

EDITORIAL: HYPER-CALVINIST! (6)

Rev. Martyn McGeown

A Hyper-Calvinist Reader

I had planned to continue the critique of common grace begun in the last editorial but recently a (real) hyper-Calvinist wrote to me to “correct” my error of duty faith and duty repentance.¹ Remember that hyper-Calvinism is not a denial of the well-meant (or free) offer and common grace, but a denial of *duty faith* and *duty repentance*. In the third editorial in this series, we addressed genuine hyper-Calvinism but more, it appears, needs to be said.

I should stress at this point that I do not intend to answer my hyper-Calvinist objector again. The purpose of this series of editorials is twofold: (1) to answer the charges of hyper-Calvinism that Phil R. Johnson makes against the PRC (and the BRF, which also rejects the teachings of the well-meant offer and common grace) and (2) to repudiate the error of hyper-Calvinism itself. There are some readers who will never be satisfied, and to answer every argument and objection would entangle the editor in interminable debate. This will be the final response to my hyper-Calvinist reader’s objections. I urge the readers of the *BRJ* to understand that, when debating theology or any other subject, wisdom dictates when one has reached the point where further discussion would be fruitless. Let us all aim to know when we have reached that stage in our personal interactions! I hope we can disagree without rancour.

We may have misconceptions about hyper-Calvinism. The popular caricature is of a church which never preaches the gospel to anyone except its own members. That, however, is *not* the issue—the issue is *what* does the hyper-Calvinist preach? A person might preach to huge crowds of unbelievers and still be theologically a hyper-Calvinist. The issue that the reader brings up is this: *to whom* do we address the *command* to repent and believe, and (related to that) *to whom* do we address the *promise*, and how are the command and the promise connected?

¹ The reader in question calls *himself* a hyper-Calvinist but he will not be named in the editorial.

British Reformed Journal

A good place to start is with the *Canons of Dordt*, which authoritatively define true Calvinism. *Canons* I:3 states, “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 crucified.*” That the reference here is to the external call is clear from *Canons* I:4, which speaks of those “who believe not.” *Canons* II:5 states,

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.

Again, *Canons* II:6 makes clear that not all who hear that command to repent and believe do actually believe (“many who are called by the gospel do not repent, nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief”). Clearest of all is *Canons* III/IV:8, where we read,

As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly shown in His Word, what is pleasing to Him, namely, *that those who are called should come to Him. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him.*

The context, again, makes clear that the external call is the focus: “[There are] those who are called by the ministry of the Word [who] refuse to come and be converted” (*Canons* III/IV:9). We have examined these creedal references in earlier editorials.

The *Canons* do not teach Arminianism and they refuse to overreact to Arminianism by teaching hyper-Calvinism. They teach the biblical and Reformed doctrine of the call without confusing it with an Arminian offer. They teach the universal and serious command to all (including the reprobate) to believe in Christ and to repent of sin, while they restrict the promise to the “whosoever believeth” or the elect.

More Biblical Proof

In the third editorial in this series, I included a number of texts to prove that Christ and the apostles commanded repentance and faith of everyone in their audience.² Let me include a few more. To the unregenerate, hypocritical and, as far as we can tell, reprobate Pharisees and Sadducees, John the Baptist spoke these words: “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:7-8). To do that is to go beyond repentance—it is to show evidence of genuine conversion! Could these unbelieving religionists do that? No, but they were commanded to do it. To the hypocritical, covetous, erstwhile sorcerer, Simon, whose heart was “not right in the sight of God” and who was, according to Peter’s accurate perception, “in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity,” The apostle urged, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (Acts 8:20-23). Whatever Simon was (elect or reprobate), he certainly was not a “sensible” (spiritually sensitive) sinner. Can one in the bond of iniquity *pray*? Can one in the gall of bitterness *repent*? No, but he was commanded to do it. To King Herod Agrippa, Paul describes his ministry in these words:

Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, *that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance* (Acts 26:19-20).

Notice what Paul does not say: “I preached that only the elect or sensible sinners or spiritually qualified sinners should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.” Paul issued general commands in his preaching and so must all true Calvinists. The risen and exalted Lord Jesus issued a command of repentance to the wicked, stubbornly impenitent, false prophetess Jezebel of Thyatira: “And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not” (Rev. 2:21). Christ adds a warning for her impenitent children: “Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds” (Rev. 2:22).

