'Three Points', pp. 54-5.

<sup>33</sup> On rendering the non-elect inexcusable, see Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.17 (Battles, 2:985; CO, 2:727).

<sup>34</sup> There is an element of truth in Balserak's statement that 'Calvin's thought is one of contrasts, of extremes, of tensions and dichotomies; a theology which is difficult to assimilate whole'; Balserak, *Divinity Compromised*, p. 188.

Calvin in the *Institutes* also outlined the uses of the gospel offer for believers. The free offer of the gospel was essential for the 'pious' who accepted it, for without a general and indiscriminate offer of the gospel promises it would be impossible for anyone to come to faith.<sup>35</sup> He stated that God's mercy could not be embraced 'if he had not offered (*offerret*) it in his word'.<sup>36</sup> Calvin therefore closely related faith and the gospel offer, explicating the former by nothing that 'Faith embraces Christ as offered (*offertur*) to us by the Father (cf. John 6:29)'.<sup>37</sup>

The connection of faith to the free offer highlighted that the promises of the gospel were, for Calvin, from one perspective, conditional. The condition was faith: 'When we receive the promises in faith, we know that then and only then do they become effective in us. On the contrary, when faith is snuffed out, the promise is abolished at the same time.'<sup>38</sup> Scholarship on Calvin has not always recognized the importance of faith as a condition in his thought.<sup>39</sup> D.G. Mullan, however, correctly notes that 'it is important ... not to create a straw man who somewhere, sometime, believed that the gospel could be proclaimed in absolute terms, without any suggestion of an appeal for faith and repentance on the part of the hearers'.<sup>40</sup> In the elect the condition is fulfilled by God's effectual grace, and they receive the gospel. In the reprobate the condition remains unfulfilled.

One final matter in the *Institutes* which related to the place of the free offer in Calvin's theology was its central role in assurance. Doubt was to be silenced by the truth that 'he willingly offers (*sponte offert*) himself as shepherd ... let us therefore embrace Christ, who is graciously offered to us (*benigne nobis expositum*), and comes to meet us'.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Calvin's pastoral advice to those who lacked assurance was to look once again to the

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.29 (Battles, 1:575; CO, 2:421-2).

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.7 (Battles, 1:550; CO, 2:403).

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.8 (Battles, 1:552; CO, 2:404).

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.17 (Battles, 2:985; CO, 2:727). Archibald correctly notes that 'The 'free offer' is, in a sense, *conditional*': Paul Archibald, 'A Comparative Study of John Calvin and Theodore Beza on the Doctrine of the Extent of the Atonement' (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998), p. 220.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 210.

<sup>40</sup> David George Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism 1590-1638* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 179. See also Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree, Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.6 (Battles 2:971-2; CO, 2:717).



mercies freely offered in the gospel, which, as noted above, provided the ground for faith to embrace Christ.

Moving to Calvin's theological treatises, the difficulty in simply equating 'offer' with 'present' becomes clear when the language used by Calvin in *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* is examined. In this work Calvin is clear that the reprobate (*reprobos*) experience the same outward call as the elect do for 'God promiscuously (*promiscue*) invites (*invitat*) [them] to penitence and faith along with His own sons'.<sup>42</sup> He does not deny that 'the Gospel offers (*offerat*) salvation (*salutem*) to all' or that it is 'salvific (*salvificam*) for all'.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the question is not whether God 'offers' salvation to all in the gospel, but for what end, and with what purpose? And in this treatise Calvin is consistent with his teaching in the *Institutes*. He again constantly denies that God *intends* the salvation of all.<sup>44</sup> The Gospel invitation is a savour of death for the reprobate and though the 'mercy of God is offered equally to both kinds of men (*communiter offerri utrisque Dei misericordiam*)' the reprobate are simply 'rendered only inexcusable (*inexcusabiles*)'.<sup>45</sup> While the gospel offer is real and its promises 'invite all men to salvation (*ad salutem invitant*)' it does not 'simply and positively declare what God has decreed in His secret counsel (*arcano suo consilio*)'; it instead shows the revealed will of God.<sup>46</sup> This said, the 'external preaching of the Gospel' remains a 'merciful invitation (*quos benigne ad Christum invitat*)' to all who hear it.<sup>47</sup>

