

# EDITORIAL: HYPER-CALVINIST! (2)

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In our last editorial, we began to examine Phillip R. Johnson's definition of hyper-Calvinism in his influential on-line article, "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism." We distinguished between a serious call (the Latin term *serio* in *Canons* III/IV:8) and a gospel "offer." We noted that it is the Arminian—and not the Calvinist—who defines serious (*serio*) as "a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save all" who hear the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson's next line of attack is to suggest that "all five varieties of hyper-Calvinism undermine evangelism or twist the gospel message."<sup>2</sup> Johnson is aware that many of those whom he labels hyper-Calvinists *do* evangelize, so he accuses them of preaching a truncated gospel:

Many modern hyper-Calvinists salve themselves by thinking their view cannot really be hyper-Calvinism because, after all, they believe in proclaiming the gospel to all. However, the "gospel" they proclaim is a truncated soteriology with an undue emphasis on God's decree as it pertains to the reprobate. One hyper-Calvinist, reacting to my comments about this subject on an e-mail list, declared, "The message of the gospel is that God saves those who are His and damns those who are not." Thus the good news about Christ's death and resurrection is supplanted by a message about election and reprobation—usually with an inordinate stress on reprobation.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Opinions of the Remonstrants" in Peter Y. De Jong (ed.), *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 1968), pp. 226-227.

<sup>2</sup> Remember that Johnson's proposed definition has five parts: "A hyper-Calvinist is someone who either #1 Denies that the gospel call applies to all who hear OR #2 Denies that faith is the duty of every sinner OR #3 Denies that the gospel makes any 'offer' of Christ, salvation or mercy to the non-elect (or denies that the offer of divine mercy is free and universal) OR #4 Denies that there is such a thing as 'common grace' OR #5 Denies that God has any sort of love for the non-elect." All quotations are from Johnson's online article, "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism" ([www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm](http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm)).

First, I would strongly urge Johnson not to be unduly influenced by theological arguments on the internet. All kinds of kooks (many of whom have no ecclesiastical home) love to spend their time as the Athenians of old “in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). It would be unwise to label a group of people as hyper-Calvinists because of the expressed opinion of some unstable soul, who may not be under—or worse, refuses to submit himself to—proper ecclesiastical oversight. Extremism thrives in unsupervised on-line domains.

Second, and more importantly, I do not think I have ever read any theologian—and especially not an ordained minister—who defines the gospel the way in which this cyber-theologian supposedly does. And, more to the point, the BRF and the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) have never expressed such an absurd opinion.

Moreover, Johnson seems to be presupposing that the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection is “good news” to all men. It emphatically is not. The gospel is only good news to those who believe it, that is, to the elect. Paul defines the gospel in I Corinthians 15:3-4: “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.”

The Bible never defines the gospel as the good news that God loves everyone, that Christ died for everyone, that God desires to save everyone and that eternal life is available for everyone, if they will only accept it. That is Arminianism, not the gospel!

The danger Johnson sees in hyper-Calvinist “evangelism” is a failure to preach the gospel call.

This first variety of hyper-Calvinism denies the general, external call, and insists that the gospel should be preached in a way that proclaims the facts about Christ’s work and God’s electing grace—without calling for any kind of response. This is the worst form of hyper-Calvinism in vogue today. I’d class it as an extremely serious error, more dangerous than the worst variety of Arminianism. At least the Arminian preaches

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enough of the gospel for the elect to hear it and be saved. The hyper-Calvinist who denies the gospel call doesn't even believe in calling sinners to Christ. He almost fears to whisper the gospel summons to other believers, lest anyone accuse him of violating divine sovereignty.

Johnson's attitude is astounding. He would prefer to have Arminianism than lose his precious gospel "offer." Hyper-Calvinism is heresy, but so is Arminianism. Johnson reminds me of a man I met once in the liberal Presbyterian church. He said that he could never join a church which denies that God loves, and wants to save, everybody. I asked him if the fact that his church allowed a host of serious errors (higher criticism in the seminary, women in church office, Arminianism, theistic evolution, etc.) perturbed him. He admitted that it did, but that at least he could have the gospel "offer." Straining at gnats and swallowing camels (Matt. 23:24)!

Paul was not one who did not mind what people preached, as long as the "gospel call" was uttered. He tells the Philippians that there were some preaching Christ with wrong motives ("of envy and strife," "of contention, not sincerely," "in pretence;" Phil. 1:15-16, 18), but that he rejoiced because Christ was preached (v. 18). Certainly, Paul preferred preachers to do their work with the right motivation, but what Paul did not tolerate was a changing of the message itself (Gal. 1:6-9).

There are preachers who *are* hyper-Calvinists—although they are few and far between, and their number is almost negligible in comparison to the huge influence of Arminianism in most of the church world. Nevertheless, remember that this article is not written to defend hyper-Calvinists (who are, indeed, heterodox in their doctrine of salvation), but to defend the BRF and the PRC *against the charge of hyper-Calvinism*. I remind the reader of Johnson's accusation: "The best known American hyper-Calvinists are the Protestant Reformed Churches."