² Matt. 11:20; Mark 1:14-15; 6:12; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 4:12; 13:38, 41; 14:15; 16:31; 17:3, 30; 19:4, 8-9; 24:25; 26:29; 28:23-24, 31.

We could multiply quotations but one entrenched in hyper-Calvinism will rarely be convinced. Noteworthy about these and many other examples in Scripture is that (1) the command to repent is addressed to all indiscriminately; (2) the preacher, whether John, Peter, Paul or Christ, never promises all the hearers salvation, even conditionally if they repent and believe; and (3) the preacher does not make an offer or express a sincere desire *in God* to save the reprobate. The command is general but the promise is particular.

My hyper-Calvinist reader submits a list of questions. I will not include them all but will only address his main arguments. I will also paraphrase them in places so that the reader can see the force of the question.

The first major issue for my hyper-Calvinist reader is the address of Peter in Acts 2 and 3, and of Paul in Acts 16: “May I command anyone to repent and be converted, and then promise that person the blotting out of his sins?” “Does Peter command the house of Israel to repent, be baptized and save themselves from this untoward generation, and promise them the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost?” “Does Paul command the unbelieving jailor of Philippi to believe, and promise him and his yet unbelieving house salvation?” “Will you walk up to any man and proclaim, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, and your house?’” Finally, to make my position seem ridiculous, he asks, “Will you say, ‘O Iscariot and Jezebel, repent, and be baptized for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Save yourselves from this untoward generation?’”

These are interesting questions, and they reveal the confusion in my hyper-Calvinist reader’s mind. He imagines that, if you teach duty faith and duty repentance, which is my position, it inevitably means that God promises salvation to all whom He commands to repent and believe, which I deny.

The Call and the Promise

Acts 2 records Peter’s Pentecost sermon, at the end of which, he declares, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made this same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (v. 36). The effect of the sermon is conviction of sin for “they were pricked in their heart” (v. 37). This does not necessarily mean regeneration and certainly no preacher can know with certainty that a display of conviction of sin is genuine. Nevertheless,

Editorial: Hyper-Calvinist!

the frightened sinners cry out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (v. 37). Peter ministers the gospel to them. At this point, we wonder what the hyper-Calvinist would say. Would he say, “Repent,” and thus issue a command? Would he say, “There is nothing you can do. You are totally depraved. It is utterly hopeless. The best thing you can do is to wait to see if God converts you”? We know what Peter said: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (v. 38). Moreover, “with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation” (v. 40).

We see from Acts 2 what a preacher must do. First, he must preach the command (“Repent,” “be baptized” and “save yourselves” are *imperatives*). Second, he must preach the command to everyone: “every one of you” (v. 38). Third, he must preach the promise. Without the promise, the hearers will not know to whom salvation pertains.

We see how Peter preaches the promise in verses 38-39: “And ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” What my hyper-Calvinist reader does not acknowledge is that Peter commands all to repent and believe, but he promises salvation (“the gift of the Holy Ghost” and by implication “the remission of sins”) *only to believers*. The promise is not conditional. Peter does not say, “God promises to each of you and to each of your children, that, *if* you and they repent and believe, you and they shall be saved.”

The promise is unconditional, as Peter explains with that qualifying clause at the end of verse 39, “even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” That phrase qualifies or limits the “you,” the “children” and the “afar off.” Peter does not promise in the name of God salvation to everyone in his Jewish audience (“you”) or to all of their children (“your children”) or to all the Gentiles (“afar off”)—he promises salvation to the “called” (the effectually called) within those three groups. Nevertheless, Peter does not limit the command to those whom God effectually calls. Peter commands *everyone* in the audience to repent and believe in Christ. That cannot be denied.

The same scenario plays out in Acts 3, where Peter addresses a crowd of unbelieving Jews who have gathered in response to a miracle that he has

performed at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. After charging them with killing the Christ, he issues the command, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (v. 19). The words “repent” and “be converted” are *imperatives*, and there is no indication here that the people had been pricked in their hearts before Peter issued the command to repent.

