

The Necessity and Justification for the Free Offer of the Gospel

By Rev Malcolm Watts

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Rowland Hill once visited Bristol to preach the Gospel, commencing his series of sermons on the eve of Bristol Fair. His text was *Isaiah 55.1* – ‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.’ His opening words were: ‘My dear hearers, I guess many of you have come to attend Bristol Fair. So have I. You do not mean to show your goods until tomorrow; but I shall exhibit mine tonight. You are afraid purchasers will not come up to your prices; but I am afraid my buyers will not come down to mine; for mine [striking his hand on the Bible] are “without money and without price”.’

The subject of this article is the theological basis of the Gospel offer. The word ‘offer’ is derived from the Latin *offerre* which literally means ‘to bring to’, for acceptance or rejection. In Freund’s Latin Dictionary, the meaning of *offerre* is said to be ‘to bring before’, ‘to present’, ‘to offer’. The following example is given of its usage in Latin: ‘a good opportunity presented itself to me.’ Clearly, the thought is not that an opportunity was merely exhibited, but that it was there for the taking.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘offer’ as ‘a holding forth or presenting for acceptance; an expression of intention or willingness to give or do something conditionally on the assent of the person addressed; a proposal.’ An example is given illustrating the use of the word in the 17th century: ‘If any of his subjects hath any precious stone of value, and make not him the offer of it, it is death to him.’

Tender of a Benefit

Both the original Latin word and the derived English word mean the same thing: a proposal, or tender of a benefit. John Calvin repeatedly uses the word in this sense. In his comment on *Luke 2.10* he writes: ‘At the present day, God invites all indiscriminately to salvation through the Gospel, but the ingratitude of the world is the reason why this grace, which is equally offered to all, is enjoyed by few.’

On *Romans 1.16* Calvin says: ‘Since, then, the Gospel invites all to partake of salvation without any difference, it is rightly called the doctrine of salvation: for Christ is there offered, whose peculiar office is to save that which is lost; and those who refuse to be saved by him, shall find him a Judge.’ His use of the term undoubtedly includes the thought of something being presented to the sinner for acceptance or rejection.

The term also appears in the famous Canons of Dort in 1618. The third and fourth heads of doctrine, articles 8 and 9, state: ‘That many who are called by the ministry of the Gospel do not come and are not converted is not the fault of the Gospel, nor of the Christ offered by the Gospel . . .’

Here, once again, offer means more than presentation or exhibition. It means a proposal – a proposal which some evidently refuse. In complete accord with Calvin and the Canons of Dort, the Westminster doctrinal standards of 1646 make free use of the word ‘offer’, notably in chapter 7 section 3 of the Confession, where we read: ‘He [God] freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.’ Such an

offer is addressed to sinners universally and indiscriminately, as truly to those who reject it as to those who receive it.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* uses the term twice. In Question and Answer 32, we read: ‘He [God] freely provideth, and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him, and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect to work in them that faith.’ Again, in Question and Answer 67, the elect are said to be ‘made willing and able, freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.’ *The Shorter Catechism*, in Question and Answer 31, speaks of ‘Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel,’ and in Question and Answer 86, faith is defined as ‘a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the Gospel.’

Turning to God’s Word, we should take account of those scriptures which unmistakably teach a general offer:

Psalms 34.8: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.’

Proverbs 1.24: ‘I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded.’

Isaiah 55.1: ‘Come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.’

Isaiah 65.1-2: ‘I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name. I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people.’

Matthew 22.2-3: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come.’

Matthew 23.37: ‘How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!’

Luke 14.16-18: ‘A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: and sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse.’

John 3.16: ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’

John 6.32: [Addressed indiscriminately to those who were gathered around him] ‘My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.’

Romans 10.13: ‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Revelation 22.17: ‘Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.’

It is important for us to establish that we are not basing our doctrine upon a few isolated texts. Be assured that these verses are but a sample of the scriptures which could be quoted in support of a free, open, and general offer of the Gospel.

‘Good News’ to All

Let us now examine the doctrine of the offer. Our word Gospel is compounded of two Anglo-Saxon words: god which means good, and spell which means message – good message. It corresponds to the Greek word, which it translates – euangelion – meaning good news. The Gospel is good news from Heaven of a Saviour in Jesus Christ.

The ‘protevangel’, or ‘first gospel’, preached to Adam, was the announcement of a Redeemer (*Genesis 3.15*).