In another treatise dealing extensively with these matters, the *Secret Providence of God*, Calvin again states that 'God invites (*invitet*) all men

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *CEPG*, 70; *CO*, 8:272.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *CEPG*, 103; *CO*, 8:298. Also, 'reconciliation is offered to all (*offeratur omnibus reconciliatio*) through Him'; Calvin, *CEPG*, 149; *CO*, 8:336.

<sup>44</sup> For example, 'no one unless deprived of sense and judgment can believe that salvation is ordained in the secret counsel of God (*arcano Deo consilio*) equally for all'. Calvin, *CEPG*, 109; *CO*, 8:303. See Blacketer, 'Three Points', pp. 55-6. However, this does not demonstrate *of itself* that Calvin denied God offered salvation to all to whom the gospel came.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *CEPG*, p. 103; *CO*, 8:299.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *CEPG*, p. 106; *CO*, 8:301. This should not be taken as entailing in itself that the gospel is not an offer, as Blacketer does. Blacketer, 'Three Points', p. 55. Blacketer highlights that Calvin's Latin statement 'though reconciliation is offered to all (*offeratur omnibus reconciliatio*)' is translated in the French as 'presented' (*presente*). Compare Calvin, *CEPG*, 149; *CO*, 8:336 with Blacketer, 'Three Points', p. 56. However, given the evidence from Calvin's French translation of the *Institutes* (where invite (*invite*) and offer (*offert*) are used) and his sermons on Deuteronomy, this example does not constitute sufficient evidence to define Calvin's understanding of 'offer'.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *CEPG*, p. 10; *CO*, 8:304.

to repentance'.<sup>48</sup> Echoing his commentary on Christ's lament over impenitent Jerusalem (Luke 13:34), Calvin holds that this reflects 'his public will (*aperta voluntate*)'.<sup>49</sup> This in turn flowed from the fact that God showed unbelieving (indeed reprobate) Israel 'great kindness (*tot beneficia*) ... [which is] nothing other than God expanding his wings to protect them, if their untamed wildness had not dragged them off somewhere else'.<sup>50</sup> Calvin vigorously responds to the charge that this simply amounts to 'hypocrisy (*hypocritam*)'. That is, if Christ has a 'public' will which calls Jerusalem to him for salvation, and which shows Jerusalem 'kindness', while not decreetively electing Jerusalem, Christ (considered here by Calvin as God) is inconsistent with himself. Calvin stated in response that to 'allure by voice and by offering benefits (*voce et beneficiis allicere*)' but to withhold the saving work of the Holy Spirit is not to act in a 'contradictory' way.<sup>51</sup> He explained that 'the mode of gathering that Christ mourns as fruitless and vain must differ from the efficacious call that he mentions elsewhere'.<sup>52</sup> The one is the revealed will, the other is the secret will of decree. Still, 'God gives no insincere (*ficte*) precepts but seriously (*serio*) reveals what he wills and commands'.<sup>53</sup> This seriousness does not consist in an intention to save the reprobate but does 'warn' them by an 'external word'.<sup>54</sup> God therefore 'invites (*invitans*) the whole crowd to himself' but only 'draws a few by his secret inspiration to obedience'.<sup>55</sup> Calvin sees no reason for this invitation to be regarded as a 'lie'.<sup>56</sup>

What is important is that in Calvin's response to the charge of 'hypocrisy' here (and elsewhere) he nowhere denies that God 'invites' and even 'allures' all. Nor does he deny that God shows 'kindness' to all. Rather, he simply insists this is not inconsistent with a sovereign election of only some. Whilst these two concepts may be difficult to hold together, Calvin in his writings does.<sup>57</sup> Thus, despite any difficulties it created, Calvin

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 71; *CO*, 9:292.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 98; *CO*, 9:305.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 98; *CO*, 9:305.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 99; *CO*, 9:305.