In Acts 3:19, the people must (1) repent and (2) be converted (or, literally, “turn”). The purpose of such repentance and turning is “that [their] sins may be blotted out.” Peter’s words are both a command and a promise, a command to all the hearers to repent, and a promise of the blotting out of sins to all who repent and are converted. Peter’s words do not constitute a conditional promise but identify the true recipients of the promised blessing—*only* those who repent and believe will be forgiven. The hearers are *not able* to repent and be converted, but *the obligation to do so* still rests on them. If they do not repent, they “shall be destroyed from among the people” (v. 23).

Acts 16 records one of the most dramatic conversions in the New Testament, the conversion of the Philippian jailor. Awoken from his sleep by a miraculous earthquake, and knowing that Paul and Silas were men of God, the terrified jailor cries out, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (v. 30). Again, I ask the question of my hyper-Calvinist reader, “What would you say to a person who asked you that question?” What ought a preacher today respond to a person who asks such a question? Will we respond, “Do not be foolish! There is nothing you can do. You must stand still and see the salvation of God”? That is not what Paul and Silas responded. “And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (v. 31).

Grammatically, again, the verb “believe” is in the *imperative*—it is a command. The words “thou shalt be saved” constitute a promise. That presents a problem to my hyper-Calvinist reader. Is Paul declaring to the jailor, whose eternal destiny (elect or reprobate) and whose spiritual state (regenerate or unregenerate) are unknown to the apostle that, *if he believes*, he shall be saved, that is, is Paul preaching a *conditional* promise to the jailor? Then may the preacher today declare to any unbeliever, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and, if you believe, God promises you salvation”? We answer in the negative. Paul commands the jailor, and we command everyone to believe. The promise (“and thou shalt be saved”) pertains only to believers. The jailor

Editorial: Hyper-Calvinist!

can only become partaker of the promised salvation through faith. However, salvation does not depend on the jailor, for Scripture everywhere proclaims that repentance, faith and salvation are gifts of God (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29).

Therefore, in answer to my hyper-Calvinist reader, I can and will preach to any person, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house.” I can and must do that without any embarrassment or hesitation. I can and must urge upon the audience to which I speak (whether to an audience of thousands or to an audience of one) the command to believe, and I can and must proclaim to that same audience that God graciously promises salvation to believers and to them only.

What about Judas Iscariot and Jezebel? The same command pertains (pertained) to them. Judas was under the solemn obligation to believe in Jesus Christ. Judas was not exempt from that command because he was a known reprobate. In fact, he was *not* a known reprobate, except to Christ. Christ even commanded Jezebel (the New Testament Jezebel of Revelation 2) to repent, as we have noted above. Although Judas could not repent and although God still commanded Judas to repent, Judas was not promised salvation. Such a promise would be impossible, since God had eternally reprobated Judas, and excluded him from Christ’s atonement and from participation in the grace of the Spirit. Nevertheless, if I meet a Judas Iscariot today, that is, if I meet a reprobate, I can and must in the preaching declare to him, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house.” I must call him to repentance and faith, despite the fact that I can never identify a reprobate in the audience, and despite the fact that the preaching will be the “savour of death unto death” to him (II Cor. 2:16).

Another example raised by my hyper-Calvinist reader is Christ’s preaching to the rich young ruler: “Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). Although the man appears not to have been immediately converted, we know from Mark 10:21 that, since Jesus loved him, he was an elect sinner who must have been converted at some point before he died. The grammar of Luke 18:22 is similar to the passages we have addressed earlier: four imperatives (“sell,” “distribute,” “come” and “follow”) and one future tense (“thou shalt have”), which constitutes a promise. Command and promise—that is the

biblical pattern. Christ does not promise everyone treasure in heaven, nor does He promise this man treasure in heaven on condition that he repents of his covetousness, which is the essence of His command here. He issues the command with a promise but a promise which only pertains to the penitent. The preacher can urge the same thing upon all his hearers today: “Repent, believe in Jesus, and you shall have treasure in heaven.” There is no Arminianism and no conditional theology here.

What Are Reprobates Commanded to Believe?

My hyper-Calvinist reader and I agree that the reprobate cannot believe and that they cannot have assurance of salvation. Furthermore, I agree with my hyper-Calvinist reader that a reprobate cannot be commanded to believe that Christ died for him/her. Where we disagree is my contention that we can and must in the preaching command a reprobate (with the caveat that we can never identify a reprobate in the audience) to *believe*.

