

EDITORIAL: HYPER-CALVINIST! (3)

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“The best known American hyper-Calvinists are the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).” It is this scurrilous charge of Phillip R. Johnson, in his “A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism,” that we are answering in this series of editorials (www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm).

We have distinguished between the serious call—what the Reformed faith, following the *Canons of Dordt*, does teach—and the gospel offer—what the Reformed faith rejects, and what the Arminians (Remonstrants) *did* teach. We have also explained that gospel preaching is the promiscuous proclamation of a particular promise, in which God promises—not merely offers—salvation to whomsoever believes in Jesus Christ (see *Canons* II:5), and that this promise—not a mere offer—must be preached to all without distinction with the command to repent and believe. We have also stressed the truth that, in the gospel, God is serious—He *seriously* commands all to repent and believe, and He *seriously* promises salvation to all believers, although *He does not merely offer* salvation to all hearers on condition of faith.

This brings us to a consideration of what hyper-Calvinism actually *is*. That we deny that we are purveyors of hyper-Calvinism and that Johnson unfairly characterises the PRC (and the BRF which also rejects the free offer) as hyper-Calvinists, does not mean that hyper-Calvinism does not exist and that it is not a real threat to the church. We must reject *all* error, both on the right and the left.

Johnson garbled the definition earlier in his “Primer” by quoting Peter Toon, who charges hyper-Calvinists with “undermin[ing] the universal duty of sinners to believe savingly in the Lord Jesus with the assurance that Christ actually died for them.”¹ As we shall argue later, God does not command all sinners to be assured that Christ died for them—how could He, when Christ did not die for all men?—but He does command all sinners to believe in Jesus

¹ Peter Toon, “Hyper-Calvinism” in Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 324.

Christ, promising eternal life to all who do. Later, in his own five-point definition, Johnson more accurately writes, “A hyper-Calvinist is someone who ... denies that faith is the duty of every sinner.”

Here, *finally*, we have an accurate definition of hyper-Calvinism, to which we would add that a hyper-Calvinist also denies that repentance is the duty of every sinner. Had Johnson’s “Primer” defined hyper-Calvinism thus, he would have been historically and theologically accurate, and he would not have slandered those who reject the free offer as hyper-Calvinists. A denial of duty faith and duty repentance *is* the hallmark of genuine hyper-Calvinism. A denial of the well-meant or free offer, i.e., a denial of God’s desire to save the reprobate, and a denial of common grace are not hallmarks of hyper-Calvinism. Would that theologians would stop muddying the waters of theological discourse!

We repudiate, reject and oppose hyper-Calvinism’s denial of duty faith and repentance. We insist that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and we are not afraid to press that serious command upon our hearers and readers.²

Both Arminians and hyper-Calvinists make the same basic error. They judge man’s duty according to his ability. The Arminian reasons that, if God commands sinners to repent and believe the gospel (which is true), unregenerate sinners must be able to do this by the power of free will (which is false). The hyper-Calvinist reasons that, if unregenerate sinners are totally depraved and therefore unable to repent and believe (which is true), God cannot command them to repent and believe the gospel (which is false).

We have already argued at length from the Reformed confessions and from Christ’s parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-14) that God calls—not merely invites—more than the elect and that whom He calls, whether elect or reprobate, He calls seriously, but not with a well-meant offer.

Let us reiterate and develop that point. The *Canons* are not hyper-Calvinist in their doctrine of the call, nor do the fathers at Dordt compromise with Arminianism. *Canons* II:6 teaches that “many who are called by the gospel do not repent, nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief.” *Canons* III/IV:9 also

² Please note that the BRF is not a church and, therefore, the BRF, as such, does not preach.

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states that “[some of] those who are called by the ministry of Word refuse to come and be converted.” *Canons* III/IV:10 adds “that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will.” Moreover, *Canons* I:3 avers that by the gospel ministry “men are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified.” In *Canons* III/IV:17, the fathers at Dordt remind us that “the most wise God has ordained [the preaching of the gospel] to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.” In addition, the *Heidelberg Catechism* explains the relationship between God’s command and man’s (in)ability: “God made man capable of performing it [i.e., obedience to His law]; but man ... deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts” (A. 9). The same catechism explains the duty of the sinner to repent: “it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted ...” (A. 84).