As preached to Abraham, it was simply the expansion of the original promise, and concerned the 'seed' in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In the New Testament it is more fully revealed but essentially the same. The Gospel is not the whole revelation of the Word of God, but is that part of the Word which concentrates upon the good news of Jesus Christ, the Saviour (*Acts 13.38* – 'through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins').

It is all perfectly summed up for us in *Luke 2.10* – 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.' Now, I ask, how can the Gospel be good news to all people if it merely declares the facts that God loves his elect, that Christ has secured them by purchase, and that the Holy Spirit will irresistibly call them to faith and salvation? That is how some define the Gospel. But thus understood, can it ever be good news to all people? Surely there is another and more consistent interpretation. I believe there is.

First of all, the Gospel is good news to all because it declares that Christ has been constituted the official 'Saviour of the world'. 'We have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world' (*John 4.42*). This is repeated in similar words in *1 John 4.14*.

Thomas Boston comments most helpfully on this: 'Like as a prince, out of regard to his subjects' welfare, gives a commission to a qualified person to be physician to such a society, a regiment, or the like, and the prince's commission constitutes him physician of that society, so that though many of them should never employ him, but call other physicians, yet still there is a relation between him and them; he is their physician by office; any of them may come to him and be healed.'

This is the sense in which Christ may be said to be everybody's Saviour and this is why it is lawful for all to apply to him for salvation. He has been given to people without restriction and without reservation. 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.' The gift is general; as in *John 6.31-33*: 'My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.' Christ was speaking there to a mixed congregation, many of whom remained in unbelief. Yet he declares that in a way he was given to them all. How? As the manna was once given, by way of a common and indefinite grant. This being so, all may take and apply Christ for the salvation of their own souls. Expressed in another way, Christ is commissioned to save sinners, and this general truth encourages a person to appropriate and apply Christ, even though he reckons himself, along with Paul, the chief of sinners.

Secondly, the Gospel is good news to all people because it brings the Saviour and salvation within everyone's reach. *Titus 2.11* reads: 'The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,' or, as the margin has it, 'the grace of God that bringeth salvation to all men, hath appeared.' Dr Fairbairn comments: 'In a word, the salvation-bringing grace of God is without respect of persons; it is unfolded indiscriminately, or to sinners of every name, simply as such.' When this salvation is brought to all who hear, for acceptance, it is what Scripture calls 'the common salvation' (*Jude 3*).

Thirdly, the Gospel is good news to all people because it gives a ground for claiming possession of Christ and all his benefits. No less is promised to all who will believe; and the promise is the sinner's legal warrant for receiving and resting upon the Lord Jesus for a full salvation. 'Say unto the cities of Judah, Behold, your God!' (*Isaiah 40.9*.) 'Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength: even to him shall men come' (*Isaiah 45.24*). We conclude therefore that faith receives Christ as he is offered to us in the Gospel. 'So we preach, and so ye believed' (*1 Corinthians 15.11*).

'To Every Creature'

This is the Gospel which must be proclaimed throughout the whole world. Christ says in *Mark 16.15-*

‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.’ In our evangelism and Gospel services, it is the good news which must be preached, not Hodge’s, Dabney’s or Berkhof’s systematic theology! And it must be sincerely, warmly and freely preached to every soul.

Isaac Watts wrote, ‘None of the sons or daughters of Adam the sinner are excluded from this salvation when the Gospel is preached, but those who exclude themselves by stubbornness and unbelief.’ In view of that, let the good news be proclaimed world-wide, and let Christ be tendered to all. God does not name certain sinners as if some only are warranted to believe. He gives to every hearer an all-sufficient ground for believing.

Does this surprise you? My friends, the law does not name people. It speaks in general terms, commanding obedience and condemning disobedience. And the Gospel speaks likewise, not naming some as if they only may believe. In fact, the Gospel goes out to all, addressing ‘whosoever will’.

Preaching once upon the words, ‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (*Romans 10.13*), John Berridge told his congregation: ‘I would much rather it be written, “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” – than, “If John Berridge shall call on the name of the Lord he shall be saved;” because how do I know that there might not be another John Berridge in the world to whom those words are addressed? But when I read “whosoever shall call . . . ”, I know I must be included.’

All to be Called

Ministers are told to invite as many as they find (*Matthew 22.9*), even the most unlikely, described in *Luke 14* as the maimed and the halt and the blind. According to *Isaiah 55.6-7*, the wicked must be called and offered God’s abundant pardon. In declaring such offers, we do well to remember the promise which Christ has given: ‘Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out’ (*John 6.37*). In view of that, we may rest assured that no sinner will ever perish at his door.