<sup>52</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 100; *CO*, 9:306.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 100; *CO*, 9:306. Calvin clearly denied that God *decreetively* wills the salvation of all, e.g., Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 73; *CO*, 9:293.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 100; *CO*, 9:306.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 100; *CO*, 9:306. Compare also Calvin's later statement where he speaks of Christ 'inviting all to himself without exception (*ubi omnes sine exceptione externa voce ad se invitans*)'. Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 117; *CO*, 9:315.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *TSPG*, p. 100; *CO*, 9:306.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Anthony Hoekema, 'The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching', *Calvin Theological Journal* 2 (1967), 135; *Saved by Grace*, 5-7.

maintained a doctrine of a free offer of the gospel, even to the extent of making it an expression of God's revealed will that all be saved.<sup>58</sup> As G. Michael Thomas notes, Calvin held together 'the apparent contradiction between a sincere universal promise and an unchangeable decree of particular election'.<sup>59</sup>

### CALVIN'S COMMENTARIES

Calvin's comments on Ezekiel 18:23 go to the heart of his doctrine of the gospel offer. He here affirms 'that God desires nothing more earnestly (*nihil magis cupere*) than that those who were perishing and rushing to destruction should return into the way of safety'.<sup>60</sup> Thus there is clearly a sense in which Calvin maintains that God desires the repentance and salvation of the reprobate. This universal desire was even made the basis for the preaching of the gospel: 'And for this reason not only is the Gospel spread abroad in the world, but God wished to bear witness (*voluit Deus testatum*) through all ages how inclined he is to pity ... In the Gospel we hear how familiarly he addresses us when he promises us pardon (Luke 1:78). And this is the knowledge of salvation, to embrace his mercy which he offers us in Christ (*quae nobis in Christo offertur*).'<sup>61</sup>

Calvin was aware of the tension here between this universal desire and the decree of election. He responded to this by noting first that 'the Prophet [Ezekiel] does not here speak of God's secret counsel (*arcano Dei consilio*)'.<sup>62</sup> He then outlined his distinction between the secret and

<sup>58</sup> Pace Blacketer, 'Three Points', p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> G.M. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 12:246 [hereafter CTS]; CO, 40:445. This contradicts Baskwell's assertion that 'Calvin is emphatic that God does not desire the salvation of the reprobate ... and the preaching of the Gospel is in no way 'grace' to all those that hear it'. Baskwell, *Herman Hoeksema*, pp. 244-5.

<sup>61</sup> CTS, 12:246-7; CO, 40:445. Compare also Calvin's exposition of this verse elsewhere: 'God leaves nothing undone which would lead to people being led back into the way of salvation (*salutis viam*) if only they were in a healthy condition ... So God wills that the dying should live (*Vult ergo Deus morientem vivere*) (so far as it is right for us to judge his will) in that he helps man by all [kinds of] support'. John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. by Anthony N. S. Lane; trans. by G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 199; CO, 6:371.

<sup>62</sup> CTS, 12:247; CO, 40:445. See, Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, p. 223.

revealed will of God. This meant that God was not duplicitous, in that he willed and did not will the same thing in the same way, but rather he willed the same thing in ‘a manner inscrutable to us (*et quidem nobis incognitis*)’.<sup>63</sup> Even though his will was one and simple (*simplex*), because of the finite nature of creatures, there had to be ‘variety (*varietas*)’ in the way it was understood and beheld.<sup>64</sup> This was not a contradiction, it was a confession of creatureliness, which meant that ‘it is not surprising that our eyes should be blinded by intense light, so that we cannot certainly judge how God wishes all to be saved (*quomodo velit Deus omnes salvos fieri*), and yet has devoted all the reprobate to eternal destruction, and wishes them to perish (*et velit illos perire*)’.<sup>65</sup>