### Offer/Invitation Versus Command

To understand the issues correctly we must distinguish between the gospel call (which Johnson advocates and which we do not deny) and the offer (which

Johnson advocates and which we *do* deny). Quite simply, the gospel call is a command. A command is something very different from an offer, even if sometimes an offer or an invitation is couched in the language of a command, that is, in the imperative mood (“Come!” “Take,” etc.). Johnson writes, “The whole thrust of the gospel, properly presented, is to convey an offer (in the sense of a tender, a proffer, or a proposal) of divine peace and mercy to all who come under its hearing.”

But that is *not* what the gospel call is!

What is the gospel? The gospel is good news, announced to sinners by heralds sent by Jesus Christ. The gospel is not a declaration of what man must do. The gospel is not even a declaration of what God would like to do for man. The gospel is a declaration of what God has done.

The gospel cannot be offered. What God has done cannot be offered, as if one were trying to sell something. When I offer you something, I give it with the expectation, hope and desire that you will receive it. “Would you like a cup of tea?” “You are invited to my birthday party.” These are offers—in the sense of a tender, a proffer or a proposal. But the gospel is never an offer. God does not tender, proffer or propose something. In the gospel call, God commands. Therefore, the Bible does not use offer language but serious command language. God never comes to sinners with an offer: “Would you like salvation. It is available for you if you would like it, but if you would rather not, that is fine too.” That is the way in which I offer a cup of tea to a guest in my home. Nothing serious is at stake, if my guest declines my offer of tea.

A much better illustration is that of a summons to a court room. The bailiff of the court comes with a document from the judge. The document is not an offer: “You are cordially invited to attend my court room. I would love it if you could attend, but if it is inconvenient to you, there is no urgency to come.” The summons says, “Come!” And the bailiff has the power of arrest, should you refuse to come, and you *will* go to jail for contempt of court, if you fail to appear at the time appointed.

The classic passage on the gospel call as a command is the “Parable of the Wedding Feast” in Matthew 22. Many have misinterpreted this parable to teach a sincere and gracious *invitation* to the reprobate to receive and enjoy salva-

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tion. However, the word “invite” is inappropriate. Throughout the parable, Jesus uses the Greek verb “call” (*kaleo*):

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son. And sent forth his servants to call [*kaleo*] them that were bidden [i.e., called, *kaleo*] to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden [i.e., called, *kaleo*], Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage (vv. 2-4).

Many of the called refuse to come, and the king destroys them in verse 7. Then Jesus adds, “Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden [i.e., called, *kaleo*] were not worthy” (v. 8). After the wedding feast is filled with guests—who were not only called, but “gathered” (v. 10)—Jesus concludes, “For many are called [*kaleo*], but few are chosen” (v. 14).

The first important lesson from this parable is that both the external preaching, which comes to both elect and reprobate, and the internal call of the Holy Spirit, which is given only to the elect, are referred to as a “call” in Scripture (vv. 3, 14). God calls both the elect and the reprobate, but in different senses. The call of Matthew 22:14 is not the same, therefore, as the call of Romans 8:30 (“whom he called, them he also justified”). Some who are externally “called” (*kaleo*) are not justified and glorified, and therefore we could say that they are not elect. Thus the hyper-Calvinist, who denies that God externally “calls” the reprobate, is proved to be in error. This text is the basis for the classic Calvinist and Reformed distinction between the external call and the internal call.

Second, the word *kaleo* proves to us that the gospel comes as a command to all who hear, not as a gracious invitation. If I invite you to my birthday party, that is a gracious invitation, which you are free to accept or reject without any serious consequences. When God, the King in Matthew 22, calls men and women to the wedding feast of His Son, Jesus Christ, He is greatly displeased when they refuse. Moreover, we read that He destroys those who do not come (v. 7). That cannot seriously be understood as a gracious invitation to them.

*Canons of Dordt* II:5 explains the relationship between the gospel and the call:

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Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.

Notice the careful wording here. God does not promise in the gospel to save sinners, *if they will believe*. God promises to save *all believers*. God does not promise to save the reprobate. But then how do the elect, the true recipients of the promise, hear the promise? Through the preaching! The promise is preached to all and sundry, but the promise applies only to believers. The command must be addressed to all hearers, and that call must go far and wide, but a command implies neither the intention of God nor the ability of man. A command only teaches us what our duty is. God does not promise anything to the reprobate. Indeed, and this element is lacking in Johnson and other modern Calvinists, the gospel call serves to harden the reprobate and to leave them without excuse (Isa. 6:9-10). Does God, then, “offer” something and later rescind His offer when the reprobate refuse to accept it?

*to be continued (DV)*