Yet, some insist that there are qualifications restricting the offer of the Gospel. We must reply carefully, making some important distinctions. It is perfectly true that the Holy Spirit, through what theologians call ‘a law work’, convinces men and women of their sins (*John 16.8*), and it is also true that until thus convinced no one will turn to Christ and believe in him. However, that deep, heartfelt sense of sin does not give the sinner any warrant to believe, or right to the Saviour: it simply moves him to take up the warrant and right which he – and every sinner – has in the Gospel’s gracious and free invitation. In the Parable of the Supper, for example, those first invited (and they were invited) made excuse and refused to come, whereas it turned out that the poor and the needy responded at once (*Luke 14.16-24*). Similarly, when Peter preached the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost, it was by way of a general invitation and offer (‘whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved’, *Acts 2.21*), but the fact is – and it is plainly stated – that those ‘pricked in their heart’ were brought to respond believably (*2.37-41*).

Make no mistake about it: the Gospel is God’s sincere and earnest offer of Jesus Christ, in his person, offices, and benefits. We do well to observe that there are many Gospel invitations which do not even mention the sinner’s state, let alone any qualifications. This is true of *John 6.37*. Nothing is said here about a required condition or preparation. *Romans 10.13* is equally unconditional. There is no justification for restricting and narrowing the whosoever when the Gospel is preached. Paul did not do that, and, as we have seen, neither did Peter, when he declared – ‘Whosoever shall call . . . shall be saved.’ And it is surely of the utmost significance that there is no qualification in the Bible’s final overture to unbelieving men and women – ‘Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely’ (*Revelation 22.17*). True, only convinced sinners will come to Christ, but Thomas Bell is absolutely right when he says: ‘The offer is clogged with no exceptions, no conditions.’

We freely concede that there are passages in which the Lord appears to invite sinners of a particular kind. A well-known example is *Matthew 11.28* – ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ But why do some assume that spiritual qualifications are in view there? The terms could simply be descriptive of a carnal state. Thomas Boston makes the point that all people labour in a sense, as we read in *Ecclesiastes 1.8* – ‘All things are full of labour’ – and he also draws attention to *Isaiah 1.4*, where we read of men and women ‘laden with iniquity’. Understood in the light of such scriptures, *Matthew 11.28* is the calling of sinners as sinners – without further restriction – to mercy, pardon and peace.

This also seems to be the case in *Isaiah 55*. Some make a great deal of the fact that it is ‘every one that thirsteth’ who is called to come. Here, they say, is a required and an essential qualification or preparation. But, again, we must ask, what is this thirst? It can hardly be the ‘spiritual thirst’ of so-called ‘sensible sinners’. The very next verse complains that they are not thirsting after Christ, but spending their money for that which is not bread, and labouring for that which does not satisfy. In other words, their desires are wholly carnal, but notwithstanding they are invited to come.

Even if it could be shown that, in such places, spiritual characteristics are intended, it would only mean that certain kinds of sinners (those particularly specified) are included in the Gospel invitation. It might even further suggest that particular kindness will be shown to those who have experienced the humbling work of the law, who are broken, and who are in real spiritual need. Let them come, however despairing and however hopeless they may feel. Indeed, we may be assured by such texts that they are especially welcome.

The overriding point, however, is that many scriptural offers have no limitation at all. The state of men and women upon the reception of the Gospel is sinful. Christ said he had come, not to call the righteous, but to call sinners (*Matthew 9.13*). This means that he did not come to call the half-sanctified, who fully appreciate the gravity of their sinful condition and who realise the all-surpassing worth of Christ. He came to call sinners: sinners in all their sin, sinners destitute of grace, and sinners who have nothing whatsoever to commend them to God.

It would be fatal to err at this point. The Gospel is for the ungodly (*Romans 4.5*), not for the half-godly. Sinners must not be misled into thinking that they need qualifying traits. If they are, they will end up bitterly disappointed, for the rich he sends empty away (*Luke 1.53*). It is far, far better to say with Luther:

‘Most gracious Jesus and sweet Christ, I am a miserable poor sinner and therefore do judge myself unworthy of grace; but yet I, having learned from thy Word that thy salvation belongs to such an one, therefore do I come unto thee to claim that right which, through thy gracious promise, belongs to me.’