Thus Calvin’s response fell back ultimately on the fact that humans are unable to go beyond *theologia ectypa* and therefore cannot expect to reconcile all truths with one another. Any who argued that God was guilty of deception in sincerely inviting all to partake of salvation while having decreed only a limited number will enjoy that salvation were, for Calvin, ‘arguing foolishly’, because they failed to make the distinction that he did between the revealed and hidden will.<sup>66</sup> Calvin was clear that in this passage God was taking on the character of his revealed will: ‘we must remark that God puts on a twofold character (*duplicem personam induere*): for he here wishes to be taken (*aestimari*) at his word’.<sup>67</sup>

This willingness to let Ezekiel 18:23 speak on its own terms justifies Beach’s conclusion that Calvin never resorts to ‘deductavistic exegesis from the secret decree’.<sup>68</sup> Rather he ‘lets the words of the text carry their own meaning, without trying to theologise his way out of a conundrum’.<sup>69</sup> Simply because Calvin believed in sovereign election did not give him *carte blanche* to use election to mitigate the teaching of Scripture. Instead, Calvin taught that ‘God lovingly calls all people to himself’ and that in some sense ‘God desires or wills the salvation of all’ and yet that they were not inconsistent with predestination.<sup>70</sup> Beach highlights that the former related to the revealed will of God, and the later the secret will, and so there was no contradiction.<sup>71</sup> Thus Calvin’s teaching on the distinction in

<sup>63</sup> CTS, 12:247; CO, 40:445.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> CTS, 12:248; CO, 40:446.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Beach, ‘Calvin’s Treatment’, p. 68.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

the one will of God explains his teaching on the gospel offer, rather than precludes it.

Calvin commented similarly on Christ's lament over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37.<sup>72</sup> He highlighted that 'God's grace (*gratia*) had been rejected at Jerusalem' and that 'God's approach to the Jews had been to attract (*allicere*) them with gentleness and friendship (*comiter et blande*), and His kindness (*benignitate*) brought Him no success'.<sup>73</sup> To this people who 'had spurned kind gestures of more than a mother's love' Christ 'offered a wonderful and incomparable proof of love (*incomparabile amoris documentum*) that He did not mind coming down to endearments to win rebels to His service'.<sup>74</sup> Indeed whenever the 'Word of God' was put before Israel, 'He bares His breast to us with maternal kindness (*materna dulcedine*)... [and] the humble affection of a hen fostering her chicks'.<sup>75</sup> To this rebellious people God 'daily held out His hands to embrace (*amplexandum*) [them]' and yet he 'gained nothing'.<sup>76</sup> If this display of grace and kindness to (ultimately reprobate) Israel was not enough, 'to us today His invitation (*invitat*), through His Son, is far more familiar and kind (*familiarius et suavius*)'.<sup>77</sup> It was against a background of the rejection of gospel invitations expressive of love and grace that Christ lamented over a lost people.

Given that he spoke of the Jews experiencing God's grace, kindness and love, and that Christ lamented over the Jews rejection of these, Calvin knew he had to respond to the 'sophists' who used these verses to deny 'God's secret predestination (*arcanum Dei praedestinationem*)'.<sup>78</sup> He did not reply by stating that Christ here was simply speaking in his humanity; rather he acknowledged that 'Christ is speaking in the Person of God (*Christum loqui in Dei persona*) ... these words really belong to his eternal Godhead'.<sup>79</sup> Given that God was speaking here, how did Calvin har-

<sup>72</sup> Compare also Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', pp. 65-6.

<sup>73</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; trans. by various; 12 vols.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 3:68 [hereafter *CNTC*]; *CO*, 45:642.

<sup>74</sup> *CNTC*, 3:68; *CO*, 45:642.

<sup>75</sup> *CNTC*, 3:68; *CO*, 45:642.