One tactic of genuine hyper-Calvinists is to refuse to recognize the distinction between the external call—the command to all to repent and believe—and the internal call—the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in the elect to bring them to saving faith and repentance. Hyper-Calvinists will not acknowledge that the call of Romans 8:28, 30 and Ephesians 4:4 is different from the call of Matthew 22:14. Moreover, because *sometimes* Christ restricts His call to repentance to certain kinds of people, hyper-Calvinists restrict the call of the gospel *always and only* to those whom they call “sensible [i.e., sensitive] sinners.” Hyper-Calvinists might even be zealous in their evangelism; they might preach widely and indiscriminately; they might plant churches; but in their preaching they do not call the hearers to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. A “sensible” sinner is actually a regenerate person, a believer, because a “sensible” sinner is aware of his sin, laments over his misery, and hungers and thirsts after righteousness. According to *Canons* III/IV:R:4, “to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed (Ps. 51:10, 19; Matt. 5:6).” Johnson is, therefore, correct when he writes,

Advocates of this position [i.e., hyper-Calvinism] suggest that each sinner must seek a warrant for his faith before presuming

to exercise faith in Christ. The sinner does this by looking for evidence that he is elect (an utterly absurd notion, since faith is the only real evidence of election).

He could have made reference to *Canons* I:12 and *Canons* V:9-10 in this regard.

Hyper-Calvinists appeal to various statements of Christ. For example, Christ declares, “They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32; cf. Matt. 9:12-13; Mark 2:17). Elsewhere, Christ says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). In Luke 4:18, Christ says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor ... to preach deliverance to the captives ...” In Matthew 11:5, Jesus bids the messengers of John to return to John with this message: “The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”

From this, the hyper-Calvinist concludes that the gospel is preached *only* to the poor (in spirit) or *only* to the meek (Isa. 61:1) or *only* to the captives; that the gospel is preached *only* to the (spiritually) labouring and heavy laden; that God addresses the gospel to no one else, and that therefore the preacher may not address the gospel to anyone else. But the Reformed faith teaches that the promise of the gospel is to be “declared and published” (and therefore addressed) to all men without distinction (*Canons* II:5).

The texts above are not the only ones which bear upon this subject. In one of the earliest examples of Christ’s preaching, we read, “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: *repent ye, and believe* the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15). This was a general call. In Matthew 11:20, Jesus “began ... to upbraid the cities.” Why? “Because they repented not.” If they were not required to repent, why does Christ upbraid them and threaten them with damnation for not repenting? When Christ sent out His disciples, “they went out, and *preached that men should repent*” (Mark 6:12). Before He ascended into heaven, Christ commanded His disciples to “teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19) and “preach the gospel to every

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creature,” adding that “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15-16), for it is His will “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations” (Luke 24:47). No restriction of the call to repentance and faith can be admitted in these passages.

The internal call of grace is limited by election, for “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14), but the external call is not limited—the gospel with the command to repent and believe is to be preached, proclaimed, declared and addressed to all men without distinction. All who come under the hearing of that gospel must be confronted with their *duty* before God to repent and believe. So serious is God in impressing this duty upon all hearers that He threatens eternal damnation upon all who refuse to believe and repent.

Exactly this is what the apostles did in obedience to their Lord. “*Repent*, and be baptized,” said Peter (Acts 2:38). “*Repent* ye therefore, and be converted,” he urged (Acts 3:19). To the unbelieving Sanhedrin, Peter declared, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we *must* be saved” (Acts 4:12). In Antioch of Pisidia, Paul preached, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is *preached unto you* the forgiveness of sins,” adding the warning, “Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish” (Acts 13:38, 41). To the pagans in Lystra, Paul proclaimed, “[We] *preach unto you* that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God” (Acts 14:15). To the trembling Philippian jailor, Paul preached the command and the promise: “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). In Thessalonica, according to Acts 17:3, Paul was “Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, *whom I preach unto you*, is Christ.” To the Athenians, Paul declared, “[God] *commandeth all men* every where to repent” (Acts 17:30). In Acts 19:4, Paul describes John the Baptist’s preaching thus: “John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, *that they should believe* on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” In the synagogue of Ephesus, Paul “spake boldly for the space of three months, *disputing and persuading* the things concerning the kingdom of God,” the result of which preaching was that some “were hardened, and believed not” (Acts 19:8-9). Paul

describes his ministry in Ephesus as “Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, *repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 20:21). In prison, before the ungodly governor Felix, Paul “reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come.” So searching was Paul’s preaching that Felix “trembled,” but he did not repent, although we can be sure that Paul commanded him to repent (Acts 24:25). To unbelieving Herod Agrippa, Paul exclaims, “I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and *altogether such as I am*, except these bonds” (Acts 26:29). At the end of the Acts, we find Paul teaching the gospel, with the result that some believed and some did not believe (Acts 28:23-24, 31).

Clearly, then, we see a pattern in New Testament preaching. Christ and the apostles preached indiscriminately, calling, commanding and urging all men to repent and believe, and promising believers—and only believers—rest, peace, salvation and eternal life. Christ and the apostles did not preach that God loves all men, that Christ died for all men and that God desires the salvation of all men head for head. Thus the New Testament rebukes both real hyper-Calvinists on the one hand, and Arminians with “free-offer Calvinists” on the other hand.