The Warrant for Faith

At this point we must underline and amplify the fact that the Gospel alone provides the warrant and authorisation for faith. *Mark 16.15-16* reads – ‘Preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth . . . shall be saved.’ It is on the basis of the Gospel that people believe, not on the ground of inward evidence or inwrought persuasion. *1 Timothy 1.15* calls the Gospel – ‘a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation’, meaning that such is the Gospel revelation that all people may and ought to believe. *Ephesians 1.13* says – ‘In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth.’ Again, it is the word of truth which gives us the ground for our trusting in Christ. In plain terms then, the Gospel offer is the warrant for faith.

In *1 John 5.11* we read – ‘This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in

his Son.’ The sum of God’s testimony is that he has made available to sinners a full and free gift of life in Christ. This gift is not a gift in possession, but a gift in offer, for as the previous verse speaks of the possibility of rejecting the testimony, the verse following speaks of the possibility of rejecting the proffered gift.

God has laid in the record of the Gospel a firm foundation for the faith of sinners. They have his own warrant and therefore a perfect right to receive the Lord Jesus, in all his grace and fulness, for their salvation. Fisher’s Catechism asks: ‘What is the ministerial offer?’ It answers: ‘It is the publishing or proclaiming of Heaven’s gift, or grant, to sinners of mankind, without exception, as the foundation of their faith, or warrant to believe (*1 John 5.11*).’

This fact may be demonstrated, firstly, by the need of such a warrant. If there was no Gospel offer, what would faith be? At best, it would be presumption; at worst, plain robbery. Faith is receiving Christ, but no person can receive anything unless it is first offered to him as a gift (*John 3.27; 4.10*). Christ is given in the Gospel, and faith receives and rests on him alone. So the very way faith is described – as ‘reception’ – indicates that a gift has been tendered.

That the Gospel offer is the ground for believing may also be demonstrated from the fact that, in Scripture, the rejection of Christ is regarded as a dreadful sin. In *John 3.18-19*, for example, the unbeliever is condemned as a sinner. But rejection of Christ can only be a sin if it is contrary to God’s revealed design. It can never be a sin to refuse something which is not genuinely and authoritatively offered. But unbelief is a sin, and a sin of the first order, because it rejects the proposal of God almighty.

One further argument for demonstrating that the offer of the Gospel is the warrant of faith is the fact that God is so angry with those who refuse to hear and respond. This is brought out very clearly in *Luke 14* – the parable of the man who provided a supper and invited many people to it. When they refused, we read that he became angry. Why was that? It was because in the generosity of his heart he had freely offered his provisions and the response had been indifference and ingratitude. Similarly, God is angry when, after giving sinners express warrant and every encouragement, they still refuse to come and avail themselves of his blessings. His offers are sincere and people are meant to accept them. He is provoked when they do not.

Other Warrants?

I am aware that there are those who make something else the warrant of faith. Some evangelical Calvinists believe the warrant of faith lies in ‘the name of God’. What they mean by that is the revelation of God’s nature, as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Since God has manifested himself in Christ as a God of love, there is every reason to believe – or so it is argued – that Christ is ready to save and give eternal life to sinners. Appeal is made to such scriptures as *Psalms 9.10 and 36.7*. There is certainly encouragement to the sinner in God’s self-disclosure but, in and of itself, it is not the warrant.

Others see ‘common grace’ as the warrant. Observing that there is a divine benevolence towards Adam’s entire race, and that the Lord seems to take pleasure in the well-being of all (*Psalms 145.9*), they find ground to believe that God desires men to be saved (*1 Timothy 2.4*). In the faith of that, sinners are urged to turn to God for pardon. *Ezekiel 18.32* is often quoted as a supporting text – ‘I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.’ We are far from denying common grace, and, again, it comforts sinners and gives them hope, but, on its own, it does not provide the clear warrant they need.

Still others find the warrant of faith in ‘the sufficiency of the atonement’. They rightly stress the

glorious, infinite, all-sufficiency of Christ's atonement, declaring it to be of such intrinsic worth that it is more than adequate ground for the salvation of all who rely upon it (which is not to deny, of course, that it had a very definite, limited design: the saving of God's elect). Verses like *Psalm 130.7* refer to 'plenteous redemption' and *John 6.35* clearly teaches that a crucified Christ could give life to the whole world of mankind. Therefore, as one theologian states it, 'Men are invited to stand on a platform which is broad enough to hold them all, to rest upon a foundation which is strong enough to support them all, to partake of provisions which are abundant enough to supply them all . . . Were they all to accept the invitation, they would all be saved. So much for the intrinsic sufficiency of the remedy for human sin.' The appropriate means of salvation having been provided, the sinner is invited on that basis – 'All things are ready: come . . .' (*Matthew 22.4*). We agree wholeheartedly with Dr Robert S Candlish that 'to every one who hears the Gospel, assurance is given of the full and infinite sufficiency of Christ's work for any, and for all, who will come to him. The dignity of his person, the merit of his obedience, and the value of his death, as a propitiation, secure this', but the sinner needs more, even the warrant actually to come and avail himself of Christ's full salvation.