<sup>76</sup> *CNTC*, 3:68; *CO*, 45:643.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* It is precisely because of the loving, gracious, nature of the gospel invitation that its rejection entails 'dreadful vengeance'. Thus those who 'with deliberate malice reject the grace of Christ ... suffer the heavier punishment'; Calvin, *CEPG*, 155-6; *CO*, 8:342.

<sup>78</sup> *CNTC*, 3:69; *CO*, 45:643.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* Calvin held that the gospel invitation came ultimately not from the preacher, but from God himself: 'God then not only employs men to lead us to himself, but comes forth in a manner himself to meet us, and rises early

monize this verse with election and answer the ‘sophists’? He, began by expounding his understanding of the free offer of the gospel and what this meant: ‘in His Word he calls (*vocet*) all alike to salvation, and this is the object of preaching, that all should take refuge in His faith... it is right to say that He wishes all (*velle omnes*) to gather to him’.<sup>80</sup> Then he reverted to his standard exegetical techniques to safeguard his doctrine of election: ‘here there is no description of the secret council of God (*arcanum Dei consilium*) – just his wishes (*sed voluntas*)’.<sup>81</sup> Calvin was aware that some believed that such a distinction between a revealed and hidden will was ‘absurd (*absurde*)’, and so he proceeded: ‘I answer that this is exactly our belief, that His will is one and undivided (*unicam et simplicem*); but because our minds cannot plumb the profound depths of his secret election to suit our infirmity, the will of God (*Dei voluntatem*) is set before us as double (*bifariam*)’.<sup>82</sup> Richard Muller comments: ‘So, too, in Matthew 23:37, Calvin presses the distinction between the secret and revealed will of God, noting that the indiscriminate and universal call of the gospel expresses the revealed will of God that all ought to be saved, not the secret will or purpose of God to save his elect’.<sup>83</sup> That there was a revealed will for the salvation of all was important, in that it left those who did not come ‘without excuse’.<sup>84</sup>

Calvin followed the same line of reasoning on 2 Peter 3:9.<sup>85</sup> He talked first of God’s ‘wondrous love towards the human race (*Mirus hie erga humanum genus amor*)’ expressed in a ‘desire that all men be saved (*quod omnes vult esse salvos*)’.<sup>86</sup> This reflected God’s will ‘as it is made known to us in the Gospel (*voluntate quae nobis in evangelio patefit*)’ and not ‘the secret decree of God (*arcano Dei consilio*) by which the wicked are doomed to their own ruin’.<sup>87</sup> Thus Calvin’s standard distinction between the revealed and hidden will was again utilised to harmonise his comments with his understanding of election.

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as one solicitous for our salvation (*quia sollicitus est de salute nostra*). *CTS*, 9:403; *CO* 37:696.

<sup>80</sup> *CNTC*, 3:69; *CO*, 45:643.

<sup>81</sup> *CNTC*, 3:69; *CO*, 45:643-4.

<sup>82</sup> *CNTC*, 3:69; *CO*, 45:644.

<sup>83</sup> Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:440.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Deum velle omnes colligere, ut quicumque non veniunt sint inexcusabiles.’ *CNTC*, 3:70; *CO*, 45:644.

<sup>85</sup> Compare also Beach’s comments on this verse, Beach, ‘Calvin’s Treatment’, pp. 72-3.

<sup>86</sup> *CNTC*, 12:364; *CO*, 55:475.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*; *CO*, 55:475-6.