To this my hyper-Calvinist reader urges Hebrews 11:1-2 and 6, which state,

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report ... But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

All men must believe that God *is*. Atheism is sin, for it is the refusal to believe and confess the one true and living God. An unbeliever cannot please God because he does not believe that God is. Unbelievers also do not believe that God rewards those who diligently seek Him, which is why they refuse to seek Him. “The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts” (Ps. 10:4). The reprobate is, however, not commanded to believe that God has a reward for him personally. He is commanded to believe in the God who rewards the seeker. And he is commanded to seek that God.

My hyper-Calvinist reader asks, “If a person has no assurance in the promise of the gospel as applicable to himself, does he have faith?” “If a person does not have assurance that Christ died for his sins, does he have faith?” “Can a

Editorial: Hyper-Calvinist!

person be commanded to believe that Christ has died for his sins if that person is a reprobate?” “Can a person be commanded to believe that Christ has *not* died for his sins, and would such a belief be faith?”

With respect, my hyper-Calvinist reader is over-complicating matters to no good purpose. We need to understand several things. First, we do not know who is elect and reprobate. Second, since we cannot know who is elect and reprobate, we can only issue *general* commands, which God then applies to individual souls for their salvation or hardening according to His sovereign good pleasure. Third, therefore, we can never command an unbeliever, “Believe that Christ died for your sins” or “Believe that Christ did not die for your sins.” We command simply this, “Believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for sinners.” And we add the promise, “He who believes will have salvation and will have assurance that Christ died for his sins.” Beyond that we cannot go. Suffice to say, God does not command a reprobate to believe a lie, nor does He command a reprobate to hypocritical repentance or to counterfeit faith. He commands all men, including the reprobate, to repent and to believe in Jesus Christ. The ground of that command is not in the hearer’s ability, but in the sovereign will and unchangeable righteousness of God.

The Reprobate Are Commanded to Repent

The third part of my hyper-Calvinist reader’s objection is his contention that not all men are commanded to repent. In fact, he says, “Some men are commanded *not* to repent.” He aims to prove this in two ways. First, he attempts to prove that some reprobates (such as Judas) were commanded to sin. Second, he attempts to restrict the command to repent to only certain kinds of sinners. About Judas, my hyper-Calvinist reader writes, “God does not command Judas Iscariot *not* to betray Him, though He laments his betrayal, but rather *commands* it in John 13:27, ‘That thou doest, do quickly.’” He adds, “Christ does not command Judas to believe. He cares for the elect. He cares that Judas betray Him to bring about salvation for the elect.” While it is true that the betrayal of Judas was necessary, that does not make it Judas’ *duty*. To be fair to my hyper-Calvinist reader, he is not suggesting that Judas was duty bound to betray Jesus or that Judas’ betrayal was a righteous act. Judas’ duty was to honour, love and obey Jesus, and to believe in Jesus. Christ

merely commands Judas to do what he has already determined to do *quickly* or without delay. Judas' had planned to perform his dastardly deed after the feast but God decreed the death of Christ to take place at the Passover.

About the Pharisees, the reader writes, "Jesus does not command the Pharisees to repent of their hypocrisy, even though He condemns them for it, but rather commands them to 'fill up the measure of [their] fathers' (Matt. 23:22)." I answer: Christ does not command them to fill up their sins. He speaks ironically, as we would when we say, "Go ahead, do what you are planning to do," even though we do not approve of it. The entire chapter is Christ's denunciation of the Pharisees for their wickedness.

About the inhabitants of certain Galilean cities, the reader writes, "Christ does not command them to repentance or faith—that He condemns them for not having done so does not diminish the fact that He does not command them to do so." But, of course, He commands them to repent! He upbraided them "because they repented not" (Matt. 11:20). There are only three options with respect to their duty: (1) God commands them to repent; (2) God does not command them to repent; (3) God does not care if they repent or not. The holy God commands sinners to repent. The holy God must require sinners to repent. God's purpose with their impenitence, however, is another matter entirely. God's purpose does not determine the sinner's duty. God's command determines the sinner's duty.