I am impressed with these grounds, but I do not believe that any of them provides the sinner with exactly what he needs. Let me explain what I mean in the following illustration.

A friend says to me, 'The Queen is an extremely kind woman.' I say, 'I believe you.' My friend then says, 'She is also known to be generous to many.' I reply, 'I am fully aware of that.' 'But there is something else,' adds my friend, 'the wealth of her palace would be sufficient to supply all your needs for the rest of your life!' To this I respond by saying, 'I have not the least doubt about that.' Now, although I believe all this, do these things entitle me to walk through the gates of Buckingham Palace and take anything and everything that I want? No, they certainly do not! If I would have the liberty to do that, I must have nothing more or less than the invitation of Her Majesty, the Queen. And, my friends, God's invitation – or offer – in the Gospel is what I must have if I would come and take Christ and all his saving benefits.

The warrant for faith, then, is the Gospel offer. We do not need to go beyond it, nor do we need to resort to sophisticated arguments which sometimes compromise the doctrines of grace. We have an infallible Word which wonderfully exhibits and tenders Christ to each and every one of us. It is enough, friends. It is enough – and more than enough. A sinner may confidently draw near to the Saviour, saying:

Jesus, I do trust thee,
Trust without a doubt;
Whosoever cometh,
Thou wilt not cast out:
Faithful is thy promise,
Precious is thy blood:
These my soul's salvation,
Thou my Saviour God!

In one of his sermons, Ralph -Erskine asks the question, 'How shall I know . . . whether I have a warrant to take and accept?' He answers as follows: 'You may be sure of this, if these two things

concur, namely, if he be offering, and you be needing these things; if you want, and he have and be saying by this Gospel, Come and share.'

A Free Offer

What a Gospel it is! Christ, his love, his pardon, his righteousness, his Spirit, his holiness, his strength and his fullness, are all offered to poor, miserable sinners. How is he offered? He is offered freely! 'Let him take the water of life freely' (*Revelation 22.17*). Nothing must interfere with this freeness.

Beware of giving the impression that people can buy anything in the Gospel market. God's gifts are bestowed 'without money and without price'. It is foolish and utterly pointless to try to bargain on the basis of your good works, your spiritual exercises, or your heart preparations. Freely you must receive.

He is offered wholly! He is made over to us in all his names, titles, offices, relations and benefits. 'Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption' (*1 Corinthians 1.30*). There is absolutely nothing in Jesus which a believer will ever lack. 'Ye are complete in him' (*Colossians 2.10*).

He is offered particularly! A general offer would not help us. We need to be persuaded that Christ is able and willing to save us. 'To you is the word of this salvation sent' (*Acts 13.26*). As Ebenezer Erskine observes, 'Faith, which is the echo of the Gospel offer and call, must needs receive an offered Christ and salvation, with particular application to the soul itself. For a person to rest in a general persuasion that Christ is offered to the Church, or offered to the elect, or a persuasion of God's ability and readiness to save all that come to Christ, is still but a general faith, and what devils, reprobates and hypocrites may have.'

He is offered sincerely! In the Gospel God says what he means and he means what he says. His heart is in his offer. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not' (*Matthew 23.37*).

He is offered repeatedly! As a friend who longs for reconciliation and love, God says: 'All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people' (*Romans 10.21*).

He is offered pressingly! It is 'as though God did beseech you by us' (*2 Corinthians 5.20*). God beseeches, or entreats, and his ministers pray or plead with sinners to accept the reconciliation God has provided. In fact, ministers are told to compel people: that is, to press and constrain them (*Luke 14.23*). Such words suggest a most urgent appeal.

He is offered lovingly! God's strong affections make great stirrings in his heart, and all his desires go out to sinners when he calls them through the Gospel. 'Mine heart is turned within me', he says. He yearns for them, and his Gospel becomes 'the word of his grace' (*Acts 20.32*).