The comments by Calvin on John 3:16-17 provide additional insight on his teaching regarding the gospel offer.<sup>88</sup> He believed that the general word 'whosoever' was used 'to invite (*invitet*) indiscriminately (*promiscue*) all to share in life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers'.<sup>89</sup> By doing this God showed he 'is favourable [or propitious, *propitium*] to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ (*sine exceptione omnes ad fidem Christi vocat*)'.<sup>90</sup> However, while 'Christ is open to all and displayed to (*expositus*) all', it remains true that 'God opens the eyes of the elect only that they may seek Him by faith'.<sup>91</sup> A universal gospel invitation to all is therefore accompanied a sovereign election only of some. Moving to reflect on John 3:17, Calvin proceeded to expand on the relationship of Christ to the non-elect. While they experience greater condemnation for despising the grace of God, this is not due to the nature of the gospel itself for 'When elsewhere Christ says that He is come for judgment, when He is said to be set for the falling of many, it may be regarded as accidental (*accidentale*), or so to say foreign (*adventitium*). For those who reject the grace offered (*oblatam in eo gratiam*) in Him deserve to find Him the judge and avenger of such shocking contempt'.<sup>92</sup> In this context it is worth considering Calvin's understanding of the proclamation of the gospel as a 'savour of life' and as a 'savour of death'. Calvin is adamant that the gospel being a 'savour of death' still 'promotes God's glory by bringing to the reprobate a just condemnation'.<sup>93</sup> However, Calvin is equally insistent that the gospel is 'the ministry of life (*ministerium vitae*)' and that while for unbelievers 'it is an occasion of condemnation ... it is they who make it so'.<sup>94</sup> Thus 'the proper (*proprium*) function of the Gospel is always to be distinguished from what we may call its accidental function (*ab accidentali*), which must be imputed to the depravity of men by which life is turned into death'.<sup>95</sup>

Similarly, while it is true in Calvin's thought that the gospel ultimately brings greater judgement on the reprobate, and further that this is decreed by God, to portray this as the only purpose and relation of the

<sup>88</sup> Compare also Beach's comments on these verses, Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', pp. 64-5.

<sup>89</sup> *CNTC*, 4:74; *CO*, 47:65.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* Compare Calvin's comments on Jeremiah 7:25-26, *CTS*, 9:403; *CO* 37:696. See Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', p. 66.

<sup>91</sup> *CNTC*, 4:75; *CO*, 47:65.

<sup>92</sup> *CNTC*, 4:75-76; *CO*, 47:66.

<sup>93</sup> *CNTC*, 10:35; *CO*, 50:34.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* See also Calvin's exposition of 2 Corinthians 2:16, *CTS*, 20:161; *CO*, 50:34. See further, De Jong, *The Well-Meant Gospel Offer*, p. 124.

gospel to the reprobate does not reflect the full breadth of Calvin's teaching. In addition to Calvin's material surveyed above, in his sermons on Deuteronomy he observed 'that Saint John saith generally that he loved the world. And why? For Jesus Christ offereth himself to all men without exception to be their redeemer (*Car Iesus Christ s'est offert en general à tous sans exception, pour Redempteur*)'.<sup>96</sup> He developed this by speaking of 'three degrees of the love that God hath showed us in our Lord Jesus Christ (*trois degrez de l'amour que Dieu à monsté en nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ*)'. He stated that 'the first degree of love, which extendeth to all men (*à tous hommes*), inasmuch as Jesus Christ reacheth out his arms to call (*appeller*) and allure (*convier*) all men, both great and small, and to win them to him (*les gagner à soy*)'. Calvin noted a second degree of love, indeed 'special love (*amour special*)', which was evident towards those 'to whom the gospel is preached'. Both these degrees of love were distinguished from the love demonstrated in effectual calling, which is peculiar to those God gives the gift of the Holy Ghost.<sup>97</sup> In failing to note that, for Calvin, in some sense the gospel offer expressed a general love, Blacketer has left unacknowledged one facet of the Reformer's teaching. Indeed in his commentary on Romans 5:18 Calvin explicitly states that Christ is 'offered (*offertur*) by the goodness of God (*Dei benignitate*) without distinction to all men (*omnibus indifferenter*), yet not all receive Him'.<sup>98</sup> What is God's goodness to the undeserving, if it is not grace?