To these obvious truths, the hyper-Calvinist responds with unbiblical distinctions. English hyper-Calvinist Joseph Hussey (1660-1726) called preachers to “preach the Gospel of the kingdom to [unbelievers]” but “do not preach the Gospel of the blood of Christ to them.” Unbelievers are called, he said, to believe in Christ naturally but not with true faith, and to repent with a legal, but not evangelical, repentance.³ As if the Bible knows of different gospels or different kinds of repentance! One hyper-Calvinist whom I encountered recently argued that the “all men every where” of Acts 17:30 must refer to the elect alone. His argument was that Paul goes on to say that God “hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him [i.e., Jesus] from the dead” (v. 31). Since the word for assurance in verse 31 is *pistis*, which is commonly translated “faith,” and since God gives faith as a gift only to His

³ Joseph Hussey, *God’s Operations of Grace But No Offers of Grace* (Elon College, NC: Primitive Publications, 1973), pp. 87, 153, 156-157, cited *with sharp disapproval* by David J. Engelsma in *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFP, repr. 1993), pp. 204-205.

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elect, the “all men” in both verses 30-31 must refer only to the elect. Strange exegesis indeed! The word *pistis* does indeed mean faith, but its meaning is not determined merely from a lexicon, but from the context. The meaning of the phrase here is to furnish proof, to demonstrate something, that is, the resurrection of Christ proves to all men that Christ will judge the world on the Last Day. The resurrection of Christ is clear, objective proof—whether men will believe or not—that Jesus is the Son of God (Rom. 1:4).

A more difficult question is, *What* does God command the reprobate to believe? Clearly, God does not command the reprobate to believe that Christ died for them or to believe that God loves them or to believe that they have eternal life.⁴ No unbeliever has any right to believe that he has eternal life, so long as he remains unbelieving. In fact, the opposite is true: an unbeliever is commanded to believe that the wrath of God remains on him so long as he remains in a state of unbelief. This is “declared and testified to all unbelievers” in the preaching of the gospel (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 84; cf. John 3:36).

The preacher must declare to the unbeliever who God is, what sin is, who Christ is and what Christ has done for sinners, and then call that person to repent and believe. These former steps of explanation are usually skipped by Arminians looking for premature decisions. To say, “Repent and believe in Christ crucified” is not the same as “Repent and believe in Christ who died for you.”

One objection to this is *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 7, where faith is defined as,

an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits (A. 21).

If the reprobate are commanded to believe, are they not commanded to have an assured confidence of personal salvation? The answer is no. No one

⁴ Remember Peter Toon’s Arminian statement that it is “the universal duty of sinners to believe savingly in the Lord Jesus with the assurance that Christ actually died for them.”

is commanded to have assurance *unless he believes*. Faith, believing the truth and trusting in Jesus, is first, and confidence is a necessary fruit of faith. Without faith—without receiving for truth all things revealed in the Word of God and without resting on Christ alone for salvation, with a repudiation of all works as the ground of salvation—there can be no assurance. Faith is the way in which the sinner receives the benefit of justification. The *Heidelberg Catechism* in Lord’s Day 23 says, “God ... imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ ... inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart” and “I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only” (A. 60, 61). Moreover, Lord’s Day 31 says that the preaching opens the kingdom of God,

when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ’s merits (A. 84).

One who does not receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith cannot possibly have personal assurance of the forgiveness of sins.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* simply summarizes the teaching of Scripture: “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16); “Repent ... and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38); “Repent ... that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19); “whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43); “And by him all that believe are justified ...” (Acts 13:39); “Believe ... and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31). To the believer eternal life is promised, and the believer can and must have assurance of his personal salvation. To the unbeliever nothing is promised, and the unbeliever may not have any assurance whatsoever—except that he will be damned if he continues in his unbelief and impenitence.

Let Engelsma—whose book Johnson calls “terribly misleading” with “selective quoting and interpretive gymnastics,” none of which charges he makes any attempt to prove—explain:

The message proclaimed in the gospel is not something that may ever merely be received for information, nor does it ever

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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.⁵

Let the gospel be preached clearly, urgently, promiscuously—with the gospel call, but not a mere offer, to all to whom God is pleased to send the gospel. Then we act as true, Reformed Calvinists, eschewing both Arminian offer theology and real hyper-Calvinism.

... to be continued (DV)

Editor's Note

At the biennial meeting of the British Reformed Fellowship, we decided to add a rubric to the *Journal* in which readers' questions could be answered. This is in keeping with our stated aims, one of which is, "To provide a source of advice, information and support to Reformed Christians who are living and working in isolation. To provide practical answers to difficult questions arising among Reformed Christians isolated from fellowship." We invite readers to submit questions to the Editor.

We hope you enjoy the *Journal*.

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⁵ Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism*, p. 26.