Now, it is essential for such an offer to be made if sinners are to turn to Christ, because if the offer is not preached, sinners are denied the warrant which they need. They must be told that they have God's permission and his invitation. If we fail to preach the offer, the danger is that we shall make the warrant some inward qualification or impression. This may be a conviction of the Truth, a sense of wretchedness, a desire for Christ, a feeling that we are elect and redeemed, a hope of mercy, a disposition to hear more, or a quickening and stirring in our hearts.

But, neither separately nor together do these things constitute an adequate warrant for faith. Why is this?

First of all, it is because the entire ground is subjective. All is made to depend upon feeling, which could be here today (giving assurance) and gone tomorrow (throwing the individual into despair). The heart is deceitful.

Secondly, it is because there can be no evidence of faith where there is no presence of faith. According to Scripture, sanctification does not precede believing. It is faith which purifies the heart (*Acts 15.9*).

Thirdly, it is because grounding the warrant of faith on inward impressions overthrows the order of grace. Although divine election is before faith, only after faith do people know their election. It is genuine, saving faith which marks people out as the objects of God's loving choice. 'As many as were ordained to eternal life believed' (*Acts 13.48*).

The tragedy is that reliance on inward impressions, so productive of doubt and fear, actually hinders people from coming to Christ. It is a real stumbling-block. God forbid that any of us should be responsible for throwing such obstacles before sinners. Our mandate is clear: 'Prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones' (*Isaiah 62.10*).

The Lord is far kinder than we think. He genuinely grieves when people will not come to him. 'Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life' (*John 5.40*). The last thing he wants is to keep himself apart from the sinner. But the doctrine of qualifications and impressions tends only to do that. It makes people believe that the Gospel is only for 'sensible sinners' and, as a result, many spend their lives wondering whether their senses have been sufficiently exercised and whether they have known the correct impressions.

A brief comment must be made on how the doctrine of particular redemption relates to the free offer of the Gospel. The Gospel offer is the setting forth of Christ as the only Saviour given to sinners, with the invitation that if people take him as their refuge, they shall be saved. Now, in this offer, Christ is revealed as having died for all who place their trust in him, and it is asserted that all who do this shall be saved.

Professor W G T Shedd remarks as follows: 'The offer of the atonement is universal because, when God calls upon men universally to believe, he does not call upon them to believe that they are elected, or that Christ died for them in particular. He calls upon them to believe that Christ died for sin, for sinners, for the world; that there is none other name under Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved; that the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin; and that there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.'

When the offer is accepted and we are conscious of having taken the Saviour as our hope and the only means of our salvation, we may then believe that, since Christ died for all who receive him, he died with the intention of saving us. Reformed theologians have carefully differentiated between these two acts of faith, calling the first direct and the second reflex or consolatory. 'The former is the act of faith, by which we fly to Christ as the only Saviour, cleave to him, and appropriate him to ourselves for salvation. The latter is the act by which, flying to Christ and resting on him, we trust that we have, and to eternity will have, communion with him in his death and benefits; and joyfully repose in the firm persuasion that he died for us, and by his death reconciled us to God' (Professor Francis Turretin).

I would not be fettered when preaching the Gospel. I know from the clear testimony of the Scriptures that God has a people sovereignly elected by grace, who have been particularly redeemed by the Son, and who will be efficaciously called by the Spirit, but he commissions me, as a minister, to preach Christ and the overtures of grace to every soul of man, gladly proclaiming that all who turn

to Jesus Christ and embrace his merit for salvation shall be granted the blessing of eternal life.

Come!

Vavasor Powell, the great 17th-century Baptist, wrote these words: ‘Prisoners, adjudged to die, and having pardons tendered to them, do not question whether those pardons were intended and granted for all in their condition; but they upon the first sight and hearing thereof, strive to grapple hard and to catch hold upon such a pardon: even so sinners, when pardon of sins and salvation in Christ are tendered and preached to them, they should, like Jacob, strive to have the blessing; or like the woman that strove for the child, they should cry, “It is my pardon, my pardon,” and not, “Is it for me? Is it for me?”’

Christian friends, this is the preacher’s task. He enters the prison-house of humanity with a great handful of royal pardons and he is instructed of the King to give them to all who believe and apply for mercy. Let the preacher be uninhibited and unrestricted when making his proclamation. And let every willing sinner come to Christ with the assurance that no one who comes shall ever be refused. Let them come! Let them come!