Calvin's commentaries are also instructive in demonstrating how Calvin defined 'offer', and in particular whether Calvin's use of *offere* should be translated as 'presented' rather than 'offered'. In examining the meaning of 'offer' Mark Beach focuses on Calvin's commentary on Romans 5:18 and the statement that Christ 'is offered [*offertur*] by the goodness of God (*Dei benignitate*) without distinction to all men, yet not all receive him'.<sup>99</sup> Beach argues that if Christ is merely 'displayed' or 'exhibited' the 'the question of *receiving* Christ is irrelevant, for there is nothing to be received in a mere display'.<sup>100</sup> He proceeds to note that Calvin's use of *offere* corresponds to 'the word receive (*apprehendere*), a term that means to *take hold of*, to *seize*'.<sup>101</sup> Therefore he concludes that 'to limit the word *offere* to the idea of a mere 'exhibit' or 'display' renders

<sup>96</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (trans. Arthur Golding; 1583; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 167; CO, 26:216.

<sup>97</sup> Calvin, *Deuteronomy*, 167; CO, 26:216.

<sup>98</sup> CNTC, 8:118; CO, 49:101.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', pp. 63-4.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 64.



Calvin's sentence meaningless'.<sup>102</sup> Beach buttresses his argument by considering a number of other texts. He notes Calvin's comments on Romans 1:16 that the 'gospel is indeed offered to all for their salvation (*Offertur quidem evangelium omnibus in salutem*), but its power is not universally manifest'.<sup>103</sup> This highlights that Calvin distinguished between the offer which is 'for their salvation' and the 'power' of the gospel which does not reach all to whom the gospel itself is offered.<sup>104</sup> This 'offer' was to be regarded as equivalent to an 'invitation'. In his commentary Calvin moves almost interchangeably from one term to the other: 'the Gospel invites (*invitet*) all to partake of salvation without any difference ... For Christ is there offered (*offertur*), whose proper office is to save that which had been lost'.<sup>105</sup> The language of 'refusal' is also commented on by Beach, for Calvin spoke of 'those who refuse (*recusant*) to be saved'.<sup>106</sup> Beach concludes that the 'language of 'refusal' comports with the language of offer and invitation ... Calvin's language is that a genuine invitation is given—a genuine offer, and a genuine refusal'.<sup>107</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In view of Calvin's teaching in the *Institutes*, his various theological treatises and his commentaries, his doctrine on the free offer may be summarized as follows. First, there is an offer of the gospel, including its promises, to all. Second, this term 'offer' is equivalent to an invitation, and is not equivalent merely to a presentation or declaration of facts. Third, the free offer is an expression of God's love and grace.<sup>108</sup> Precisely because of this, those who reject it are (as decreed by God) subject to greater condemnation. Fourth, the free offer of the gospel is vital for any believer to come to faith and have assurance. Fifth, it is God's revealed will and desire that all accept his offer of salvation.<sup>109</sup> Sixth, as Beach recognises,

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 64. For the context of Calvin's comments, see *CNTC*, 8:27; *CO*, 49:19.

<sup>104</sup> Beach notes that Calvin explains though the gospel is the 'taste of death' to those who reject it this 'arises not so much from the nature of the Gospel itself (*non tam ab eius natura provenit*), as from their own wickedness'. Calvin, *CNTC*, 8:27; *CO*, 49:19–20.

<sup>105</sup> *CNTC*, 8:27; *CO*, 49:20.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', p. 64.

<sup>108</sup> See also, Archibald, 'Calvin and Beza', p. 217.

<sup>109</sup> Rainbow states that 'Calvin clearly articulated a universal saving will of God that was conditional on faith'. Jonathan Rainbow, *The Will of God and the Cross: An Historical and Theological Study of John Calvin's Doctrine of Limited*

election and reprobation do not 'short-circuit' the gospel.<sup>110</sup> The decree does not reduce the gospel offer in Calvin's thought to 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'. Rather, it is true that 'Calvin is content to say that God wills the salvation of all'.<sup>111</sup>

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*Redemption* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1990), p. 149. See also, Archibald, 'Calvin and Beza', p. 316.

<sup>110</sup> Beach, 'Calvin's Treatment', 75.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