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas preach to pagans "that [they] should turn" from idols to the living and true God (v. 15). My hyper-Calvinist reader attempts to circumvent the force of the passage in this way: "Paul addresses in his promiscuous preaching only those whose hearts Paul had filled with food and gladness, which latter term Scripture otherwise applies to the filling of the heart of Christ with gladness at His resurrection (Acts 2:28, quoting Psalm 16:11)." I respond: the address of Paul is general: "Sirs ... [we] preach unto you that *ye* should turn" (Acts 14:15). Notice also that in verse 17 the pronoun changes from "*ye* should turn" to "[God] gave *us* rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling *our* hearts with food and gladness." Paul does not restrict the command, and my hyper-Calvinist reader's appeal to Acts 2:28 ignores the context. No one in Paul's audience, and none of Luke's readers, doubted that Paul was addressing *all* the people in Lystra with the command to repent.

Editorial: Hyper-Calvinist!

In fact, insists my reader, there are *many* places where the inspired writers did not call unbelievers to repentance. It would appear that, in the mind of my hyper-Calvinist reader, the “duty faith” position fails if there is *even one place* where an unbeliever is not called to repent and believe the Gospel. He cites examples in Matthew 23—Christ simply pronounces woes upon the Pharisees (23:13ff.), James 5—James simply calls the rich men to “weep and howl” (5:1), and Jude—Jude simply excoriates the apostates for their many sins. When a biblical writer condemns a person for his sins, the call to repentance is *implied*. When, in the preaching, we hear the condemnation of a particular sin, we are called to repent, even if the minister does not explicitly say, “Repent of this or that sin.”

The arguments of my hyper-Calvinist reader illustrate the lengths to which some will go to avoid the obvious teaching of Scripture. God commands all to repent and believe, despite their inability, and God promises salvation to all who do repent and believe. It only becomes complicated when someone has a deliberate hyper-Calvinist agenda that clouds his exegesis.

The Twofold Call

One final issue is the hyper-Calvinistic interpretation of Matthew 22:12. My hyper-Calvinist reader refuses to acknowledge a twofold call in the Scriptures, arguing that “called” in Matthew 22 is the same as “called” in Revelation 19:9, where we read, “And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.” It is true, of course, that both texts in Matthew 22 and Revelation 19 speak of the marriage supper, but the context is different. In Revelation 17, for example, those who follow Christ are “called, *and* chosen, and faithful” (v. 14), and in Revelation 19, those who are called are “blessed” (v. 9), but in Matthew 22:14, Christ *distinguishes* between the called and the chosen: “For many are called, *but* few are chosen.”

My hyper-Calvinist reader offers the following, to my mind bizarre, exegesis of the parable:

Hypers identify the city in Matthew 22:7 as Jerusalem, the typical abode of the elect. The king’s destruction of the city refers to the truth that Christ died for “those murderers” (v.

7) and vicariously endured eternal fire for their sakes. After this, God sends the Gospel into the whole world to the elect (vv. 9-10), and they hear it and enter the kingdom of God.

No one reading the parable without hyper-Calvinistic bias could possibly come to that conclusion. Those who first heard the parable never imagined that that was Christ's meaning. Here is the obvious meaning: God calls some (in the context, the Jews), who refuse to believe. God judges those unbelievers with damnation. God then calls others, who do believe. God makes them partakers of the blessings of salvation. Christ's explanation for this outcome is (1) many are called—they are "unfeignedly called" as *Canons III/IV:8* explains; (2) of the many who are called, some do not come, which is sinful rebellion, for it is their duty to come, and God commands them to come, and punishes them for not coming; (3) those who do not come, although they were unfeignedly called, are reprobate, that is, they were not chosen; (4) those who do come enter the wedding feast because they are elect.

The true Calvinist preaches the Gospel without an ineffectual offer—he proclaims far and wide the glad tidings of salvation in Christ crucified. He announces that there is salvation full and free for all who come to Jesus Christ. He urges everyone in the audience to repent of sin and to believe in the crucified and risen Saviour. He warns, exhorts and even begs—although *God* never begs—sinners to flee from the wrath to come. He promises to all believers that they will have eternal life. He warns all unbelievers that they will perish, if they refuse to believe in Christ. And he does this knowing that God has an elect people, that Christ died only for that elect people and that the Spirit grants life only to that elect people.

In all this, he avoids Arminian conditionalism and he repudiates stultifying hyper-Calvinism.

Next time, we shall continue our critique of "common grace" (DV).